

Leveraging digital platforms for the greater good - beyond the 12 days of Christmas

By  Deseré Orrill

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The past decade has seen vast growth in corporate social investment (CSI) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes in South Africa. Despite tougher trading conditions in most sectors, CSI expenditure in SA was estimated to be worth R8.6bn in 2016, up from R2.9bn in 2006.



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Businesses are taking heed of the strategic advantage generated from social programmes and are beginning to understand and appreciate how a commitment to a healthier society drives sustainable brand longevity.

Causal marketing is not new. Indeed, linking a company or a brand to a charitable initiative or organisation has been happening for decades. But, like its cousin 'greenwashing', causal marketing has often been for show and not necessarily designed to be effective or sustainable. Research carried out by Trialogue shows that companies have become more strategic in their social investment and more proactive in choosing programmes to support, with the aim of achieving not only social but also the business impact from their CSI expenditure.

The power of sustained involvement

Today, brands are recognising the power of sustained involvement in causes over and above linking to specific 'event' days throughout the year. If strategically planned and true to the core of the brand, CSR and CSI can generate more than just brand approval, they can also drive systemic change. Like so much in CSI, the effective use of social media relies on the ability to build and maintain relationships.

Digital platforms provide opportunities for information sharing, volunteering and calls to action, capacity building, fundraising and supporting of programme goals, such as behaviour change. In today's digital era, our communications can reach more people and serve them a wider variety of content in less time and with more ease than ever before. Digital communication also means not only that customers are more informed, but also that they have the means to share their opinions and experiences, to influence and be influenced by their peers. And what their peers say, matters – to them, and to brands too.



Digital gives marketers a sporting chance

Deseré Orrill 26 Aug 2016



For companies to continue their CSI and CSR involvement, the benefit to the company and the chosen beneficiary has to be mutual. It is not only the ethical outcome of a brand's charitable support but also the positive communications around these activities that are relevant. It is important to share what we are all doing, as doing good is good for business. Part of this is communicating the good stories in ways that leave the reader, listener, or viewer affected enough to stimulate action.

Digital communication and information sharing

Corporations that have succeeded in doing just this include some of the top 50 brands in the country, as judged by the research group, Brand Finance, along with Brand South Africa.

The MTN SA Foundation, for example, has been transforming people's lives through their CSI and CSR projects for 16 years, through various interventions spanning education, health, arts and enterprise development in excess of R700m. They have not only expanded their sphere of influence for social good but have also effectively enhanced their brand image by sharing information about their CSI activities through ongoing communication campaigns.

Also in the top 10 of the Brand South Africa 'Top 50 Brands' is Woolworths. Through EduPlant, Woolworths Trust's flagship programme, the Trust has helped disadvantaged schools and communities gain the skills they need to grow their own food, and their MySchoolCard programme raises funds for resources for schools throughout the country. Not only is the programme itself facilitated through digital means, but it is also thanks to digital communications and information sharing that Woolworths has been able to spur support, grow community participation and also, as a corporate quid pro quo, been able to continuously enhance brand perception.

Another great example of a CSI campaign that has reached an enormous audience, thanks to digital communication was a campaign by the Cipla Foundation earlier this year. Supporting various initiatives aimed at providing essential health care facilities for disadvantaged communities, the Cipla Foundation does exceptional good on the ground, but by reaching, even more, people through the 'digisphere', the Foundation sought to do even better. The aim of the digital marketing campaign was to change conversations into action and to spur support for the CSI initiatives they endorse. Encouraging active citizenship, with a call to rally behind the various causes that the Foundation supports, the '#NotAskingForAnything ... Not for ourselves anyway' campaign garnered significant online traction, views and interactions.

Rather than calling for companies or individuals to donate money alone, the subtext of the campaign was "What can you do for others?" This mirrors a growing trend in the way that companies are moving beyond corporate social investment to active social innovation, with these practices becoming a part of normal business.

Doing good

Consumers and employees, especially Generation-Zs and millennials, expect brands to be involved in advocacy work. As companies continue to make the public aware of their social involvement through effective multi-tiered communication campaigns that enable informed decision-making, consumer buy-in will increase, with consumers making choices that favour environmentally and socially responsible companies.

It's a message that is resonating throughout the world today, as material consumerism moves over to make way for the new status symbol – doing good. Tapping into this sharing economy has far-reaching consequences, so the question corporations need to ask themselves is this: are we 'causal washing', merely paying lip service to CSI and CSR initiatives, or are we as brands 'living' the causes we support? Can we as marketers tell the difference? Because our customers certainly can and they are not afraid to share their views - online.

Corporations and brands that understand that they need to have value as well as values, will make this festive season count, beyond the 12-days of Christmas.

ABOUT DESERÉ ORRILL

Deseré Orrill is a co-founder of the Ole! Media Group and is currently the group CMO as well as managing director of MbbiMedia, a mobile engagement company within the group, and HoneyKome, the strategic digital consulting arm of OMG. She is intrigued by the way in which digital communication is redefining the relationship between brand and consumer, and how mobile in particular has become the catalyst for changing the traditional marketing monologue into a conversation.

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