

Why these rolling blackouts are an opportunity for brands

 By [Sarah Gooding](#)

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It's like the country is stuck in a bad dream that's constantly on repeat. Only instead of losing teeth or forgetting to study for an exam, we find ourselves drowning in wave after wave of power cuts and an endless sea of frustrations.



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The year might have begun with improved consumer confidence, but that was before Eskom once again decided to crash the party. Given that it's only February, it's all a bit tough to swallow, especially when many economists are predicting another rough year of price increases.

As South Africans, we're a pretty resilient bunch. But, the increasing burden of rising costs and bad service delivery is undoubtedly taking its toll.

Already research shows that South African consumer expectations are at an all-time high. According to WE Communication's [Brands in Motion](#) (BIM) study for 2018, this applies not only to brand innovation but also to ethics.

In search of stability

We see this reflected in the 68% of South African respondents who believe that technology will enable them to do more amazing things in less time, as well as the 99% of respondents who believe that companies have a responsibility to use technology ethically – a higher percentage than any other country in the world.

It's clear that the less control South Africans have over certain aspects of their lives, such as public service delivery, the more they'll seek stability in areas they feel they can control.

So, what does this all mean for local brands?

Consumers are jaded, jaded, jaded. They have a serious case of disappointment fatigue and are looking to brands to become beacons of light amid the doom and gloom.

For brands it becomes a double-edged sword.

The threat is bigger

Those brands that dare to disappoint will feel the sting of the backlash twice as sharp as before. Even untouchable brands like Woolworths have learnt this lesson the hard way.

Barely into month two of 2019, and beloved Woolies has already been raked over the coals twice.

The first incident surrounded allegations that the brand had copied a local small business' design for a baby carrier. According to opinion mining company, BrandsEye, sentiment towards Woolworths reached its lowest point on 9 January when the retail giant agreed to sit down and meet with the alleged designer.



Ubuntu Baba saga knocks public perception of Woolworths

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Trip-up number two involved an ill-conceived Valentine's ad campaign that sparked outrage around gender stereotyping. All in all, it proves that even brands that get it very right 98% of the time, will take a hammering if they slip up. Brands in Motion research tells us that no matter how much South African consumers say they love a brand, they will gladly shame them if they step out of line.



Woolworths pulls "gender stereotyping" Valentine's Day campaign

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But, so is the opportunity

There's a critical 'but' in all this though, and that pertains to the opportunity brands have to provide the stability consumers are so desperately seeking.

The challenge for businesses is to create that trust.

Easier said than done, no doubt. But it becomes easier for companies to assess consumer sentiment towards their brand when they measure themselves against very specific sets of rational and emotional drivers.

When asked whether they would support a brand that has a high level of functionality or a high-level purpose, 52% of South Africans maintained a brand should have both.

It's about finding that balance between rational drivers like executive behaviour, innovation and industry leadership; and the emotional drivers which measure sentiment like customer experience and social impact.

Businesses that strike a sweet spot between the two will find it easy to harness their own forward momentum.

These are tough times for consumers and companies alike. But, the opportunity for brands to provide a bit of light in the darkness has never been greater.

ABOUT SARAH GOODING

Sarah is passionate about the organisational structure of the growing team at WE in Johannesburg and maintaining an open, integrated culture that is geared for long-term success.

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