

Reactions and reputation happen inside, not on top

 By [William Smook](#)

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Billions spent on creating brand awareness can be helped or harmed by the instinctive actions - good or bad - of frontline staff.



A bad response to a complaint from a customer or member of the public can leave a brand somewhat dented - as is this car. (Image: La Cara-Salma, via Wikimedia Commons)

Most of us are guided by our emotional interaction with brands, good or bad. The entire advertising industry is built around this emotional resonance. Advertisers spend over R36bn a year trying to trigger an emotional frisson or a catchphrase that sticks with the public - and some even outlast the advertising. Remember Cremora's "It's not inside, it's on top"?

Much of this resonance is irrational: I've driven plenty of BMWs and they're safe, reliable and fun to drive; but I'd never buy one because I associate them with folk who reckon they're exempt from trivia such as rear-view mirrors, indicators or occupying a single parking bay at a time.

Some responses are grounded in experience: a colleague recounts a lifelong aspiration to own a luxury SUV. When he finally did, it was so unreliable and the after-sales service so bad that he swore off the brand and has become what could only be called an evangelist against the brand. He now owns a Toyota Fortuna and has converted two friends (previously Nissan and Mercedes-Benz owners respectively) into Toyota fans. [Hellopeter.com](#) is full of such examples.

In my work in public relations - reputation management as we rather grandly call it - we often deal with more analytical material than the pathos of ads for chakalaka, credit cards, cataract surgery, or cars. But emotion plays a role in our business too, and I'm fascinated how it shapes perceptions. Every so often I compare my personal experiences with brands and the most recent instance was motor dealers.

A simple gesture, speaking volumes

The first incident took place in our office's parking garage. The building's lifts needed replacement and the contractors needed somewhere to store their equipment. My parking-bay was selected and I was temporarily allocated a visitors bay. It was clearly marked as reserved parking, but because it was in the visitors' parking area, every Tom, Thabo, and Teresa parked there anyway.

It seems excruciatingly bourgeois to get annoyed that someone's parked in your bay. But if it happens every day for eight months every time you return from a meeting it starts to rankle. My insular middle-class outrage aside, there's a point to this. The ground floor of our building has a CJD (Chrysler, Jeep & Dodge) dealership. Apart from sniggering at the CJD acronym (Mad Cow Disease, essentially. I'm mature that way) and ogling the Jeep Wrangler Rubicon, I've had nothing to do with them. But one day a Jeep driven by a visitor to the dealership had been parked in my bay. Being the sanguine, reflective type, I was penning a fuming, snotty note for the driver when someone from the dealership came over and asked if he could help. I explained that one of his clients had parked in my bay. He apologised on the driver's behalf and offered me use of one of the dealership's bays as long as I needed it.

I was surprised by this simple, unnecessary, very courteous gesture and that it was made without shrugging of shoulders, rolling of eyes or sighing.

Heavy breather

I forgot about it until I had cause to note the behaviour of a second car dealership: Mitsubishi Imperial in Kuilsrivier. Twice in a couple of weeks I saw what looked like the same double-cab bakkie being driven like a minibus-taxi in a hurry: exceeding the speed-limit, unindicated lane-changes, weaving through traffic, tailgating other vehicles. The driver's conduct was a case-study of what makes our roads among the world's most dangerous.

The vehicle was brightly branded but had no number-plates, which is illegal. I was concerned enough to email the dealership about it. No reply. On my fourth attempt I copied the most senior person I could find at Imperial, the holding company for the dealership.

I then had rather brusque replies from the sales manager at Mitsubishi Imperial in Kuilsrivier: "Driver in both circumstances no longer employed by this company." Ah. And the fact that he was driving a vehicle adorned with your branding, but no plates, and driving like a jackass? "Garageplate was in vehicle as per the Traffic Regulations."

Within an hour I had a couple of calls: a chap who wouldn't identify himself and wanted to know what I did for a living, and a heavy breather. I'm sure these had nothing to do with my complaint.

I was later contacted by a chagrined spokesman at Imperial who confirmed the driver had been the dealer principal, who'd since been dismissed the previous week for among other things, reckless driving.

Taking a new angle on things

Until then I'd looked at these incidents from the perspective of a motorist trying to get his family safely from A to B. But I started thinking about it from a professional perspective. A conundrum: a helpful and professional response to one fairly innocuous incident (the inconvenience of my occupied parking bay) and a dismissive response to what was far more serious, a vehicle being driven dangerously and illegally.

Perhaps the Mitsubishi Imperial sales manager was desperately shy, or perhaps he couldn't be bothered to answer a complaint with full sentences. At some stage I'll need another vehicle for work and ferrying salty, sandy surfboards, wetsuits, kids, and dogs. I might draw conclusions about which of the two brands I dealt with would deliver better after-sales service.

I suppose my concern was guided by the news: from 1 December to 2013 to 7 January this year, 1376 people perished on

SA's roads. None died because someone parked in their bay. Most died because people drive like the driver of the Mitsubishi Imperial bakkie.

Brand ambassadors

Outrage over e-tolls is feverishly popular now, so perhaps it's heretical to suggest that if South Africans applied as much righteous indignation to road safety as they do to tolling we'd save thousands of lives. But we're emotional beings and those emotions become inflamed or inured. In the same way, we fail to see the link of our actions to our reputations.

The same attitude extends to the brands we represent. At school we were assured in fearsome tones that wearing the uniform made us ambassadors of the school and woe betide us if we did anything to besmirch that image. Each of us still represents brands: a family, business, nationality, political party. Seth Godin says: "You are not your résumé. You are your work."

Justine Sacco may find it hard to free her personal brand from her Tweet: "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm White!" Macintosh Polela's name will be associated with Vaseline for some time.

The chap at the Jeep dealership gets that, as do the people at Imperial who run the iPledge campaign, which promotes road safety. They get that the best awareness campaign can be dented by the actions of one irresponsible person. They get that brand affinity (I tried not to use the term, I really did) happens in the heart as much as the head.

Two lessons from the examples I've cited: first, your biggest brand exposure may be in areas where you have least control - on the road. That's why your team needs to take ownership of your brand. Second, if your brand's first reaction to a reputational threat is wrong, everything that follows is damage-control. It affirms or negates the white-knuckled grasping for creative resonance and the vast sums spent on that.

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