

The medium isn't the message

With electioneering under way, who can blame the DA for targeting the mobile youth vote?

THERE is no doubt that the official opposition party, the DA, is intent on wresting votes and the leadership of the economic hub of South Africa, Gauteng, from the ANC. Buoyed by the momentum of the past two elections, in which it increased its share of the nearly 25 million votes from 12.4 percent to 17 percent, this week the DA upped the ante by launching a novel airtime voucher branding campaign and deciding to sponsor the Opposition to Urban Tolling Alliance (Outa) to the tune of R1 million to fight government plans to implement e-tolling in Gauteng.

As should be expected, the ANC, in a spirited defence of its 66 percent mandate, refused to take either move lying down, branding the DA actions as electioneering.

Of course they are. The battle for 2014 is indeed under way and the DA has fired the first salvoes – with creativity.

Blue Label Telecoms, the distributor of the airtime vouchers, which claims to have offered the opportu-



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nity to all political parties, with the DA grabbing it, capitulated under the ruling party's criticism and apologised to MTN for "creating the perception" that the campaign was sanctioned by the cellphone operator, which had faced undue criticism.

This week's events brought to the fore two fundamental questions: what are the limits of creativity? And what is par for the course for corporate South Africa in political branding and campaigns?

It's clear why the DA took the

opportunity.

The cluttered traditional media doesn't cut it any more in the R40 billion advertising market and the battle for the attention of an increasingly mobile, discerning and politically disinterested target market.

A recent TNS Mobile survey indicated that cellphones are the technology devices owned by most South Africans; more people have a smartphone than the total combined ownership of laptops and desktop PCs.

At least 89 percent of homes are using a cellphone, of which 82 percent are on prepaid. The cellphone has become the most important piece of technology – and medium – in South Africans' lives.

Recent studies by World Wide Worx show that the most popular cellphone banking transaction is the purchase of airtime, with 74 percent of customers using the platform for this purpose. The second most popular banking transaction is the transfer of airtime, with 69 percent of rural users and 51 percent of urban users using their phone to this end.

Consequently, the mobile medium is no longer just a channel for people to reach each other, but for marketers to reach them. It is an effective medium that delivered victory for an upstart called Barack Obama in the US in 2008 and won a re-election for him last year. It is also the battleground for South Africa 2014.

There is no doubt the battle next year is going to be the fiercest yet, in an increasingly young, impatient and unemployed nation, where according to Stats SA, 58.5 percent of people are under the age of 34, with a non-existent or fading memory of the Struggle.

For this generation, everything – the present and the future – is mobile, a view confirmed by a Generation Next survey which found that the coolest brand is BlackBerry and the coolest bank is FNB. FNB no doubt made it to the top of the list for its leadership in mobile banking, and particularly for facilitating ownership of iPads and Samsung tablets for those who sign up as customers.

Like Blue Label Telecoms, which is responsible for printing and dis-

tributing airtime vouchers on behalf of MTN, Vodacom and Cell C, FNB has felt the wrath of the ANC for a perception that it has dabbled in politics, and it stopped the initiatives that created this view and issued an apology.

But there's a distinct difference between the two scenarios.

Both are similar in that their ultimate aim was to influence the bottom lines of the companies involved.

In the case of FNB, it was misguided to give young customers a channel to vent.

The bank clearly veered away from its core offering and was engaging in the kind of social discourse best reserved for civil society and political parties. In the Blue Label Telecoms case, the ANC may not have put its reaction within context.

But in reality, it realised retrospectively that the DA had bettered it strategically in reaching 2.5 million voters using a quick and relatively inexpensive and effective form of media (assuming the targets bothered to read the message while achieving their primary goal,

airtime).

Irrespective, the spirited reaction created much more value for the DA because of the PR it created, rendering the Blue Label Telecoms cancellation ineffective and multiplying the DA's return on its investment.

But airtime vouchers, like flight, bus, parking and movie tickets, for example, are a novel medium that marketers have been using to reach increasingly elusive but mobile targets.

At face value, it seems preposterous to accuse Blue Label Telecoms (or MTN, Vodacom and Cell C by association) of supporting the opposition (or the ANC, had it chosen to use the medium). Blue Label Telecoms is a brand, and by definition a brand creates boundaries of identification and association, and similarly attracts like-minded people – or those who aspire to be associated with it.

In the craft of building brands, it is often said that perception is everything.

In politics, there is no doubt that perception is everything, especially to a fragile nation with a population

whose political knowledge and maturity is just coming of age.

In branding it's often difficult to make the distinction between the medium and the message.

Thus, in mature political markets, often there is an express specification that the political message is distinct from the medium. The role of the media, the ultimate winner in this debacle, is as a conduit of the message.

However, as brands with defined constituencies, corporations can be perceived to endorse a point of view merely by doing what is legitimately their business.

As the election battle heats up, parties will be sharpening their persuasive skills and responding with creativity, using either traditional tactics or veiled strategies, such as sponsorship of Outa.

As a nation, we should not condone any party that threatens or sacrifices the hard-earned democratic right of freedom of expression, association, choice and channel enshrined in the constitution.

■ Ikalafeng is founder of Brand Africa and Brand Leadership.

Money-rich DA will never sway SA poor to its side

NKENKE KEKANA

THIS latest stunt by the DA in using ambush marketing is a weak attempt to try to rid itself of its apartheid label.

Many of the DA leaders bear the disgusting odour of those who walked the corridors of a Parliament that endorsed the apartheid racist system over and over again for 46 years. For more than 300 years, their forefathers pushed an agenda designed to disenfranchise the African majority, yet today they attempt to distance themselves from this past while still employing their age-old tactics to continue with their unjust privilege. In the meantime, the poor remain in squalor designed by the DA's forefathers.

This opportunism knows no bounds, where they want to accost unsuspecting MTN and reportedly Vodacom customers with their false messages of the Know Your DA campaign, designed to rewrite history and fool the populace. Thankfully, our people are not stupid.

Not only does this opportunistic party have no shame, it attempts to continue buying votes from a black majority who over a 20-year period have rejected the notion of the return of white rule in South Africa. We will continue to say what we have said for a long time: poor people are not a people without functioning brains, contrary to what the DA believes. Their white capitalist funders continue to think that they can return their party to political power and destabilise the gains of freedom brought to our people by the ANC, the mainstay of the poor and the working class.

This latest disgraceful infringement of consumer rights and guidelines provided for in Section 9 of the Electoral Code shows a disregard for the electoral guidelines set by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa).

While the voucher advertising is done outside a declared election period, Icasa regulations state that a paid political campaign must conform to standards that do not contravene the constitution and Section 9 of the Electoral Code. The peddling of false information by the DA constitutes incitement of the public, and the ANC cannot stay silent as our people are brainwashed and fed propaganda, while they have a right to not be subjected to ambush marketing when buying airtime from spaza shops. The DA uses its millions of rand gathered from white business to advertise false political messages that are predatory on the poor who have few options as to where they purchase their airtime.

If we silently allow this advertising trend to gain traction, where will it stop? Will this then become an issue of consumers with few choices – poor consumers, being forced to buy products that contain messages designed to condition their thinking and indoctrinate



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them? Our people can't opt out of buying vouchers, compared with the elite DA membership with choices and resources, so it is up to the ANC to protect them from this opportunism and dirty tactics employed by those who attempt to abuse voters with their endless cash reserves.

Interestingly, the DA has long attempted to use their money to buy voters, like they are doing with the e-toll matter, with their opportunistic "donation" to their own Opposition to Urban Tolling Alliance (Outa) project. The calculated move by Outa of announcing a need for R1 million one day, and miraculously two days later their parent DA-party comes to their "rescue", is a not-so-clever ploy to again sway public opinion against the ANC-led government. Whatever the argument against e-tolling, the fact is that the government embarked on thorough extensive public participation processes to ensure that the Gauteng Freeway Improvement Project is understood by all members of the public who benefit from the world-class freeway network that flows through the province.

Meanwhile, in the DA-run Western Cape, the deprived communities in places like Khayelitsha are subjected to colonial prison-like conditions in their shacks, with portable toilets placed right in the middle of where families eat, sleep and live. Adults are expected to relieve themselves in front of children, undermining their human dignity and pride. This is what the DA throws in the face of the poor – yet they act surprised when those same communities throw the human waste at them as a sign of extreme frustration. If they can't convincingly govern one province effectively, how do they expect the electorate to entrust them with the economic hub of South Africa, or indeed the entire country? The reports that ANC Gauteng leadership is panicking because of the DA's tactics are false; we will never be intimidated by a war of words and borderline illegal activities of a fringe party that recruits with their wallets, hell-bent on manufacturing history for disreputable reasons.

■ Kekana is a member of the ANC's Gauteng provincial executive committee.



A GROWING THREAT: DA leader Helen Zille speaks to the media after police blocked her attempts to walk near President Jacob Zuma's home in Nkandla in November last year. South Africa needs a new culture of political debate, and to put aside the tendency to bully and intimidate, says the writer.

PICTURE: REUTERS

MTN did not authorise political ads on airtime vouchers

ROBERT MADZONGA

MTN'S brand remains the most valued in Africa as we, once again this year, became the only African brand to make it into the prestigious Millward-Brown Brandz Top 100 Most Valuable Global Brands survey.

We improved our ranking from 88 last year to 79 this year.

Such achievements do not come through complacency. Rather, they reflect our investments in making sure

our brand resonates with all our customers, regardless of their circumstances and beliefs.

We take great pride in ensuring that our consumers see themselves in a brand they admire.

We strive not to deliberately offend or alienate our customers by endorsing a particular political or religious group.

As a company, we are focused on enhancing our customers' experience whenever they encounter the MTN

brand.

MTN respects and recognises the right to freedom of political affiliation in line with the country's democratic values.

However, our policy and principles as an organisation prohibit promotion of any political or religious views across all our business operations.

Therefore, we were shocked to learn that our MTN-branded airtime vouchers had been associated with political advertising.

Unfortunately, media coverage relating to this matter has been unbalanced, one-dimensional, inaccurate and misleading.

We learnt this week that MTN airtime vouchers had been printed with advertisements of a political party's marketing campaign.

Until the media reported on the matter, we were not aware that our vouchers had been used in a manner that is against our company principles. When we discovered the news, we

immediately distanced ourselves from the campaign.

Our information is that MTN is not the only cellphone operator to be affected by this issue.

However, it is also incumbent on the media to rectify misleading facts about this airtime voucher marketing campaign, as current reporting may damage our reputation.

■ Madzonga is chief corporate services officer at MTN.

ANC flexing muscle to influence private marketing campaign

MMUSI MAIMANE

THIS week has been full of undemocratic behaviour in South Africa – from the ANC's call for consumers to boycott MTN following the DA's airtime voucher advertising campaign, to ANCYL members in the Western Cape throwing faeces at the provincial legislature and the premier's car.

This level of engagement and intimidation has no place in our democracy. In fact, this anti-democratic, and often vulgar, behaviour takes us further and further away from the rainbow nation for which so many fought so hard.

Instead of engaging on issues of service delivery, education, or even redress, the ANC this week chose to use its political muscle to influence the private sector into pulling the plug on a DA advertising campaign.

This kind of intimidation goes directly against the constitution, which guarantees freedom of association and the right to campaign freely.

Ironically, the ANC was reportedly offered the same opportunity, but chose not to partake.

Also this week, the ANCYL chose to protest in a particularly vulgar manner about toilets in a municipality that is the leading metro for sanitation delivery in the country. Bucket toilets are an apartheid relic which the DA has addressed at a rate faster than any other municipality or province in the country. Now 97.2 percent of people in Cape Town have either flush or chemical toilets; as do 90.5 percent of people in the greater Western Cape.

Thousands of people are still using bucket toilets every day in ANC-governed provinces.

What is overwhelmingly clear from this trend is that the ANC is becoming seriously worried about the DA's growth. More and more people from all walks of life in South Africa are finding their political home with the DA. This has prompted an increasing culture of political bullying and intimidation which is very concerning.

Coming from different political homes, or having contrasting ideas, does not mean we need to engage on any level that involves undue influence, public disrespect or violence.



Mmusi Maimane

I may not personally like an individual or even a group of people. I may not agree with their ideas. But this does not entitle me to disrespect them or exercise undue authority over them.

South Africans need to start engaging on a different level; one which encompasses a culture of respect and tolerance.

Vulgar behaviour such as that demonstrated by the ANCYL in Cape Town this week, or violence and damage to property during public protests, are simply not acceptable. In the same light, using race or political muscle to engage only polarises South Africans and does not deal with the substance of pressing issues in the country.

We need to mature as a democracy and mature in our political discourse, which should be a contest of ideas and not of a particular race or group.

Two decades into our democracy, the ANC has failed to deliver opportunities – or even services – to our people.

Their desperate attempts to cling to power will not hide this failure from South Africans.

The fact remains that the ANC cannot win in a battle with the DA over service delivery.

Yet, instead of addressing these failures, they continue to bully and intimidate.

This won't change the fact that the DA is growing across all parts of South Africa. We will continue to deliver where we govern and we will continue to redress the legacy of apartheid in every way we can.

■ Maimane is DA national spokesman.