

Why the ANC is the Coke of political branding

FIONA FORDE

Good brands don't die. They just thrive on a solid reputation that is born out of a promise made and a promise kept. The successful brands spread their wings. They become household names the world over. And they withstand the test of time.

Take Guinness, first brewed in rural Ireland in 1759, as a case in point. Or Johnnie Walker, which has been sitting on the shelves since 1820. *The New York Times*, which has stood tall since it rolled off the presses back in 1851. Levi Strauss, since 1853. The unique taste of Coca-Cola that began to quench thirst in 1886.

And the African National Congress, the movement that was founded in 1912 and went on to become a brand leader, by a proverbial mile, in the world of politics.

Ever since it was launched, the ANC has stood by its core message of liberation and in 1955 the Freedom Charter became its selling point. In 1994 it delivered on its promise of a free South Africa. And by then it was a formidable brand with a broad support base and easily one of the most widely recognised political movements in the world.

In branding terms, it works, says Thomas Oosthuizen, a brand strategist with The Brand Wealth Organisation. "Whether you like it or hate it, you are confronted with it every day."

But in the past few months the brand has been called into question. Mosiuoa Lekota and Mbhazima Shilowa – or the Shikotas, as the pair and their supporters have come to be called – say the comrades have deviated from the Freedom Charter and are no longer delivering on a better life for all.

"They are saying the promise is being comprised," says Thebe Ikalafeng, a brand strategist. So they have decided to end 96 years of matrimony to start their own political brand.

Yet despite the attention the move has attracted in recent weeks, brand experts don't believe the split will cause any real harm, for now at least.

"In politics, the test for the brand is an election," says Andy Rice, the chairperson of Yellowwood Brand Architects. And with the ANC sitting on 69,69 percent of the vote from the 2004 poll, "it's hard to imagine how two or three weeks of publicity for a small number of high-profile individuals" can reduce that figure in any meaningful way.

Yet there's no smoke without fire, Ikalafeng cautions.

"Who would have thought that 15 years after democracy we would have the potential of a formidable black opposition?"

Consequently, the South African electorate will now have a stage on which to judge the ANC. But rather than see this as a threat, the comrades should welcome the breakaway as an opportunity "to reinforce and consolidate its promise and explain to the electorate what makes the ANC distinct from any other challenge or brand," he adds.

Rice begs to differ: "If you command such a majority, the imperatives to be different don't quite seem so strong. You're not in competitive danger."

There is the example of Coca-Cola, which withstood the challenge of Pepsi in the early 1900s to go on to become the strongest soft drink brand in a crowded global market. And there's no reason why the ANC cannot do it now as well.

But the challenge, both Rice and Ikalafeng agree, is for the ANC to show their targeted electorate that they understand these changing times and their voters' changing needs, because recent in every brand strategist's mind is also the Sony Walkman saga; the label that thought it was the leader in walking sound until the iPod toppled it from its perch seven years ago.

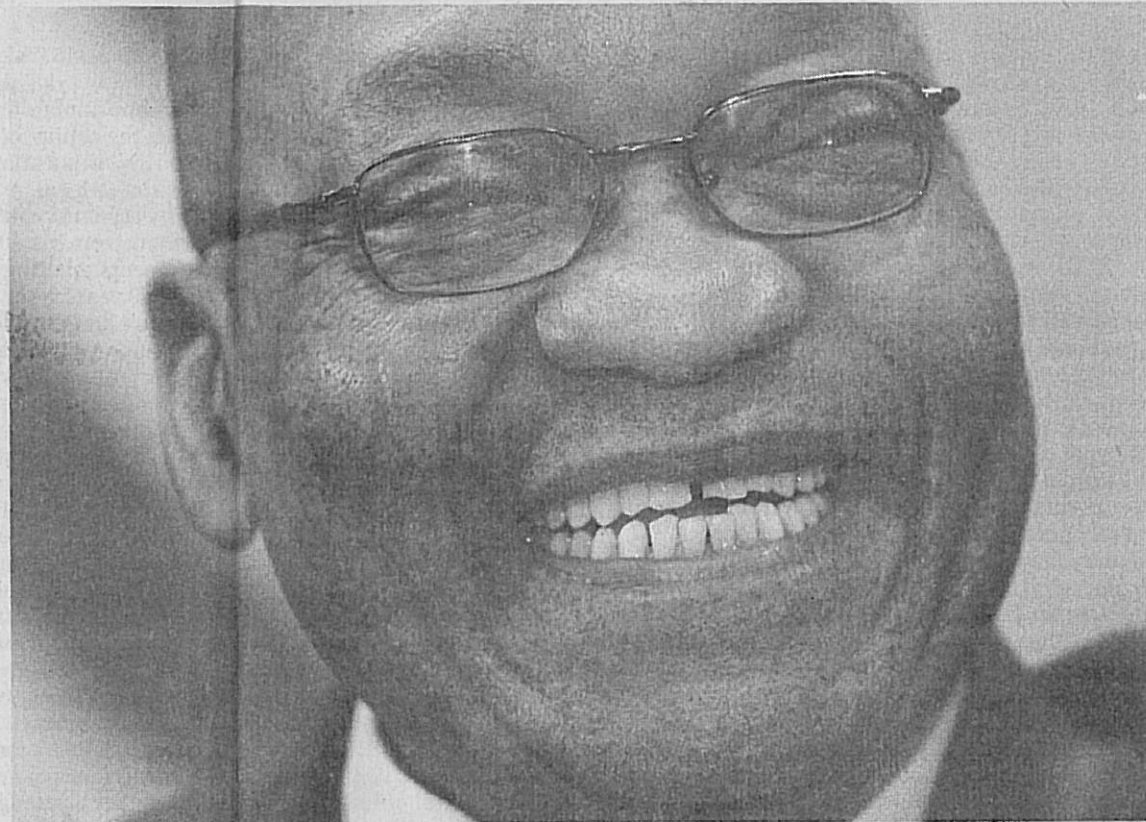
The strategists caution against the arrogance and complacency that too often begins to rise to the surface when great brands have been around for some time.

They argue that no brand exists for and by itself. It's the consumers, and in this case the voters, who give them licence to exist.

And as with all great brands, and partic-

All smiles: Jacob Zuma, the ANC president, 'doesn't seem to have the leadership style, or the latitude of credibility' when the ANC brand needs it most. 'There's a lack of vision. A lack of gravitas. Of aura...'

PHOTOGRAPH:
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ularly those of a political nature, they say that leadership is critical. Leaders are what they call the "branding champions" and it is leaders who must embody the values and promise of the brand.

"What the ANC needs to ask themselves is whether the current leadership embodies the same values as the preceding leadership of the ANC, particularly the OR [Tambo] and [Nelson] Mandela and [Walter] Sisulu crop," argues Ikalafeng. "If they do not, then the brand is in danger."

Last week the ANC dispatched its top national executive committee team around the country in a desperate bid to allay concerns and stem defections. This week, some of the party's veterans are being rolled out to address branch meetings around the country, praying for unity at

this 11th hour. "They are wanting to remind people of what brought us here and what binds us together," Ikalafeng suggests. It's about that earlier promise. And it's about strategising the brand.

Not too many years ago, Mandela went hand in hand with that earlier promise and "when he was an active head of the ANC, you didn't need a brand strategy", Rice believes. "But the party did not think about managing the post-Mandela era and sustaining the brand."

It is human nature to want to be led and with the Mandela leadership came a sense of blindly following. "And that's why the strength of leadership tends to often be more important than direction," says Rice.

But when the leader is not strong, "then the thinking and debate revolves back to

direction, which is what's happening in the ANC right now".

And it is casting a sharp light on the incumbent leader, Jacob Zuma, a man whom Rice says has done well in quantitative terms, "but the jury is still out on his qualitative strengths as ANC president".

Despite his support base, "Zuma doesn't seem to have the leadership style, or the latitude of credibility" when the brand needs it most, Oosthuizen suggests.

"There's a lack of vision. A lack of gravitas. Of aura... all characteristics of a leader that are critical for the brand and which can make or break the promise."

That's why the comrades need to focus on a clear and credible message now to evoke their original promise and founding principles. The strategists are quick to cite

the success of Barack Obama, the United States presidential candidate, a man they say is the epitome of clarity. He is a politician who rose to prominence on a ticket for change 18 months ago and whose message has not wavered since.

To his credit, Obama recognised the changing needs of the electorate and moved with them, they argue. And his defining factor has been the way in which he has communicated his core message: an outstanding orator who hooked into the internet and mastered mobile telephony to spread the word as no other politician before him has. He is not shy to befriend a celebrity or two. And, as a result, he has rarely been wanting where supporters are concerned.

Zuma, on the other hand, spent the first half of this year singing a different tune for just about every audience he encountered and left more constituents scratching their heads than clapping their hands in his wake.

The ANC now needs to listen to the perceptions that have been created as a result, be they true or false. "Perceptions are massive and can never be underestimated," says Oosthuizen. Take Pick n Pay as a classic example. The supermarket lost market share this week because of the perception that its prices are not competitive, despite the fact that they are often the cheapest on the market.

The problem is that African politics is still in its infancy, and hence branding and marketing are light years from continental thinking where politics is concerned.

"We haven't quite graduated from our guerrilla days ... we are still quite sensitive. We may look mature but we are not quite there yet," says Ikalafeng.

But we shouldn't discount the importance of being strategic, says Rice. "The vast majority of us are politically illiterate, all over the world. So it's the brand that gives us something to hang on to."

If they were the guardians of the ANC brand, all three of the strategists say they would watch it and, right now, worry about it. But as Ikalafeng says: "It's never too late to do the right thing."