

Refugees from common sense: Helen Zille, DA's five marketing mistakes



By Sarah Britten

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[Helen Zille](#) mystifies me. For someone who has the potential to get people on her side, to really bring a breath of fresh air to the stale, rather Pavlovian scuffles that characterise South African politics, she's stuffing up on an astonishingly regular basis.

Does many things well

Zille ([@helenzille](#)) does many things well. She and her advisers know how to play to the audience and she's accessible in a way that few other politicians in this country are, spending what must be serious time on Twitter responding to the public. Can you imagine another party leader conducting a Twitter interview, as she did with Eusebius McKaiser? She's even been on Top Billing. Evidently, she's not just a politician; she's a celebrity.

So if her team are so marketing savvy, why is she making so many glaring tactical errors? [Brand Zille](#) (and Brand DA) are being tarnished by sudden outbreaks of foot-in-mouth disease and just plain bloody mindedness. The ["refugee" tweet debacle](#) is just the latest example.

Sure, a lot of the outrage that Zille generates is just empty posturing, using convenient opportunities to score points. But the fact is she creates the conditions for this to happen in the first place.

The DA's communications strategy team must surely be aware of where it's going wrong, but if it isn't, here are a few pointers:

1. Alienating a key growth market

The DA has to grow at all costs. Young, educated black South Africans disenchanted with the ANC - many of whom voted for COPE - are an obvious growth area for them. Yet time and time again, Zille and the DA make the kind of tactical blunders that ensure the next time those voters reach a moment of truth, in that booth, their cross will not be next to her face.

The [DASO poster](#) was one example; the "refugee" fracas is another. Again and again, the DA looks preachy, willfully obtuse and lacking in empathy. Why keep reminding an audience you're wooing of the reasons they *don't* like you?

2. Allowing your critics to position you

There's nothing you can do about the haters; they're always going to hate you. But you can make it harder for them to influence others who feel less strongly. A mistake many brands make is creating the conditions where it's easy for competitors to position them in the market.

It has long been fashionable for the left of the political spectrum to dismiss the DA as racist, with Zille derided as "Madam". They'll look for any reason to bring this up, which means that the DA leader has to tread extra carefully. To use an ill-considered word such as "refugee" offered up a Zille-bashing opportunity on a platter.

This [quote from News24](#) neatly describes the issue from the point of view of a black South African: "Madam you do know that there are people who believe that if the DA won the national elections, they would bring back Apartheid and yet you make such statements not considering the history of citizenship and pass laws coupled with how you are

perceived as a 'racist Madam'."

3. Letting the message run away from you

Imagine if Zille had described the plight of the children of the Eastern Cape without referring to them as "refugees". Regardless of whether it was taken out of context - and having your statements taken out of context is par for the course in politics - the fact is that, thanks to one word, the issue became one of the DA's tone deafness to the legacies of our tortured history, and not one of delivery - which is presumably what the DA was actually aiming for.

The responses by [COSAS](#) and others have been completely out of proportion to the original offence, but anyone with two firing neurons could have seen that coming. The DA drew attention away from where it's strong and the ANC is vulnerable. Unbelievably stupid.

4. Refusing to back down when it makes tactical sense

After it became clear that the response to the word "refugee" was overwhelmingly negative, Zille should have said, "Sorry, my bad, next time I'll consult a thesaurus." Instead, she got sucked into arguments about semantics and history, arguments which merely reinforced the negative perceptions her critics are more than happy to entrench.

Oh, and helped draw attention away from non-delivery in the Eastern Cape by helping others to make it a race issue, exactly where the DA is vulnerable.

5. Not knowing when it's better not to respond

Last year I [wrote a piece](#) on why I was impressed with Zille's use of Twitter. Now I'm [not so sure](#). Scrolling through her tweets, I find instances where she engages constructively with people such as *Sunday Times* columnist Ndumiso Ngcobo - yet at the same time she hits back at trolls instead of ignoring them.

On Twitter, it's remarkably easy to provoke her. I used to enjoy her sarcasm because she came across as more authentic; now it's just off-putting. I'm astonished that she dignified this tweet with a response:



[click to enlarge](#)

The upshot is that instead of using the situation to position herself as a leader who delivers tangible improvements to the lives of South Africans, Zille is managing to come across as Tony Leon in a dress, a tactless white liberal of the old ANC-bashing guard. I've spoken to many people about this, across the political spectrum, and they all agree that the DA should be talking about one thing: delivery. Nothing else.

One dominant player is not good for anyone

We know that inequality is the biggest challenge facing SA, and that applies to politics, too. One dominant player is not good for anyone. Unless the DA come to its senses, focusing more on demonstrating tangible delivery and less on scoring points against the ANC, it won't gain market share.

That would be a pity, because the more real choices voters have, the better for us all.

For more:

- Daily Maverick: [Tough lessons for Zille from refugee tweet debacle](#)
- Bizcommunity: [Nando's frames Zille](#)
- Memeburn: [Four reasons someone should get Helen Zille away from Twitter](#)

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For More list added at 11.37am on 4 April 2012.

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