

# Sanral bravely tackles the long road back from reputation damage...

 By [Brendan Seery](#)

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As far as government agencies or parastatals that we "love to hate" go, the SA National Roads Agency Limited (Sanral) is right up there with Eskom.



Screengrab from the ad.

The roads agency, it must said from the outset, plays a critical role in the South African economy, designing and building what is still the best highway infrastructure in Africa... the sort of image which is used regularly to set us apart from the rest of the continent.

Yet, Sanral has such a bad public image that the mere name has almost become a swear word.

And that is, as we all know, because of the contentious e-toll project in Gauteng... or, more correctly, from the way the Gauteng Freeway Improvement Project was implemented – which millions of road users believe disregarded them.



Sanral funding model to be discussed amid e-toll resistance

9 Nov 2017



In the process, the boycott of toll payments has become the biggest single mass defiance campaign in the history of a democratic South Africa.

Most of the damage to Sanral's image was done by one man, someone you might call the Donald Trump of the civil engineering sector, Nazir Alli, the former CEO of Sanral.

In blustering, dictatorial and often inaccurate tirades, Alli tried to force the concept of electronic toll collection down the throats of the public. And that did not go down well with motorists, whose level of ignorance about the scheme was such that they believed they were being hoodwinked.



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Marketing Mistake Number One: bad communication.

It didn't help, of course, that the final cost of the project saw the country saddled with some of the most expensive roads in the world. It didn't help either that some of the "experts" trotted out by Sanral to justify tolling were guilty of misleading the public.

Now that Alli has left Sanral, one can feel the winds of change in the air.



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Andiswa Maqutu 5 Jul 2016



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The organisation has completely changed its "do what we say" approach to one of marketing persuasion. It has realised that it needs to "sell" its product, to a public which is constantly battered by more and more price increases.

Rather than bombard us with figures as Alli did (in the hopes maths-challenged people wouldn't see the logical sleight of hand, which was his forte), the "new" Sanral is looking at the benefits roads bring us.

The first ad in the series was flighted some time ago, and focused on the joy in an ordinary family, coming together from all over the country for a celebration. Connecting people via excellent roads. It's a great ad because it is not only true, it is subtle – as is the best of marketing – and shows Sanral for what it is... a facilitator.

The latest in the series looks at how roads are essential to living the lives we want. So we see coffee, on its journey from the estate, through roasting to the final, aromatic and deeply satisfying, cup.

Something like 80% or more of our goods are transported by road in this country, so without the efforts of Sanral, our little treats and daily necessities might be more difficult to obtain, or be more expensive.

Elegant point, elegantly made.

Sanral still has a lot to do to redeem itself, especially as e-tolls still has not been resolved – but these ads are an excellent start. They enable us to see the good side of this organisation.

Well done to Sanral and its ad agency, Blueprint. Orchids for your marketing skills... and your bravery.

The problem with using social media for your marketing, as I have said many times, is the danger for any flaws to be magnified and seized upon to actually damage your brand.

Latest in line for that lesson is seafood restaurant chain Ocean Basket, one of my favourite family places.

It generated a bit of a flurry on social media this week when it aired a promotion that many likened to the “glory hole” fad which had its origins in the San Francisco gay bathhouse culture of the ’70s and early ’80s.

Suffice to say that many commentators on social media were reminded of “gloryholes” by Ocean Basket’s hands appearing from holes in a backboard, holding various meals.

Perhaps, as our online colleagues noted on [citizen.co.za](http://citizen.co.za), the comments were more of a judgment on those making them than on Ocean Basket, but, nevertheless, the comments were there. And they were wholly incompatible with the ethos of a family restaurant.

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Danette Breitenbach 11 Jul 2017



And Ocean Basket may complain till the cows (or cod) come home that this is a misinterpretation of its message, but I ask: Why did anyone not foresee the possibility?

Given the “woke” and raucous nature of social media, you have to be extra careful – and you weren’t.

So you get an Onion.

I only hope it was not intentional...

### ABOUT BRENDAN SEERY

Brendan Seery has been in the news business for most of his life, covering coups, wars, famines - and some funny stories - across Africa. Brendan Seery's *Orchids and Onions* column ran each week in the *Saturday Star* in Johannesburg and the *Weekend Argus* in Cape Town.

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