

# The extent of Volkswagen's brand damage is debatable

 By [Chris Mberdyk](#)

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In the coming months Volkswagen will find out to what extent its blatant cheating on emission data will damage its brand. My guess is that if history is anything to go by, it won't be long before VW has licked its wounds and bounced back to business as usual.

Firstly, the VW debacle is happening in a global consumer environment where political manipulation and corruption are rife. Nothing seems to shock the consumers anymore.

The business environment is also rotten to the core prompting the Pope and many others to have a full go at the current global economic system in general and capitalism in particular. Nothing seems to shock the consumers anymore.

Banks have cheated, big stores have cheated, formerly trustworthy accounting firms have cheated. And big pharma and chemical conglomerates are under fire for apparently trying to impoverish, poison or kill us. Nothing seems to shock the consumers anymore.

Even churches and religions have come under fire in a litany of scandals, sex abuse and profiteering. Nothing seems to shock the consumers anymore.

Frankly, the modern consumer is pretty desperate for something or someone to trust. And that quest is becoming more difficult by the day. So, one has to look at the VW debacle in this perspective. Yes, they are cheats but only the most naïve consumers will believe they are alone in their cheating, not only in the motor industry but in business in general.



Image via Pxabay

So, how do these trust-deprived global consumers react to news that a big brand such as VW has cheated? History shows quite clearly that they actually don't care.

Ask around and see if you can find a single VW owner who is going to sell his or her car and buy something else? You will struggle to find anyone. Lawyers, of course, will have a field day on behalf of these aggrieved VW owners who will continue not to give a toss unless there is the chance of some sort of compensation.

This consumer apathy was exactly the same way when South Africa's textile industry was on the point of collapse and consumers were asked to show their patriotism and buy local. No-one did because consumers are not in the least patriotic nor prepared to stand up and fight for a cause if their own pockers are going to be affected.

South African consumers just kept buying cheap imported clothing from China. It will be the same, I suspect, with VW.

Particularly when you take into account that this is not a safety issue. For VW owners all this means is that VW cheated on emission controls so that their cars could go faster by polluting the atmosphere a bit. Which, as far as the vast majority of VW owners are concerned, really isn't a problem. They will just trot out old chestnuts like the beef herds used for McDonald's hamburgers create more pollution by farting than all the cars in the world put together.

There will be a huge outcry from those people and consumer organisations that have appointed themselves custodians of society and there will be governments that will huff and puff. But once VW has spent a fortune on fixing the emission problem, it will be back to normal. I wouldn't even be surprised to find that VW, like so many other big companies, has a "war chest" filled with enough funding to be able to sort out a crisis by basically chucking money at it.

And another point in terms of government intervention, particularly in South Africa, the motor industry represents one of the biggest employers and a massive source of foreign cash through its exports. My guess is that, as it has done in the past, the South African government will tread very carefully around VW and the other manufacturers in this country.

From a pure marketing point of view, if history repeats itself which, without fail, it usually does, the VW debacle will get sorted out and people will keep buying the brand.

The reason why politicians, brands and religions are able to get away with all manner of scandal today is because consumers practice selective morality. If it doesn't hurt them or cost them, it's not worth fighting for. Which is why, in marketing terms, it is extremely difficult to badly damage a big brand and almost impossible to kill one.

ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK

Apart from being a corporate marketing analyst, advisor and media commentator, Chris Mberdyk is a former chairman of Bizcommunity. He was head of strategic planning and public affairs for BMW South Africa and spent 16 years in the creative and client service departments of ad agencies, ending up as resident director of Lindsay Smithers-FCB in KwaZulu-Natal. Email Chris on [mberdykc@gmail.com](mailto:mberdykc@gmail.com) and follow him on Twitter at [@chrisMBERDYK](https://twitter.com/chrisMBERDYK).

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