

# All's fair in love and the ad business...

By  [Brendan Seery](#)

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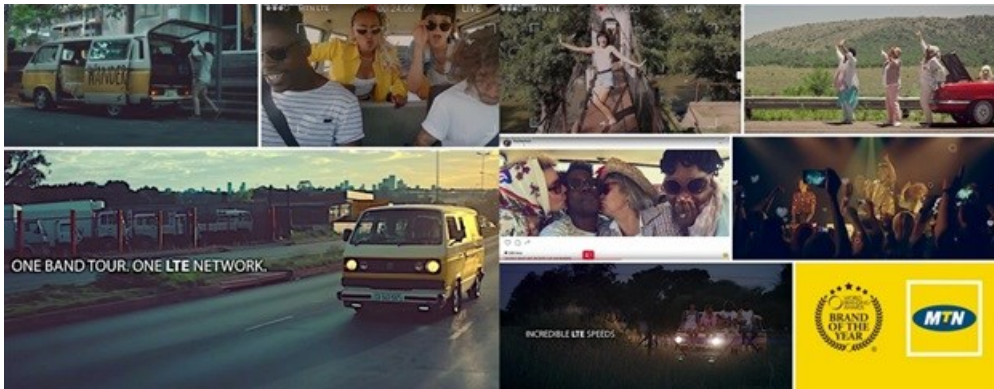
Nothing is truly original, so the experts say... everything has been seen, or done, once before. And true creativity is a synthesis of all that an active and alert mind absorbs from everywhere.

That is why, when I was an editor, I urged my reporters to read, read and read some more – and take in the world around them as a sponge soaks up water.

Plagiarism – the out-and-out stealing of someone's intellectual property – is a different matter... and as a victim of some heinous plagiarism in my time, I don't have a lot of sympathy for those who engage in it. Those who steal, lock, stock and commas are lower than the proverbial excrement of a shark.

The ad business in South Africa – and the marketing industry as a whole – is extremely touchy when it comes to someone appropriating some of its ideas for their own benefit. That is why we have seen many cases in front of the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) where brands and their agencies have engaged in battle with competitors they accuse of misleading the public by using concepts which are not theirs.

Two of the brands which have been at each other's throats on a number of occasions in the past over allegedly misleading or unethical advertising have been MTN and Vodacom, South Africa's cellphone giant networks. And I am sure that the powers-that-be at Vodacom might be a little miffed at the latest cheeky MTN TV ad, which not only pokes a bit of fun at them, but also uses some of their own characters to do so.



MTN's new TV ad pokes a little fun at Vodacom's group of elderly ladies on tour © – [Orchidsandonions.net](#).

The ad is aimed at the connected generation, of whatever age they may be. We see a group of young musicians and singers hitting the road in an old VW Kombi (and nothing quite says 'road trip' like one of those, whether through the Karoo or in the hippie years down to the California beaches) to go on tour.

The difference is that in 2017, with technology and the internet on their side, they are their own groupies, their own reporters and their own agents as they spread the word of their comings and goings via MTN's latest LTE networks. That technology not only spreads the word, but it shows too, how MTN can benefit a business (even a small band) by enabling people to buy tickets online for upcoming gigs.

So far, so fairly ordinary: remember, just because something is about tech doesn't necessarily make it cutting-edge or ground-breaking...

However, what got me chuckling and what gets the ad this week's Orchid is the gentle bit of ribbing of Vodacom.

We see a bunch of little old ladies, apparently stranded somewhere in the Karoo, next to a classic red Mercedes SL sports car. Sitting inside the car is a large, elegantly tended poodle. Now, where could I have possibly seen this before? Ah ha – Vodacom's holiday season TV commercial – still airing, I think – which features three retired women travelling around the country in a red SL.

Not only does the MTN-equipped Kombi have to come to the aid of the damsels in distress but the travelling band puts that fact out on the Net: Guessed who we rescued, they ask? #VC Babes!

I love it... because I love it when clever ad people can poke a bit of gentle fun at their competitors. I hope Vodacom sees it in the same way and responds to it in kind. Somehow, though (see below) I don't think Vodacom has much of a sense of humour these days.

However, for MTN and its agency, Metropolitan Republic, this is my second Orchid in as many weeks, following on the one for the classic "[Night Shift](#)", which broke late last year. Keep it up, Paul Warner – head honcho at Metropolitan. When you and your agency are on song, sir, the South African ad space is a nicer place.

As to Vodacom, I wonder if any of you reading this have experienced sudden, large data charges on your accounts... despite the fact it never happened before and despite the fact you're well aware of how ruinous out-of-bundle data charges can be.

That happened to me with my November account: I suddenly got lumbered with data charges of more than R800 when for the previous months there were none. I normally only turn on my mobile data when I know I will need to access something on the Net and I am away from ADSL or WiFi. And, on those occasions when I know I will be working out of town, for example, I buy add-on data bundles to cover me.

When I asked Vodacom's customer service department what was going on, I was sent a form letter of more than a page in length, assuring me in detail that the data charges were correct and that there was no way Vodacom could "manipulate" those charges. Funny, I never said anything about manipulation, although I did ask in my original dispute notice for a full break down of the days and times the data was used.

The form letter also included a very patronising lecture – as to a five-year-old – about how to turn on and off mobile data and how to ensure you don't use too much. Patronising – but insulting, too, because it takes it for granted I am a moron. However, moron I may be and impossible though "manipulation" may be, Vodacom nevertheless offered me a payment of R650 towards those data costs, as a mark of its esteem for me as "a loyal customer".

Do I smell a rat here? When I posted the saga on Facebook, a number of people responded with similar experiences... although not all of them were with Vodacom, to be fair.

Only on my third communication to the cellphone giant was I able to get a full breakdown of the data usage. And, I felt a lot like Alice in Wonderland.

Most of the charges were accumulated on one day – and each parcel of data was almost exactly the same in size, to fractions of less than a percent. How likely is that, I ask?

I have queried that, and have so far not had a response. For that, and for the fact that you treat me like a moron (along with plenty of others in a similar position, judging by your standard form letter) you get a marketing Onion, Vodacom. I wonder how many others, like me, are looking elsewhere because of this sort of service.

I am not at all implying that there is a deliberate attempt on the part of Vodacom to “manipulate” the system to rip me off... but we all know how reliable software is, don't we?

For more of Brendan Seery's writing, see: [www.orchidsandonions.net](http://www.orchidsandonions.net)

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## 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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