

Stopping corruption starts at home



By [Anton Harber](#)

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The Sandton advertising world is one in which you will hear much said about the corruption of our public life. It will often be accompanied by sage nods of the head, recognition of mutual understanding of where this rot comes from, and a strong sense of moral superiority. Unless that corruption is in the advertising world itself.



SA's advertising industry and the private sector at large need to insist on the highest ethical standards themselves if they wish to be taken seriously in their fight to stop corruption. (Image: Jeff Attaway, via I-Net Bridge)

A few weeks ago, advertising agency Metropolitan Republic was caught trying to defraud its peers. For the prestigious Loerie Awards it entered under false pretences an advert it did for MTN, claiming it had been aired in Uganda. It had not; the campaign it was promoting was only in the conceptual, planning stage. The advert was therefore not eligible for the awards, and the Loeries withdrew the silver, gold, and Grand Prix awards the agency had won.

The agency compounded things by trying to lie and squirm its way out of it. At first, it said it had withdrawn the entry when it realised due process had not been followed. Then it blamed junior staff members, saying the entry did not have the approval of seniors, as if an agency would allow juniors to enter its material into the most prestigious award in South Africa without their knowledge and consent.

A travesty of crisis management

Then the agency blamed the Loerie organisers for not picking up the problem, even though it had signed a form pledging that the entry had met the requirements, which are well known. Then it apologised and withdrew some of these statements.

The way the agency handled this - a travesty of crisis management - should have been enough to make its clients wary. Add to that its serial dishonesty, and one would think twice about its communication skills, let alone ethics.

What was the industry reaction to this?

The Loerie organisers withdrew all the awards Metropolitan Republic had won that night, said the agency could not take part in judging the competition for the next two years, and that its entries had to be accompanied by proof that it had been screened. In other words, the agency got a slap on the wrist.

Coverage in the media has been slight, especially if you compare it to how quickly the misdeeds of sometimes obscure and small-time public officials can make the headlines.

We have not heard of heads rolling at the agency. We have not heard from MTN, nor the agency's other clients. We have not heard from other industry bodies, all of whom should be insisting that the agency - and the responsible individuals - be banished from competitions and industry organisations for at least five years. There is a smell in the room, and everyone is trying to ignore it.

The fight against dishonesty, corruption starts at home

What made all of this particularly cynical was that the advert promoted an MTN initiative to make books widely available to Ugandan schoolchildren on their cellphones. It was a corporate social investment campaign and it won the Loeries' Ubuntu Award. Not only had this project not got off the ground, but there are doubts about the claims being made for the untested technology. Many companies milk corporate social investment work for marketing purposes, but this is the first case I know of in which they have done it before the project is even shown to be feasible.

Is this the next stage: start with an advert about doing good deeds and then you may or may not do them thereafter, but at least you have made everyone (or at least your board and shareholders) feel good, and gain some awards in the process? Is this the ultimate Bono/Bob Geldof effect?

This agency damaged itself, without doubt, but it also hurt the industry, the Loeries and the credibility of a corporate sector that purports to oppose corruption, demands strong action when it is in the public sector, but eases up when it is in its own backyard.

If the Loeries wants to be taken seriously, it will have to get serious. If the advertising industry wants credibility, it will need to be firmer. And if the private sector wants to stop corruption, it needs to start with zero tolerance in its own ranks.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism and chair of the Freedom of Expression Institute, was a Weekly Mail (now Mail & Guardian) founding editor and a Kagiso Media executive director. He wrote *Diepsloot* (Jonathan Ball, 2011), *Recht Malan* Prize winner, and co-edited the first two editions of *The A-Z of South African Politics* (Penguin, 1994/5), *What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic* (Jacana, 2010) and *Troublemakers: The best of SA's investigative journalism* (Jacana, 2010).

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