

Government on an ad-banning roll

 By [Chris Mberdyk](#)

13 Nov 2014

If you ban ads, the world will be a healthier and better place, or so the government seems to think...

It was entirely predictable that after a relatively trouble-free and politically safe banning of tobacco product advertising almost two decades years ago, government would turn its attention to liquor, fast food and a raft of other forms of advertising that it believes are detrimental to society.

Interestingly enough, the attempt by health minister Dr Aaron Motsoaledi to ban alcohol advertising has not been nearly as simple a process as his predecessor's successful assault on tobacco ads.

It was about 18 months ago that the minister announced that he would, within the week, be making public his proposed legislation to ban alcohol advertising and sponsorship.

We are still waiting.

And the reason we are waiting is because cabinet could not agree on what this should entail.

Draconian

Motsoaledi's ideas were draconian in the extreme. In a conveniently leaked document purporting to be the health department's draft of the bill, all advertising and sponsorship would be banned outright.

Those government ministers involved with the promotion of trade and business in general, refused to back the bill. Eventually, after about a year, cabinet requested a further impact assessment in terms of job losses and sport promotion and then put everything on hold until after the May 2014 elections.

Since then, nothing has happened. Not a word. The proposed alcohol ban legislation wasn't even mentioned in the health minister's budget speech in July.

In the meantime, the media and marketing industries, assisted by the liquor industry, have been hard at work developing strategies to present once the bill is made public. They are all well prepared and ready to go.

Undaunted by the impasse on the banning of liquor advertising, the health minister has now announced plans to target fast food and fizzy drinks advertising as well. Apparently, even breakfast cereals and anything with a high salt or sugar content are included in this.

Banning madness

It won't stop there, of course. I suspect dairy products will also soon be in the firing line and a host of other goods our nanny state might deem harmful to society.

It would not surprise me if motor car ads showing speeding cars were banned as well as any advertisement showing a child doing anything even mildly dangerous. Like kissing a puppy or spreading peanut butter on a sandwich with a knife.



Apparently we're considered too immature and weak-willed to make our own decisions regarding what we drink, what we eat and whether we smoke or not. So what's next on the list of products to have its advertising and marketing attacked? (Image: Tim Parkinson, via Wikimedia Commons)

Once governments start banning advertising, all manner of new pressure groups draw encouragement to harangue the relevant government departments to do something about whatever it is that gets their knickers into knots.

And the safest and easiest thing for government to do to show that it is taking the well-being of consumers to heart is to ban advertising.

The ANC-led government does not lose votes by banning ads because of the ineptitude of the advertising industry to educate the public on the importance of what it does. It is fair to say that 99% of South Africans don't care one way or the other about advertising and probably believe that it is just a big con and a clever way of allowing youngsters to own Porsches.

In addition, the über-liberal World Health Organisation (WHO) also manages to demonstrate that it has the wellbeing of the whole world at heart by strongly advocating the banning of advertising as a cure-all.

The WHO and the World Bank supported pressure on the South African government to ban tobacco advertising.

The 'research' is rubbish

Of course, there are the ad ban proponents who quote reams of research showing how advertising influences consumers. There is also the pro-advertising lobby quoting reams of research showing that advertising can only persuade consumers to switch brands but cannot force them to buy cars, start smoking or try drinking alcohol.

And no one, it seems, takes much notice of the fact that Canada, Denmark and New Zealand tried banning alcohol ads and found it had so little effect that they reinstated liquor advertising again.

If one has a look at all that research on both sides of the fence, the vast majority is paid for or commissioned by organisations wanting to make a point, either for or against. In short, all that so-called 'research' is rubbish.

It has to be said, however, that government should at least be lauded for wanting to curb alcohol abuse in South Africa. It is a scourge and in spite of the fact that 85% of the population of this country do not drink liquor, it plays havoc on probably half of the remaining 15%.

There is also no doubt that products high in sugar and salt are equally unhealthy. In fact, a few years ago the WHO declared obesity to be the world's number one health problem. That's right, not smoking or alcohol but people being too damn fat.

Bans don't work

The problem is, however, that trying to solve alcohol abuse and obesity by banning advertising is like treating virulent cancer with an aspirin and a pat on the head. Banning advertising is the worst possible kind of tokenism.



Dr Aaron Mbitsoaledi... what else has he got in his sights?
(Image: GCIS)

Banning advertising is not going to stop alcohol abuse. Alcoholism is a disease; people who drink themselves into a stupor are not going to stop doing it because there are no longer any alcohol ads.

And in terms of preventing children and young adults from starting drinking, banning advertising isn't going to help because youngsters don't consume mass media anymore. They don't see the ads right now. Likewise, it is ridiculous to assume that advertising persuades children to eat fast food.

It is not advertising that does that, it is their parents. Banning advertising is not going to prevent parents from giving their children pocket money to buy lunch or go to the mall while they are at work. Kids stuff their faces with junk food because they are allowed to and because they are

encouraged to do this by peer pressure.

Ever seen an ad promoting drugs? Child abuse? Crime?

In fact, when it comes to smoking and alcohol, the main cause of young people turning to these vices is simply peer pressure. Just ask any young adult why they started smoking or drinking and I'll bet not one of them blames advertising. All of them will tell you it's because their friends or parents introduced them to it.

The sad part about the banning of alcohol, fast food and other advertising is that in 10 years' time nothing will have changed. It will still be a massive problem. And the only result will be the loss of thousands of jobs in the media, advertising and marketing industries.

I strongly dispute the claims that banning tobacco ads has created a lower incidence of smoking in this country. To the official tobacco sales statistics should be added another 25% at least for the contraband cigarettes imported into this country.

And, finally, just to prove the stupidity of banning ads: in the Western Cape there is a massive problem with drugs, particularly one called tik. It is widespread among the youth. And yet, there has never ever been any advertising for it.

ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK

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