

# Ah for the good ol' days

 By [Brendan Seery](#)

18 Jan 2022

*Memorable: Where have all the creative juices gone?; Mark of great advertising is that people can still recall it years later*



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I am well aware of the old saying that “nostalgia ain’t what it used to be” as I write this at the beginning of a new year and wonder: where has all our South African advertising creativity gone?

Could it be that I am hankering after a time which wasn’t that great after all, or has this country’s marketing sector become just as dull as most of the globalised world?

The mark of great advertising is that people can still recall TV or radio ads, or brand punchlines years or decades after the first ads crumbled to dust. Example: It’s not inside, it’s on top.

Even years after the brand disappeared from South Africa, many people of a certain age still associate ‘braai’ with Chevrolet.

Therein, partly, is the rub.

Some of the ads people remember come from a time when the target market was clearly defined: white, middle class and gender-specific (ie cars for men and soaps for 'girls').

Plenty of water has flowed under the social and political bridge since the late '80s and early '90s when some of those ads were produced. Yet, even if we take away the prism of apartheid and the race-based targeting, there were some executions that still stand the test of time as classic advertising, either through their humour, their clever tag lines, slick production or combinations of all of those.

Even in the most self-indulgent creative directors' offices there seemed to be an innate understanding of the intrinsic of the product and how to get those across to consumers.

That Cremora 'it's not inside, it's on top' series (which is still going, proving the evergreen and perfect nature of the concept) is a perfect example. Cremora may be powdered creamer, but is so good it's like the real stuff - which should be inside a fridge, and not on top.

Likewise, BMW's 'Mouse' ad in the early '90s was a simple, yet elegant way to push the selling feature in its new cars – that all now featured power steering. So, a mouse running on a steering wheel 'treadmill' is enough to get it moving, showing perfectly how easy power steering makes the driving experience.

The ad which BMW (and its then agency Hunt Lascaris) is best known for from those days is 'Beats the Benz' (Beats the bends). Flighted over a weekend because the agency knew it would be banned for being outlawed comparative advertising, the spot features a BMW 5 Series negotiating the same treacherous curve of Chapman's Peak Drive in Cape Town which Mercedes-Benz had used to showcase the safety of their cars. A Merc driver had gone off the road, plunging into the rock, but had survived. BMW made the clever point, though, that if you'd been in one of their cars, the accident wouldn't have happened in the first place.

Further back, one of the first ads to try to bridge the race gulf with a bit of humour was Lunch Bar's 'What kind of a Mac are you?' - featuring a skinny black man amazing many Scotsmen at a Highland Games gathering. His answer to their confused question: "I'm a Mak – atini..."

Likewise, Vodacom's Yebo Gogo campaign tossed the race cat among the pigeons by gently pointing out the inability of most white South Africans to speak, or understand, black languages.

Many uncomfortably cried that the ad was racist, but just as many laughed at themselves and the phrase itself became part of the local lingo.

In a similar way, the Klipdrift brandy ad capitalised on the cross-linguistic confusion with its 'Met Eish' commercial which, apart from showing that appreciation of a good brandy knows no ethnic or cultural boundaries, also hinted that there may be more that unites us, as human beings, than divides us.

No trip down advertising memory lane would be complete without the seminal Volkswagen advertising, which manages to capture the emotions as few other brands do. The recurring theme is of family – and that continues to this day in the car maker's ads.

VWs are part of your life, they help you make those memories. (Declaration: those ads were the reason I bought a VW Jetta which, after getting married, was the best decision I've made in my life).

There are many more ads that stand out in memory – and, to be honest, there are still some which jump out at you and make you say: our ad industry still has a flicker of life left in it.

*What are your favourite local ads (from any era)? Let me know – [brendans@citizen.co.za](mailto:brendans@citizen.co.za)*

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## ABOUT BRENDAN SEERY

Brendan Seery has been in the news business for most of his life, covering coups, wars, famines - and some funny stories - across Africa. Brendan Seery's *Orchids and Onions* column ran each week in the *Saturday Star* in Johannesburg and the *Weekend Argus* in Cape Town.

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