

The marketing don'ts we can learn from Helen Zille's Twitter account

By [Jessica Edgson](#)

13 Nov 2019

Something I often think about is Helen Zille's Twitter account. And I think about it that often because it's always in the news. Or, at least, being commented on by journalists, columnists and thinkers that I follow.



Helen Zille's Twitter.

In most cases, they don't have the nicest things to say. In all honesty, I don't follow many (or any) people that are outright Zille fanatics. And, politics aside, that's pretty much because she's really bad at marketing herself.

So, that got me thinking, if she's pretty much her own worst PR person, what can marketers learn from her? What lessons can she teach us in the industry of creating positive brand awareness about what not to do?

Well, I'm here to tell you all about the marketing don'ts we can learn from Helen Zille's Twitter account.



When Twitter met South Africa - a match made in a train smash

Stephen Grootes 28 Jan 2016



Don't @ a hater... six months later

Anyone who knows a thing or two about Helen Zille's Twitter account knows that she and local author and columnist Max du Preez don't exactly see eye-to-eye.

And that's fine, all brands have their competitors and unhappy customers. But if you're going to reply to someone who's found your brand disagreeable in the past, don't dig into their Twitter timeline and find a post from six months ago and reply to that.

No, that's not a way to make your brand likeable. People are going to think your social media manager has an axe to grind and absolutely nothing better to do first thing in the morning.

“ HelenHas your account been hijacked?Picking a fight with Max from a tweet dated 15 May?[@jsteenhuisen](#) is this the image the [@Our_DA](#) is going for?

— Steven Ingham (@StevenIngham5) [November 7, 2019](#)

”

Here's what happened. In May this year, Max du Preez tweeted “My advice to a matriculant in my extended family: do a BA degree with history, sociology, languages, etc. to broaden your mind and then qualify as a plumber, electrician, chef, technician, welder, mechanic or such. An actual job + an active mind + love = happiness.”

It's a logical tweet about career and life advice he gave a family member. Now, and this is important to remember, it had nothing to do with Helen. Nothing whatsoever. But that didn't stop her from hurrying to reply to the tweet almost six full months later with her hot-take on the failures of our local universities.

Now, if you were a social media marketer/guru/ninja/whatever-you-call-yourself, you wouldn't reply to an unhappy customer six months after the fact. No, you'd reply immediately.

But you also wouldn't reply to a tweet that has nothing to do with your brand just because it was written by someone who has previously claimed they're not a fan of your brand. It's like Coca Cola replying to a tweet by someone who'd previously shown a preference for Pepsi, six months later.

It's weird and makes everyone who sees the tweet uncomfortable.



Refugees from common sense: Helen Zille, DA's five marketing mistakes

Sarah Britten 27 Mar 2012



Don't waste your data dissing the competition

If there's one thing Helen Zille's Twitter account is known for (aside from fangirling about colonialism, of course) it's bashing the ANC. In all honesty, that's a wider DA marketing fail, but Helen seems to be the biggest advocate for that strategy. In South Africa, you won't find advertising that outright insults the competition and for good reason.

“ Everything unravels against the ANC.— Helen Zille (@helenzille) [November 11, 2019](#)

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There are laws around it, for one. And it makes brands seem childish and unlikeable for another. Advertisers would much rather spend their valuable time telling people why they should buy their client's product than telling people not to pay for their competition's product.

Why? Because even if you succeed in making people doubt and dislike the competition, there's no guarantee they'll decide to spend their money on your brand instead.

And here's another thing, it's not just the ANC that she's @ing with attitude, it's anyone who disagrees with her. She's a keyboard warrior who likes taking issue with anything said or done by people who take issue with her.

In the marketing world, that would be like BMW publicly shaming the people who choose to buy a Mercedes Benz. They wouldn't do that because those people aren't going to turn around and reward that public shaming by buying a BMW instead.

Some call it strategic marketing, others call it common sense.



Twiplomacy grows as world leaders engage followers

30 Apr 2015



Don't try as hard as you can to alienate the youth

If there's one SA social media account deserving of the reply "[OK, boomer](#)", it's likely Helen Zille's Twitter account. It's like she's personally out to alienate the youth. Whether she's insulting the universities they're attending or making bitter jokes at the expense of being "woke", she doesn't seem to like the youth of this country.

“ *Sometimes I really regret not having adopted wokeness. Imagine how much fun it would be right now to play the "toxic masculinity" card, and say that I am only being targeted because I am a woman in leadership. Jeez, maybe I'll be woke for a day. I need a Blue Herring.*— Helen Zille (@helenzille) [October 25, 2019](#)

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And that's a pity because the youth of this country are either already voting or will be voting in years to come. That would be like a big brand actively trying not to sell to the fastest-growing consumer market.

When your apparent target market is only [20.77%](#) (give or take a few due to the latest product developments), you can't afford to alienate a large part of that percentage because you really, *really* don't like their language, beliefs or ideals.

And you definitely can't claim to understand them enough to fulfil their needs with your products or represent them in government.



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At the end of the day, if you want to market your product to the majority of people in this country, try to avoid being divisive, stubborn and/or bitter.

Don't go out of your way to disagree with someone who doesn't like your brand, don't waste time insulting the competition, and don't make a show of letting the youth know that you don't understand them and never plan to.

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ABOUT JESSICA EDGSON

Jes Edgson is a freelance writer and editor with roots in the marketing industry. Originally from Cape Town, she's spent the past few months enjoying the fresh air in the tiny town of Darling. She's always up for a cup of coffee, a chat and a laugh. Opinions shared here are her own.

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