

Targeting the black guy

South Africans are obsessed with race. The apartheid government tried to convince us that skin colour conditioned our capabilities and behaviour. We continue to reason as such and therefore perpetuate the myth. Can we stop seeing the world in black and white already?

 By [Pierre Cassuto](#) 17 Nov 2011

Apparent differences

I recently attended the Bafunny Bafunny comedy festival, hoping to leave feeling proud of my adopted South-African-ness. Although some of the acts were standouts (both Nik Rabinowitz's and Trevor Noah's come to mind), most of them left me cringing, dwelling on apparent differences between black, white, coloured and Indian people.

Racial commentary has become to SA comedy what McDonalds is to the restaurant industry - common and cheap - and, just like the latter, it's not particularly healthy.

Now, humour is a catalyst for democracy and tolerance. It exorcises fear and encourages reflection and dialogue over issues that seem too serious otherwise. In other words, practiced well, humour should bring us together.

The problem arises when humour further stigmatises our differences and entrenches misperceptions. By constantly rehashing over and over again what supposedly makes us different, comedians continue to drive the misperceptions left behind by apartheid.

We marketers (and advertisers) are no better

Comedians may be culprits of perpetuating myths for cheap laughs but we marketers (and advertisers) are no better. We continue to use skin colour as a shortcut to box attributes onto potential audiences. Ask yourselves: when was the last time you saw the description of a target market that did not feature a reference to skin colour?

Some may argue that this is called segmentation and it's a necessary part of marketing. Leaving my feelings about segmentation aside (for perhaps another rant in the future), I would then argue back that skin colour has no logical place in segmentation, unless you are a skin-care product.

Marketing's core role is to respond to consumer needs. The logical flow between consumer needs and the relevant marketing answer is often pretty clear:

- Whereas the consumer's need may be "I need to eat a meal to help me with my diet", the marketer may answer with an offer for "a meal under 300 calories".
- Alternatively, should the consumer say "I need to eat lunch on a small budget", the marketer may come back with "a lunch-time special for under R20".

Need-state marketing is always relevant and non-exclusive.

Why the need to box the market?

Why would so many South African marketers then need to box the market for the latter as "urban black males, LSM 4-6, in search of a filling meal and the highest value deal"? Unpacking this description, we have "urban", relevant to the target's geographical location and therefore distribution purposes, "LSM 4-6", relevant to its purchasing power and therefore pricing, and the rest of the sentence, which alludes to both a physical and a psychological need. Where does "black" fit and what does it say?

In my mind, this is as logical as designing a banking solution for "people who love making money and saving it and are Jews". Can you imagine the outcry if this document leaked? It would, without a doubt, be labelled anti-Semitic. If this is the case, why are we ok with correlating needs and tendencies to skin colour, and not calling it racist?

Culture affects behaviour but skin colour does not reflect culture. Education, social status, circles, background and experience all affect our behaviour and these exist in many colourful ways, even within the same "ethnic" segment.

A very wise person with whom I was having this argument replied to me, "Skin colour affects our behaviour because it affects the way others perceive us when we deal with them".

Start with the way we talk

Is it not time we stopped perpetuating the myths of apartheid? At the very least, as the supposed thought-leaders of SA, we could start with the way we talk and avoid shortcuts.

So, please, do me a favour next time you write a strategy document or a creative brief - unless you are trying to sell skin-care products, leave skin colour out of your target market's description.

ABOUT PIERRE CASSUTO

Humanz is one of the world's fastest growing AI companies focused on empowering valuable creators and the marketers that work with them. Each day, Humanz analyzes hundreds of millions of social media profiles and content pieces as well as transaction data from online merchants, to generate better benchmarks and predictions for social commerce ROI, while also improving transparency, motivation and access for creators and marketers.

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