

Winning hearts and minds online

 By [Marion Scher](#)

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Although to South Africans there's only been one election they've been interested in recently, another election that has just taken place produced even more surprising results than ours did.

That's the European Elections 2014, where the Ukip (United Kingdom Independent Party), who you've probably never heard of, swept to victory taking 4,351,204 votes, ahead of the official British opposition party, Labour by around 300,000 votes and beating David Cameron's ruling Conservative party, who came in third together with his coalition partner the Lib Dems.

For these and our own elections the dust has now settled and it's interesting to look at the results of both elections and analyse from a communications point of view just what could the various parties have done differently to get better outcomes?

After our elections, as normal, some parties cried foul, saying they weren't afforded enough media coverage. Well unfortunately that's just how it works - the big parties get the most coverage. Or is it? Here we come to the remarkable showing last weekend by Ukip - who until last weekend were thought of as a non-entity.

A single stance on a single issue

Originally founded in 1991 by former Liberal Party MP (now Lib Dems) Alan Sked, they were very much bottom of the pack, (even being beaten by the Monster Raving Loonies party). Six years later, after much infighting (sounds familiar - COPE) Sked was kicked out and the first of many reinventions started.

To skip what has been a rather chequered past - party leaders who didn't know their own party's manifesto; party officials calling women sluts; being jailed for benefit fraud and blaming floods on gay marriage - they won 27.5% of the European Election vote on just one stance - immigration.

Although at present they don't hold a single seat in parliament, the current leader Nigel Farage now feels it's just a matter of time before his party sweeps to victory in the United Kingdom's elections. Shades of Juju perhaps - although with possibly more political know how and backing.

They've been called the 'funny little fruitcake fringe party' but they may well end up at No 10 Downing Street in the very near future.

Massive social media drive

Apart from the fact their campaign centred around one topic, stopping immigration into the UK, how did they manage to lure steadfast Labour and Conservative voters away from their parties? Not a difficult question to answer - a way-out advertising campaign sponsored by a supportive multimillionaire, designed to cause a media stir and of course a whole load of publicity with it.

And of course a massive social media drive around the campaign. Leading the Ukip's Twitter campaign was Farage himself with 137,000 followers. UK social analytics firm Birdsong shows Ukip are the most popular political party on Facebook with a few hundred more fans than Labour with an engagement rate of 87% as against the Conservative party's 9%. Birdsong's CEO Jamie Riddel commented, "In short, Ukip are engaging on social where others are not."

The social-media-savvy woodworker

This is where the similarity to our own polls comes in. As I said in a previous column, Julius's EFF party were right out there in the social media stakes, which you would think every party would have been doing - right? Wrong. Like Nigel Farage of Ukip, Julius himself had the biggest following with 456,000 followers compared to Jacob Zuma's 320,000 followers.

According to Afrosocialmedia's social media consultant, Samantha Fleming in a recent interview with News24, "Party leaders have higher numbers of followers than the parties themselves - but then South African politics is very personality driven."

Like followers of Ukip, the rise of the EFF is also on the back of unhappiness with unemployment and poor service delivery.

The feedback now from the European elections shows that Ukip was mentioned more than any other party on social networks in the days running up to the weekend's elections, which again matches Julius and his red-hatted brigade.

So what can we take away from this, even if we're not remotely interested in politics, especially in the UK. Just this, ignore social media at your peril - use it to your enormous advantage...

ABOUT MARION SCHER

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