

How online activism is shaping the way we do business

 By [Lynn Erasmus](#)

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For companies that believe that the way they do business will remain unchanged by the power and influence of online activists should take heed from the lessons that some of South Africa's biggest brands have learnt over the past year.



Image source: Getty/Gallo Images.

We've seen how activists can garner a groundswell of support that can overrule the 'terms and conditions' of business and put world leaders in their place.

Earlier this year, local retailer Woolworths once again found itself in the hot seat after striking similarities came to light between its house brand baby carrier and that of local business Ubuntu Baba. The online backlash and groundswell of support from social media ultimately compelled the retailer to pull the range and apologise to the designer.



Ubuntu Baba saga knocks public perception of Woolworths

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Facing similar outrage on social media, Momentum Life had to rethink its life insurance policies in relation to deaths as a result of violent crime after initially rejecting one such claim due to the policy holder's lack of disclosure of a pre-existing health condition at the time of signing up for the policy.

Hard lessons

When things go wrong, having underestimated the power of social media is a hard lesson to learn.

Companies are increasingly more vulnerable to online activism thanks in part to the rise of socially conscious consumerism. It has the power to affect real change either for - or against businesses, as was the case for both Woolworths and Momentum.

Online activism is an incredibly powerful tool for change that gives activists who would otherwise go unnoticed an immediate and vast audience to hear their side of the story. It is an instantaneous tool for like-minded people to band together in one place, regardless of where they are.

It is, however, important to distinguish between the online activist versus the online saboteur and businesses who've not invested in placing on record their reputation for being ethical and transparent will be particularly exposed in times of crisis.

Keyboard warriors

There is a huge responsibility for activists to ensure that they can stand by the veracity of their cause. Online activism, however well-intentioned, can also lead to unwarranted damage to brands.

When conversations ignite society's emotions about a particular issue – whether it is for or against a cause – there are many “keyboard warriors” who jump on the bandwagon without really interrogating the merits of the issue at hand.

Online activism can be very unpredictable and can start a potentially open-ended conversation to which activists can return to time and time again.

It raises one important issue for business – actually an important opportunity – and that is to be much more in tune with the conversations that their audiences are having and to be sensitive to their causes. It is inevitable that mistakes will be made, but the key is to get ahead of the problem before being called out.



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Be proactive

It is critical that companies are proactive when problems do arise to explain, apologise, repair the damage and rebuild trust on the premise that a problem will not reoccur.

Business must be able to answer the question ‘what is the worst thing that could happen to our company on social media today, and are we ready to deal with it?’

The online world has enabled society to become a conscience for business and it is a conscience that is ever vigilant and fearless in its pursuit of what it believes is just.

ABOUT LYNN ERASMUS

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