

Colour me shocked... but mind the digital snake oil

By  [Brendan Seery](#)

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How many of you remember the controversial campaigns in the 1990s for Benetton?

The “United Colours of Benetton” print and TV ads shocked many with the way they got stuck into the touchy subject of race.

They turned many racial stereotypes upside down and made some people uncomfortable, because they thought Benetton was straying into the political arena. The Italian brand is still doing it today, calling on people in its European and North American markets to “unhate”.

The idea of busting stereotypes is not new, then – but the way it has been done by Ogilvy South Africa and Giant Films in the ad for Audi’s new Q2 car really strikes a chord.

The Q2 has been hash-tagged #Untaggable, which is modern-speak for saying you can’t put it into any box. It’s not quite a sports car, not quite an SUV, not quite a luxury hatchback... while simultaneously being all of these.

To get that #Untaggable message across, Ogilvy and Giant Films (with director Sam Coleman at the helm) brought in Thanda Hopa, a person who not merely challenges stereotypes, she obliterates them. A lawyer by training, she is also a successful model – but is an activist because, as an albino, she knows people like her are badly discriminated against in this country.



Screengrabs from the ad.

The ad scratches irritatingly at many of our own prejudices, but it makes the marketing point brilliantly about the A2 and another one about judging books by their covers or being afraid of “The Other”...

It's not something you can ignore, either as a car buyer or a sensitive ordinary citizen. Seldom do you see ads that manage that dual success in marketing promotion but also in doing some small bit of good for society.

So, Orchids to Audi, Ogilvy and Giant Films.

One of the most perturbing realities in the world today – and not just the world of marketing – is the near-fascist way the digital “clevers” have of intimidating and shaming people into buying their services and snake oil.

Many people – and especially business decision-makers and brand managers – are made to feel that if their company is not all-singing and all-dancing its way into cyberspace, then it is doomed.

The latest such scare-mongering comes from Business Connexion, which promises to integrate the latest tech into your business to make it more efficient and profitable. I do not doubt they are capable at what they do, but the smirking “we know better than you” tone of their ad irritates me.

They choose the obvious examples of where the exploding expansion of tech has left behind many traditional businesses. They single out the music people who didn't believe music downloads had a future; camera film-makers who scorned digital; and newspapers, which are dying in many places.

The problem is that in all examples, the industry being targeted by a “disruptive” technology was anything but complacent. Nobody, in the music business, film manufacturing or newspapers dismissed the new wave out of hand. However, most didn't appreciate how quickly the tech would improve and how quickly their livelihoods would be threatened. To portray a newspaper manager in 2006 as saying newspapers would be around forever is simply not correct.

The print industry has been concerned about its future for a lot longer than that and no-one that I can recall said anything like that in 2006.

By the same token, I could roll out a whole lot of digital miracles, which never came to fruition: Digital picture frames; “smart” fridges (Bill Gates predicted these more than 15 years ago); apps (more than 90% of them are only used once); MySpace... Even e-commerce has proven to be a damp squib, especially in this country. Twitter may be mega-popular among the digirati but its business model is not sustainable. Even more ditto for Snapchat: how do you have an advertising platform where the content disappears as soon as it is posted? Some people are going to get badly burned by that...

And why do you think Mark Zuckerberg is frantically expanding Facebook, in much the same way Google did? Because, when the bubble finally bursts on his social media empire, there will be fall-back products which keep raking in the cash. (Talking about Facebook, isn't it ironic that the experts were telling us that it is the ideal platform from which to have "a conversation" with your customers; yet the interaction between brands and consumers – and which sees Zuckerberg laughing all the way to the bank – is increasing in old-fashioned advertising?)

And, while we South Africans fondly think of ourselves as being at the cutting edge of technological achievement, how come a borderline Third World country like Kenya could come up with the M-Pesa system of electronic transfers?

Obviously, it makes business sense to trash your potential opposition so I can understand why BCX chose the easy, cliched path on "disruption". But I think BCX should have rather concentrated on showcasing what it does, rather than doing what all the other digital clevers do. It gets an Onion for the ad.

It would be pointless me trying to defend myself against your comments that I am a technophobe, although I will just say that, years ago, when most of you had not heard of Twitter, I was involved in a freelance project overseas where a Twitter site I helped oversee led an international TV news bulletin for the first time. I've lectured on the case study to marketers here and overseas so I hardly have my head in the sand. Email me if you'd like more details (brendanjseery@gmail.com).

The digerati like to characterise people like me – who question their answers – as tin-foil hat-wearing weirdos, in much the same way that the mainstream media in the States portrays everyone who says anything in support of Donald Trump as a racist moron. The job of journalists (and I will be one till the day I die) is to interrogate dumb assumptions... from wherever they emanate.

I do believe technology's march cannot be stopped – and nor should it be. But, there will come a time when people will realise that it is merely an enabler and it will become like the water which comes out of your tap. And, you read it here first: the pendulum will swing back towards analogue. There is evidence that it has already started doing so: sales of vinyl records are at their highest level in three decades.

The reason for the pendulum swing back is that human beings are analogue, not digital, by nature. They love the old-fashioned things like touching and feeling, and really experiencing products. Those "old-fashioned" and un-sexy things could be a very profitable route for your business in the future.

As long as you don't believe all the digital snake-oil.

For more of Brendan Seery's writing, see: www.orchidsandonions.net.

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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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