

## The Last Word

# A communication strategy for speeding up the process of reform in South Africa

Darryl Phillips

**WHILST** there seems to be a strong commitment by the government to reform the socio-political system, the basic task to market this reform policy to a most diverse electorate still remains at hand. Although "reform" may be a somewhat more esoteric and crucial product than soap powder or fast foods, it is no less real. And the marketing principles which apply are no different...

"Wars are not 'acts of God'. They are caused by man, by man-made institutions, by the way in which man has organised his society. What man has made, man can change". — Frederick Moore Vinson.

In his forthright credo of man's ability to change his society, Vinson just as easily might have been talking about general human circumstances. Human ability to change is remarkable.

The general condition of South Africa 1985 is not particularly pleasant. Yet beneath the tensions which abound there seems to be a strong commitment by the government to reform our outdated socio-political system in order to accommodate the legitimate political aspirations of black South Africa which, to date, have been largely ignored.

The government has taken South Africa to the gateway of a bold new path, a journey down



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which will change our lives dramatically. Paradoxically the government has to live with the accusations that it is moving both too rapidly and too slowly. Its main task, however, is to ensure that the bulk of the electorate will be prepared to accompany it on the road to real and relevant

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reform. Without the company of its electorate, any government journey must lead to an unsure and isolated destination.

The main task at hand, indeed the most important consideration in South Africa at the moment, is how to persuade the electorate that significant changes to the socio-political system are in its best interest.

The task is a daunting one. The electorate, comprised of white voters who are accustomed to reserving political, and a large degree of economic privileges for themselves, have to be convinced that there are significant personal advantages to be obtained from conceding some of their absolute political power.

In essence, the government quite simply has to sell "reform" as a commodity, a consumer product which will add something to the lives of its adherents much like any other product they purchase.

When considered in this light, the problem of making change acceptable to the electorate is immediately cast within fairly simple dimensions. It becomes apparent that classical marketing and communications techniques have to be put to work.

While the product being "sold" is somewhat more esoteric and crucial than soap powder or fast foods, the techniques remain the same. As with any other product, the first aspect of marketing that the manufacturer has to consider is which of his products qualities are most likely to evoke consumer response.

Looking at "reform" as a product, I would postulate that it offers peace and prosperity.

Most people, anywhere in the world and of whatever culture, seem motivated by the dominant attraction of peace and prosperity. These have been primal concerns of mankind for millenia. Anyone or any group who can offer a particular community some sort of guarantee of peace and prosperity, is likely to win much support from that community.

Of course, there are always exceptions to the rule, people who are motivated by a plethora of other considerations. The success of a marketing campaign, however, depends on achieving consumer interest across the broadest possible common denominator.

In marketing "reform", the desire for peace and prosperity appears to offer that denominator.

Having decided on the central theme of the proposed campaign, it has to be fleshed out by way of generating relevant messages, or the main appeals which should be conveyed in order to communicate that theme.

I suggest that the concept of confidence in the future constitutes a very strong appeal. Simply put, confidence in the future means a return to peace and harmony in the land. It means an end to the low-key internal warfare which we have to countenance at the moment. It means a greater security of life, limb and property. The concept appeals to the electorate to sacrifice some of its entrenched privilege in return for a peaceful future for itself and its children.

A great fear of a large segment of the electorate is that in sanctioning the removal of statutes like the Influx Control Act and the Group Areas Act, it will be endangering the future of its separate cultural identity. The second appeal should address itself to the fallacy of this reasoning by referring to minority communities which have never been protected by anything approximating a system of apartheid yet such communities have maintained a strong ethnic identity.

One has to look no further than South Africa's own 'immigrant' communities to see that although not legally separated from the rest of white society, they have maintained strong ethnic identities. Greeks, Portuguese, Jews, Italians have all guarded their cultural norms and customs jealously.

It should be pointed out that exclusive political power is not necessarily an ingredient for protecting cultural identity. For so long disenfranchised, the Zulu nation has retained a strong and distinct group personality. Why should any part of the White community lose its identity if it facilitates increased political rights for other groups?

The natural workings of economic and ethnic separation should be stressed. An end to statutory segregation will not lead to immediate and total integration.

Thirdly, attention should be paid to the social and economic consequences of a decision to reform the current system. This should be approached in terms which will easily be comprehensible to the man in the street.

There is no doubt that current policies are

increasingly isolating South Africa from the world community. Couched in double standards though world reaction to South Africa undoubtedly is, and much as we would like to tell the rest of the world to mind its own business, the reality of our current international relationships is that we are rapidly becoming the outcasts of the world.

Consider the scenario of an internationally re-accepted South Africa. It is not unlikely that investment funds will once again pour into the country, stronger trading links will be established. This will result in new boom times, employment for all, rising living standards for all.

Perhaps the most important appeal in the task of "selling" reform should be a consideration of people as people regardless of their race. The system under which we have been living for so many years has tended to turn people of different race groups into stereotyped images for people of different race groups. Is the time not long overdue to stress that we are, all of us, people, people with emotions, aspirations and goals? The bottom line is that we all wish to get on with our lives, do our jobs, better ourselves, educate our children and live in harmony under a communal sun.

Once the appeals of the programme have been decided, creative concepts have to be developed. That is the subject of a separate paper. Suffice it to say that in realizing these

concepts the keynote has to be honesty of presentation and communication. Reality has to be faced fairly and squarely, there must be no attempt to minimize the actual. Past mistakes have to be acknowledged not with culpability, but at least showing a sincere desire to make amends.

Ultimately the goal of the exercise should be aimed at shifting white perception of black and black perception of white, at the removal of all existing prejudice, stereotyped image and inter-racial misunderstanding.

The crucial element in this marketing exercise lies in the availability of the product. When selling any other product, it is to be readily found on store shelves. "Reform" is not as palpable, but it should be no less real.

It should have a readily recognizable form such that consumers are able to recognise it when they see it and there should be no apprehension involved in its "use"

If "reform" is to sell well, the government will have to ensure that it is readily available to the public for first-hand experience. It is a pointless exercise to market a product which does not exist, except in the imagination of its designers.

In the final analysis this is what reform is all about. It's not an academic, theoretical exercise about constitutional law. Reform implies a new way of relating to fellow countrymen, a new way of adjusting cross-cultural interface to the benefit of all.