

# Top Gear - Lessons from the Stig

By [Andrew Ross](#), issued by [Havas Johannesburg](#)

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So unless you have been living in the boot of a reasonably priced car, you will pretty much know that the writing is on the test track tyre-wall for the once mighty BBC motoring institution, *Top Gear*.

The edgy, and charismatic Jeremy Clarkson seems to have allowed his legendary ego to get the better of him once too often. and in an altercation around the provision of a hot meal, punched a producer for not doing his job. (The producer WAS Irish, but I'm not sure that alone is reason enough to swing a right hook?)

From the outside, objectively, the BBC are pretty much "damned-if-you-do", "damned-if-you-dont" in the scenario planning of the future of their biggest selling franchise. At best they have publicly aired their dirty laundry surrounding the real personality of their affable, blokey, everyman presenter who is actually, if reports are to be believed, an ego-manical, celebrity-fuelled tosser. At worst, should they axe the iconic Clarkson, they will no-doubt pretty much have succeeded in toppling a mighty franchise and global cash-cow.

Now before we go over-dramatically claiming that this is unexpected and terribly sudden, you have to assume they would have learnt from the Stig-saga! Various drivers behind the Stig helmet over the last years have rippled the code of the *Top Gear* matrix by threatening to, and then disclosing their true identity, no doubt to cash in on the fame and fortune of being associated with the worlds most-watched TV series.



Yet they have undeniably, even with Jezza's previous poor conduct around racial slurs, increasingly edgy opinions and a growing super-ego behind the scenes (apparently), continued to allow Clarkson to dominate programming content, appearances and live events. There has not been even the slightest editorial shift that I have been able to pick up, despite Clarkson obviously being an increasingly loose cannon.

In case we are in any doubt of the inextricable integration of Brand Clarkson, and Brand *Top Gear* - Norway has already announced a "postponement" of Top Gear Live! Let's not forget Top Gear is a large franchise, not just limited to TV programming. The financial viability of the Top Gear Live event's in Hong Kong, Sydney and of course Jozi, without Clarkson as a drawcard, has to be a looming question on promoters' balance sheets right now. It is noticeable the beleaguered South African event has been noticeably quiet on the subject, clearly dispelling the old adage that any publicity is good publicity!

Marketing 101: Brands associate with individual celebrities at their peril! End of Story! Finish and Klaar! Global icons such as Tiger Woods and Oscar Pistorius have proven this concept over and over again and in this case Clarkson may well be too closely aligned to *Top Gear* for it to survive without him.

It is an interesting dilemma. The direct relationship between brands and celebrities creating emotional connections between fans and brands, will always be hamstrung by the exact reason that brands do this to begin with. These celebrities are real people. Warts and all! And the great emotional connection these ambassadors bring to the mix of brand-love, can just as quickly create massive and irreparable fall-out as a result.



**Where it's really pertinent right now, is simple! Clarkson is not just a brand ambassador of the *Top Gear* franchise. Jeremy Clarkson IS *Top***

## Gear!

Anyone having watched the editorially sound but sadly lacking Australian or North American versions (cancelled last year) will surely attest to the inextricable value, and character that Clarkson brings to the *Top Gear* recipe.

The producers killed off Black Stig by driving him off an aircraft carrier, when his identity was revealed by the press after a motoring incident (*correction by the real Black Stig, Perry McCarthy @original\_stig*) and I sort of feel the swan song of Clarkson's imminent public firing needs to be as bold! No re-casting, re-jigging, re-scripting or re-aligning to a new presenter, no matter how famous, is going to bring the "old" Top-Gear back, in fact it may well make better business sense to kill it off, like Black Stig, leaving audience and show exiting on a high (except for the Falklands episodes) rather than attempt to re-cast and re-create the unique dynamic of character and content that made the original so successful.

RIP *Top Gear*. It's been a great ride! If Clarkson is not returning to the studios, it really is time to hang up the keys, and switch off the lights, before more damage is done to an iconic brand.

## ABOUT ANDREW ROSS

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