

Are you keeping the promises your branding makes to your customers?

 [By Lindsay Grubb](#)

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If Vodacom is anything to go by, branding has definitely solidified its status as a multimillion dollar industry. So as a brand marketer, who has spent millions on getting your message across, you have to ask yourself what you would do, if your customers were allowed to vote on whether or not you were allowed to use it.

We're bombarded with so many messages these days, across a variety of platforms, from TV advertising, to print, in-store promotion, outdoor media, mobile marketing and, of course, social media. Yet many marketing departments are making promises their organisations just can't keep. Then there's also the problem of trying to keep track of the promises being made, as brands seem to change slogans like regular folk change their underwear.

Is it surprising we get frustrated?

While most of us consumers are still feeling the pinch of the recession and are increasingly disheartened when we hear regular newscasts telling of petrol price increases, electricity price hikes and public service strikes, is it surprising that we get frustrated when we see what we perceive to be wasteful spend by the conglomerates that are constantly adding to our woes?

Imagine if marketers were required by law to place a red and green electronic buzzer in each of their stores, and add it as an app on their websites. The hoarding above the buttons reads "We kept our brand promise to you". The word above the green button "Pass" and above the red button the word "Failed".

Every customer that passes gets to hit the buzzer they feel is relevant to their purchasing experience. When you fail 100 times, your signage rolls over to reveal a plain white banner, or it vanishes from your website. After that it takes 100 "Passes" to turn the cogs that roll your branding back into place. It's a scary thought to have the branding you spent millions on disappearing when you don't live up to expectations generated by your promise to your customer.

Failed

Vodacom's service is poor, its network glitchy, and its account department completely unhelpful.

Currently, claims of maladministration of data accounts are rife (from personal experience and from colleagues' experiences), with people suddenly being stung with bills in the thousands when their regular usage never went above R300.

The best Vodacom can do is blame its customers for not using high end anti-virus and anti-malware protection. Did it perhaps turn red from embarrassment at its shocking service?

"Connect and you can"

MWeb manages to secure an award for best service provider (granted, the award was for the previous year) in a year when its service was appalling. It was down more often than not, sometimes for days at a time.

Now we hear, via The Daily Maverick's opinionista [Mandy de Waal](#), that the CEO Rudi Jansen doesn't want the 4000 - 5000 customers who cannot currently connect, to know that there is a problem, never mind how to fix it, because consumers "will mess things up and this will just make matters worse, rather than making them better."

Ouch. Bet he's regretting making that comment.

PnP

What about the likes of the big retailers such PnP, which over the years have made brand promises of being "*Inspired by you*" and its latest "*Fresh*" approach?

Its customers apparently chose the "Inspired by you" tagline for it out of a possible four they were shown - does this mean it reflected their customers' feelings about the PnP brand or just that it was the best sounding tagline from the four available choices?

Let's be honest here - in marketing and PR, we're in the business of "manipulating" customers' opinions through persuasion. I would have been more impressed if it had had a write-in contest where the tagline that came up most often from thousands of customers were chosen.

It's obviously not me it's talking about being inspired by - I'm a regular at the manager's desk at my local Midrand PnP store, complaining about the myriad of bug-stung and ruined "fresh" vegetables on offer that it's trying to sneak to its customers.

Clearly, best-by-dates don't mean a thing either, because the stuff goes off before the stipulated date arrives. (I'm well-read. I understand that the year's rains have wreaked havoc on the crops, but some retailers have still managed to secure good quality produce.)

Store names

Then there are the PnP store names to consider.

For me personally, arriving with my two-year old at the then newly refurbished Kyalami "Family" Store, to find it had no child-friendly trolleys available for me to pop my daughter into while I traversed the aisles, was just a little frustrating. Waiting the 15 minutes for the trolley to come up from the basement with a tired child was more than I could stand and I left and went up the road to Woolworths, for a much more pleasant retail experience.

Passed

Spar's tagline used to be "Good for you" and it aims to provide "friendly, caring" service, which "cannot be matched". It also has a "double-your-money-back guarantee" on all the Spar-branded products.

I frequent a number of the Spars in my area, and I can definitely attest to their friendly, caring staff. They seem genuinely happy to be Spar ambassadors and they're always chatty and engaging. Their bakeries are definitely good for me, too (just

not great for the waistline).

Its current My Spar campaign is engaging with customers, asking them to tell their personal story. I think this is a great way for marketers to learn what people's true experiences are - the good and the bad.

There's no guarantee it'll publish the bad, but at least it will provide valuable feedback for it if it chooses to listen to what its customers are really saying.

Slim pickings

The "Pass" pickings are slim - it's been tough to find taglines that do keep their promises. I'd love to hear about your positive brand experiences.

In what are still frugal times, perhaps it would be wiser for our marketers to look at ways of really engaging with target markets to ascertain what is really important to them?

I do understand that many brand managers are focused on the operational and logistical sides of their businesses, and are more numbers-orientated rather than creative. Perhaps they need to take a more hands-on approach and not simply leave it to the agencies to define the personality and promise of their brand?

Either that, or take the time to find an agency which will care as much about the brand as they do.

Honesty

There's enough corruption in our country already. Instead of telling customers what you think they want to hear, or what you think they should believe about your brands, let's put honesty into the picture for a change. It's time for more meaningful personal interactions again and less extravagance, less wasteful spending.

We have the tools; let's use them.

ABOUT LINDSAY GRUBB

I am a Johannesburg-based freelance writer and editor with a talent for crafting well-researched, strategically aligned, and professionally written communications and searching out and telling interesting brand stories that create interest in and loyalty to brands. I have worked with local and international clients for the past 20 years.

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