

What an advert for a tub of margarine can teach us about the dangers of narrow self-interest

 By [Justin McCarthy](#)

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A South African advertisement for Flora margarine recently caused a bit of a stir both here and abroad^[1], raising some interesting questions about what constitutes offence.

The print ad shows a headline sculpted in the shape of a bullet speeding towards a porcelain heart, reading "Uhh, Dad I'm gay". Cue moral outrage, media hype and social media hysteria. Are we asking the right questions though, and does this really warrant the nature of the outrage? More fundamentally, does it engender or reinforce prejudice as many of its critics argue, or are some people selfishly hypersensitive?

Reading a good deal of the commentary on the subject I'm firmly of the view that the outrage emanates predominantly from the domain of two categories of people. The first is elements of the gay and lesbian community, some of whom feel offended by the suggestion that "coming out" can still be hurtful to a parent given today's (alleged) advanced societal norms. The second is a class of people desperate to associate themselves with a public expression of political correctness rather than any genuine interest in gay and lesbian affairs. This is a trend that is becoming increasingly popular and harmful to genuinely robust public discourse. It's the lemming effect, where access to social media platforms enables these types to twitter on about subject matter they haven't actually thought through properly.

We like to think of ourselves as tolerant, but...

I believe the advert is based on a deep human insight prevalent in SA - the fear amongst quite possibly the large majority of parents that their child may turn out "different". The evidence of homophobia is overwhelming, despite that we like to sometimes think of ourselves as this idealistic rainbow nation at the leading edge of liberal democracy. We might have the most robust Constitution that protects the rights of all, but that doesn't mean that prejudice isn't widespread and deep seated.

I dare say that if the writer replaced the copy line "Dad I'm gay" with (for example) "Dad I'm marrying a black/white/coloured/Indian woman" that the outrage would have been greater, simply because the race card has even greater sensationalist value. Or for that matter "Dad, I'm dating a Muslim/Jew/Christian/Hindu". What ad agency Lowe + Partners has done is tap into a human truth - one that may not be open to much public debate because people are afraid of betraying their silent prejudices - and dramatised it. This is a primary basis of good advertising because it gets noticed, noted and dramatises the brand proposition (which is expressed in the line "You need a strong heart today"). It's not for me to pronounce on whether or not this is appropriate for Flora as I don't have the requisite insight into either the margarine market or the brand. Neither can I pronounce with any authority on the relevance of the advert to its desired audience. But what I can say is that the human truth the ad draws upon is most likely to strike a resonant chord with a broad swathe of South Africans from almost all market segments. Quite simply because we're a complex and complicated lot, tortured by ghosts past and present in the form of fragmented shards of cultural and societal norms. Those sensitised to homophobia are in the minority, and while it is right and just that we educate and diminish any prejudice, this doesn't make the advert bad or in poor taste.

Internet brings out the mob mentality

That's not to say that I believe Flora's decision to run with the advert was a smart one. Just because the ad meets certain criteria doesn't mean it's the right thing to do. Brands are hypersensitive to causing any offence, and a massive multinational like Unilever (the company that owns Flora) would usually avoid this level of risk like a contagious disease. This is a direct result of the unthinking, knee-jerk and nanny state mind-set of people all over the world who take umbrage at

something they deem to be personally offensive. Unlike previous eras, the internet has enabled them to gang up rapidly on the perpetrators and manoeuvre them into a corner. The instinctive response from corporations is to back down quickly, apologise and institute a bunch of new regulations that strip layers of managers of any decision-making ability. The net result is the faceless, androgynous, characterless and risk-averse company whose agenda is now being wagged by a tail of mother-grundies who want the world to conform to their narrow criteria. I find this deeply problematic and also deeply ironic.

There's a legitimate argument that the Flora advert raises the volume on a subject that many people are uncomfortable talking about. One of the unintended consequences of good advertising is that it holds a mirror up to society. In every country and culture, good advertising raises subject matter that's otherwise not readily openly discussed. Such occasions present great opportunities for reasoned debate to enter the minds of the prejudiced and move it back a few degrees. That's progress, and it should be encouraged, particularly by those most affected by it.

Bans and boycotts are not the way to go

While the ad also strikes a discordant chord amongst some gays and lesbians, possibly because of the pain of their personal experiences, I despair when they condemn brands that dare trespass into "their" sacred territory. One's personal experiences should never trump the common cause. No person or brand or entity should ever be subjected to calls for a ban on their advertising or a boycott of their products on such a basis. To do so is fundamentally counterproductive to not only the ideal of freedom of expression, but also to the very cause those most affected wish to see banished from society. Yes it may be painful, but is that good enough cause to punish a brand that chooses to goad a particular debate? Surely that debate is, at the very least, likely to raise awareness of the issue, even if it doesn't meaningfully change attitudes? Surely those most affected should be calling loudest for the support of a brand that has the courage to push the debate forward, as opposed to boycotting it?

Being provocative can be good

Readers may recall the highly controversial Benetton advertising campaigns of decades past and the concomitant uproar around Europe at the time. Deliberately provocative, Benetton succeeded in opening whole new chapters of previously taboo subject matter. This played a not insignificant role in highlighting the prejudice against AIDS sufferers, who at the time were unequivocally associated with homosexuality or drug abuse, or both. The campaign helped to dispel many of those myths by thrusting the subject into otherwise mundane dinner party conversation. The principle here is exactly the same. Intentional or not, the Flora advert pushes the boat out on a subject we South Africans should be discussing - that of homophobia and its accompanying prejudices.

I find it immensely saddening that the greatest irony a liberal democracy exposes is the freedom it brings others whose views, opinions and choices don't conform to our own. Too many South Africans equivocate between the idea of the ideal and the reality of living by it, most particularly when it doesn't suit us. We stagger like drunks from petty nanny state meddling to violent imposition and enforcement to lofty ideals, desperate to avoid the straight and narrow. Unilever meanwhile, abandoned all responsibility for the advert and distanced itself as far as possible from the matter. In doing so, it

may well have hung its agency out to dry. A spokeswoman said "This advert was prepared by an external agency in South Africa and was not approved by anyone at Unilever. (It's) offensive and unacceptable and we have put an immediate stop to it." In my 22 years of advertising I have never heard of an advert go public without explicit client sign-off. If indeed Unilever is cowering behind its agency then we will have reached a new low. And for that you can thank the narrow self-interests of people in SA and as far afield as the UK, US and Australia, the latter whom have absolutely no clue about the issues that South Africa faces.

The matter of an advertisement for a tub of margarine, as mundane and insignificant as it is, may ring hollow to you now, but the principle is far from it. Homophobia is just one of many, many serious issues we face, and the sooner we stand up for those hard fought Constitutional rights over narrow, strident self-interest, the better we'll be able to manage the issues.

[1] BBC News [website](#)

The Guardian [website](#)

The [Huffington Post](#)

The Independent [website](#)

Australia's [news.com.au](#)

ABOUT JUSTIN MCCARTHY

Justin is a media, marketing, technology and telecoms specialist and a creativity and innovation crusader. Persuasion comes in many forms - subtlety is not his favourite and as a libertarian free speech advocate he defends the right to offend. He writes an opinionista column for Daily Maverick. Contact details: Twitter @justininza | Google+ | <https://za.linkedin.com/in/justinmccarthyza> | <http://www.hoswho.co.za/justin-mccarthy-1855195>

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