

When retail and politics collide: The Israel/Palestine conundrum

 By [Jess Mbuneimne](#)

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The current Israel/Palestinian conflict has again intensified calls for boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS), with supporters urging major retail brands to discontinue the sale of products manufactured in Israel, which affects brand managers of stores such as Woolworths, Pick n Pay and Dischem.

If caught unprepared, even the most well-meaning decision makers are damned if they do and damned if they don't. Heeding the call of pro-Palestinian activists means rejecting Israel and sidelining one's pro-Israeli customer base. The alternative is to continue stocking products showing up on the BDS Campaign's no-go list and again run the risk of making enemies in the process.

With an active Jewish and Muslim community, many South Africans find themselves personally invested in Palestine/Gaza. Furthermore, international community boycotts and sanctions were instrumental in the demise of Apartheid South Africa and because of this, the power of a product boycott tends to yank at our heartstrings just a little more than other nations.

Whether a systematic boycott by Palestinian supporters of a brand such as Woolworths, for example, will negatively affect the company's pockets will ultimately depend on whether these 'consumer activists' value liberating Palestine more than they love their microwave lasagne.

Nevertheless, all publicity is not necessarily good publicity. Retailers currently in the hot seat are experiencing organised protests on their social media platforms resulting in pockets of the Middle East conflict being fought on their Facebook pages - not ideal when you are desperately trying to promote the winter final clearance sale.

These brands are being accused of unethical business practice in much the same way as if they were found to be using child labourers to manufacture their products or were selling blood diamonds, for example. Brand reputation is at risk should they not choose to navigate through these murky political waters wisely.

Reputational PR essential

Most brands hire a PR company or person to increase their position in the market place or to become top of mind when thinking of a certain industry. Very few have a particular reputation issue they need managed and even less consider that the origin of the products they sell could become a reputation issue.

With the continual growth of social media, a conscious consumer has been created. One that wants to know if the food

contains GMO or if the soap was tested on animals.

Just as brands should have strategies in place for the ingredient list of a product, they now need to know the origin of that product and its subsequent political affiliation. This requires a proactive contingency plan because ignoring it and hoping it will disappear is certainly not the right approach.

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