

Let us encourage brand activism



By [Gordon Cook](#)

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The debate about the benefits and genuineness of today's brands applies, of course, to the quality and integrity of the brand internally, as well as externally. A misalignment between the two is already a target for activism.

In this debate, we need to see a brand as an open system - the complete supply chain including suppliers, distributors and retailers, as well as all outsourced services. Ignoring a more holistic brand approach has already landed many companies in a reputation crisis. A good example of this is when some brands distanced themselves from their manufacturers who were using child labour, harmful glues and enforcing unacceptable working conditions. Whatever the recent platinum mine strikes were about, they were ultimately a manifestation of brand failings.

Passive consumerism makes us complicit

You may ask on what criteria we should become activists. We can consider a continuum, at the one end of which are authentic, value-adding and sustainable brands and, at the other end, are brands with flawed products and deceitful marketing and communication campaigns. On the extreme end of this side of the continuum are terminally sick brands whose plug should be pulled.

Let me briefly also debate the free-market argument. Unfortunately, brands and businesses cannot be left to their own devices and require a regulatory environment. After all, companies are not closed systems. Thank goodness for the public sector. Consider imposed age restrictions, health warnings and packaging disclosures. All these are a result of government intervention to better protect consumers.

Brand activism can take many forms. It begins when we ask critical questions of brands such as those posed by brand gurus like Neumeier and Olins: Who are you? What do you do? Why are you here? Why do you matter?

Other platforms for activism include demanding a full disclosure of product content, the supply chain and all testing procedures. This includes scientific assessment of side effects (think of some of the damage caused by hair products and skin lighteners) and also evidence to support claims, such as free-range chickens and meat. Amazingly, there is still no agreed upon standard as to what we mean by this in South Africa.

Proactive brand management

We have entered what Wally Olins calls "The New Zeitgeist". Think of the old short- and long-term insurance brands with products that added little or no value whatsoever; brands that over-promised and under-delivered. Brands on the wrong side

of the continuum are aware that the writing is on the wall and are scrambling to diversify. Tobacco brands are spending fortunes on developing and launching e-cigarettes while fizzy sugar drink brands are buying water, diet and sports drink brands.

However, we are also seeing Corporate Social Investment (CSI) being used to balance wrongs. While there is at least an implicit link between fizzy drinks and obesity, we are now seeing more proactive brand management. For example, Coca-Cola has recently launched a TV advert addressing obesity. Another one of their ads features activities that add up to burning off the "140 happy calories" in a can of Coke.

I agree with Olins' hunch that "if the mood of the times is towards authenticity, then Coca-Cola and other brands are going to try and offer it. They will move into it in a big way. But it's a bit late". He also feels that "... a huge group of brands... have lost touch with what's going on in the world." My point is that activism must remind brand owners of what is really going down.

Complicit in much of the blind-siding by unhealthy brands has been clever communication campaigns and CSI diversions. I believe we need far more robust professional codes of practice for communication agencies and CSI practitioners. But this is a debate for another day.

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