

Lessons from home-grown "Mandela Story" viral sensation

By Gill Moodie: [@grubstreetSA](#)

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The oddest things go viral. YouTube videos of cute animals or laughing babies or blunders on live television often do. Julius Malema's "[bloody agent](#)" farce went big globally - as did the totally bizarre [Buck Norris](#) vid while, more recently, Chad le Clos' [proudly gushing Pops, Bert](#), all put South Africa out there in a big way for better or for ill.



Prakash Patel

This is the stuff of marketers' dreams: how to create something that will be picked up as cool or fascinating or fun by millions of social-media users who will move it around the world for you for free and with credibility because it's friends recommending it to friends.

It does seem that many viral phenomena become so because they are so authentic - slices of real emotion or real life in all its richness and weirdness. They are by their very nature authentic.

So it was very interesting when last month a video created by a Cape Town digital crew called "Mandela Story" to mark our former president's 94th birthday also went so big so fast.

[Prezence Digital](#), the creators of the video, reckon more than 80 000 people watched it and it was tweeted to more than 18-million people. It was ranked at one point below Obama and above Man Utd as most popular discussed and viewed videos on YouTube while it was ranked as a top trending article on the international Mashable site (with 3 900 shares).

It reached more than 130 countries - the most active countries beside SA included the US, the UK, Spain, the Netherlands, Mexico, Kenya, Canada and Brazil. On the first day the video was released, it moved across 20 to 30 countries alone.

That's a hell of a thing!

[Prakash Patel](#), the CEO of Prezence Digital - which was started in the UK and expanded to SA in 2002 - says that the fact that the video got the official approval of the [Nelson Mandela Foundation](#), which also embedded it on its YouTube channel and website, had a lot to do with its success.

But Patel - who drove the creation of the vid - is also being modest. The idea for it - "Would the father of our nation have spent 27 years in captivity if he (and others) had access to the same technology, social media platforms and tools as we do today?" - is really out of left field. It's intriguing and innovative - and as thought-provoking about our history and Nelson Mandela's life as it is about today's world of new media. Here it is again in case you haven't seen it yet:

(Click here to go to the ["Mandela Story" website](#).)

Patel, who came up with the concept for the video more than a year ago as a tribute to Mandela and not for any commercial gain, told Bizcommunity: "It was a wacky idea and a very creative idea in the sense that it was different - it stood out from the crowd. Trying to break through the noise on Mandela's birthday - when there must have been something like 1000 campaigns being launched on that day - was great."

The production of the video was three months in the making by Patel's Cape Town team and he only approached the foundation a few weeks before Mandela's birthday. Initially, they were sceptical, says Patel, as they are naturally protective of Mandela's legacy and get so many approaches from all around the world. Patel kept his pitch short and sweet: he let the video speak for itself by playing it to members of the foundation and, he says, they liked it immediately.

The Mandela video may not have been for commercial use but are there any marketing, branding and social-media lessons we can draw from it? What strikes Patel is:

- How Twitter and social media have drastically changed how we live our lives and how we do business.
- How people's social networks straddle many countries as we all know fellow professionals and friends living in other countries.
- That marketers can sometimes get too wrapped up in serving a target market when a stronger focus on creating great content will naturally resonate with audiences. "Content has to be compelling and different," Patel says. "There *is* something to that classic cliché - 'the big idea' - and how that translates in a creative way."
- That a social-media campaign is an excellent vehicle for a mass campaign as social networks are accessed very widely across LSM, race and age groups through cellphones - especially in South Africa with its high cellphone penetration.
- That it *is* possible for viral campaigns to succeed without any ad spend but that timing is very important so that you

can be relevant.

- That we're all still learning about the power of social media but the big positive is that it connects and resonates with people across national borders in a virtual country of its own creation.
- That 90% of people on social networks are watchers and "retweeters" while the remaining 10% are the ones who actually create all the content, starting and taking part in conversations. That said, however, the digital world is a great leveller in that whether you're a doctor or a lawyer or a cleaner or a student, you can still have a voice.
- That there's no point in brands doing social media half-heartedly, for example, a Facebook page that is updated occasionally or a Twitter account that is monitored every now and again. "One thing about social media is that you must have a real plan 24/7," Patel says.

But most heart-warming of all is the lesson that South Africans can indeed play on a bigger stage - and play big.

"South Africans tend to have a chip on their shoulders sometimes," says Patel. "But we've got great people living and working here and being creative in lots of ways."

Of course, he's right. Just think of how Nelson Mandela straddles our globe in the biggest, most meaningful way possible.

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