

Cause-based marketing overload



By [Anton Ressel](#)

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Do you market yourself as a 'green' business? OK, so you may use recycled materials in your products, limit electricity usage, even have different dustbins for glass, plastic and other, but does that entitle you to use words such as 'sustainable manufacturer' or 'environmentally-friendly' in your marketing spiel?

In all likelihood, what we view as responsible environmental practice today will be the absolute minimum requirement a decade or so from now. Already in many countries recycling is an imperative, not an option. In light of this, is it fair to trumpet our environmental credentials when we are actually simply doing what is expected in terms of saving the planet for future generations?

Greenwash

Forgive me if I sound cynical. In truth I welcome and applaud any steps, no matter how small, to try and limit our impact on this very fragile planet of ours. However, I do take umbrage to an increasingly common phenomenon known as 'greenwash'. Perfected by serial polluters such as oil companies and mining giants, Wikipedia defines it as "a form of spin in which green PR or green marketing is deceptively used to promote the perception that an organisation's aims and policies are environmentally friendly." In fact, there is even an annual award for the most brazen display of greenwashing - see www.greenwashgold.org.

Unfortunately, while certain oil companies continue to nauseate and push the boundaries of what people will believe, such grandiose overstating is not just limited to big corporates. In fact, in growing local sectors like craft and small-scale manufacturing this is an increasingly common practice, not just around the environment, but across a host of social issues.

It seems like every second craft or small manufacturing business in SA is a 'job-creation initiative', an 'income-generating project' or some other Mother Theresa-like saviour of all our social ills enterprise. What happened to just being a great business, with great products and services? It feels like we believe we cannot compete unless we put some or other social spin on what we do in the course of carrying out our business.

Wake up call

This obsession with cause-based marketing, which is practised globally but not generally to the level we experience it here in SA, probably has its roots in our unique, skewed past.

When I was invited some years back to attend an export promotion conference for developing countries in Rotterdam,

Holland, in my role as director of social enterprise at Streetwires, all five SA businesses present had some or other 'do-good' message in their marketing story. The one guy was particularly brazen, even including a picture on his packaging of a poor, very hungry looking 'mother with HIV' who apparently was the maker of the beaded widgets he was trying to sell.

What was most interesting about the conference was that virtually none of the other attendees employed this tactic - and they were from some of the most impoverished countries in the world including Bangladesh, Bolivia and Ethiopia. The hardened Dutch buyer summed it up when he presented me with the following withering assessment of my products: "It is very nice that you are creating some jobs for people in your country, but your pricing is unsustainable, your products are average and your packaging sucks." It was probably the most valuable feedback I have ever got.

Save yourself before you save the world

Of course, aligning yourself to a cause can be a useful and powerful marketing tool, especially if it is done in a sincere manner. Over and above this, many entrepreneurs do by their very nature have a natural affinity towards doing good, and being more than just the sum of their products and services. In addition, many non-profit organisations use skills such as craft and related small-scale manufacturing as tools for income generation, and this is all fine and well.

What gets my goat, however, is when the one-man band who happens to employ a carpenter or two on a part-time basis (usually at a very low wage) as and when order volumes dictate, calls himself a 'job-creation initiative'. Or when the e-commerce website that retails SA curios claims that its sole reason for existence is to 'give poor subsistence crafters access to market opportunities.' What is wrong with simply promoting the great work coming out of this country, and making money doing so?

By tagging a cause onto what we do simply because we think it is expected, we cheapen the real value inherent in much of our locally produced products - many of which are truly innovative and unique. A business leader's primary responsibility is to build a great business that makes and sells great products and treats each and every customer like gold.

Maybe I am a bit cynical, but for me the words 'income-generation', 'job creation', 'upliftment' and 'previously disadvantaged' as a core part of a company's brand positioning are so 1994.

ABOUT ANTON RESSEL

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