

The elephant in the room is Julius

By  Walter Pike

18 Dec 2014

If I had to award a prize for the marketer of the year, that prize would go to Julius Malema and his Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF)...

You may ask why I would include that on a piece to do with 2014's top trends. The answer: Because their tactics are appropriate for the social era. I'll explain. But first I will digress to the conflict in Gaza and to ISIS.



© EFF website

When politics and social media collide

ISIS is waging a successful propaganda war using social media, successfully hijacking trending hashtags and posting their message widely. Using very graphic images, they've forced themselves onto the agenda. In the recent conflict in Gaza, similar tactics were followed by the Palestinians. The establishment response has been to set up counter propaganda social media accounts. For example, the US Department of State has a campaign called [Think Again Turn Away](#), and the Israeli Defence Force ran a Twitter feed putting out responsible, nicely produced infographics and video. But how does this counter the raw images and horror of a 15-year-old tweeting about bombs landing about them? It doesn't even come close.

If we can ignore the ideas that are being spread and focus instead on the underlying tactics, there is a clear trend for activists to take on social media as a tool to spread ideas and they are doing it far better than the establishment.

This is a trend that brands need to also understand.

Who has more Twitter followers - Julius or Helen?

The EFF have realised this. [Julius Malema's Twitter account](#) with its 615,000 followers, has one of the biggest followings of a politician in Africa. In fact, it has an FNB stadium-capacity crowd (make that 72,000) more followers than [DA leader Helen Zille's](#) very successful account, started approximately a year earlier than Malema's.

This is significant on a number of levels, not least that if the EFF commander in chief draws his support from the lower-income disaffected youth, a huge bunch of them evidently have smartphones as they follow him on Twitter.

The EFF have realised that in a connected world filled with citizen journalists you are always fighting the next election, and so even if they aren't winning in parliament they are winning in the streets. That the Holy Grail is to spread an idea. The trick is how to get that idea to spread. There's no doubt that [#paybackthemoney](#) was one of the most successful hashtags of 2014. The EFF have become master discussion starters, they stir it up.

So bringing this back to your business, what can be learned from this trend?

Firstly, one must be aware of the power of disgruntled customers for your business and one needs to plan for it.

Secondly, one must be aware of the power of the community to work in support of your business and how to utilise that power.

Use the community's power to build your business

Here's how to do so:

- Understand who the community is and why they are there.
- Analyse the community, know who the players are.
- Understand that although your followers are important their networks and their followers are even more important than yours.
- Create a role for your brand in that network. Decide whether you will be a broadcaster, an expert, support and identify the roles of the others, especially the bridge and decide how you will facilitate that conversation.

One of your key tools is the 'talking points' often designated by hashtags. The EFF has been very successful in using talking points.

He/she who leads the hashtag talk hold the power

Just keep in mind who the mayor of your hashtags is, as well as the mayor of all the subgroups and the roles of all the players involved.

When we analysed the community of [#paybackthemoney](#) on 18 November, we found that the mayor was [@VernAtal](#). He had the highest between-ness centrality, meaning the highest influence on how ideas pass through that network. He was the mayor then.

The top 10 were:

1. [@VernAtal](#).
2. [EconFreedomZA](#)
3. [@andimakinana](#)
4. [@kaysexwale](#)
5. [@mkhulekohlegwa](#)
6. [@azzyterror](#)
7. [@positivelynot](#)

8. [@effparliament](#)
9. [@myanc_](#)
10. [@mmusimaimane](#)

I've included the full top 10 list because of how interesting that list is. Notice the position of [@myanc_](#) and [@mmusimaimane](#).

When we analysed the same hashtag on 10 December, we found that some of the players had moved on, with the [Mail and Guardian](#) followed by [Helen Zille](#) suddenly the most influential based on the hashtag. How funny that [Helen Zille](#) has more centrality than [Julius Malema](#) on this topic. They are now the mayors of it.

Business lesson takeaway...

The strategic leaders of business know they need to be aware of these trends, and to learn the lessons taught by the Arab Spring, Gaza, ISIS and the EFF. It appears these lessons are being learned faster by the challengers than they are by the establishment. They need to understand the structure of the communities and they need to understand how to operate in this world, in order to protect themselves and take advantage of the opportunities they present.

ABOUT WALTER PIKE

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