

Why brands fail at Women's Day

 By Louise Marsland

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When a brand gets it as badly wrong as Bic South Africa did with its Facebook post for Women's Day - which has now been vilified globally - you have to wonder if any thought at all goes into some campaigns or actions by brands...

Bic SA is one of the worst recent examples of a brand getting it wrong. The story went global yesterday and thousands of complaints flooded their Facebook page locally, along with choice examples of brand mockery, which have now gone viral in the worst possible way, reaching international media and doing damage to the Bic brand reputation worldwide too.

Brands seem to jump on Women's Day and Women's Month as a shiny happy holiday like Christmas, or the ghastly misogynistic National Cleavage Day, to build commercial capital on, rosy pink colour tones, boobs, balloons and women with flowing hair ordered up from photo stock files. It's distasteful and ill-conceived and can do a brand more damage than if they did nothing at all.

Bic SA, in a little ad with a bad clipart pic, pulled a quote from another site (so not even any original copywriting there), which exhorted women to: 'Look like a girl / Act like a lady / Think like a man / Work like a boss...' Utterly sexist and out of touch.



The company took down the post and apologised after being taken to task on Facebook and Twitter almost immediately after the post went live, but how did that even get past any marketing authority as a good idea in the first place?! Did any women work on this bite-sized campaign? It's clear what many commentators thought, but none encapsulated the nation's scorn as well as cartoonist Jerm who pilloried the company, turning the BIC logo into a big yellow 'DICK' with the pen decal as a penis. *Eina*.



[Jerm](#)

Social media users, appalled at the blatant sexism and patronising tone, reworded the campaign, reposting it with new words and links to exhort women to look, act, think and work like "your own magnificent goddamn self" (from 'Kirby Enthusiasm') or just as a 'human being'. Global news site, Mashable, called it "[The world's worst National Women's Day tribute](#)"; and the UK's *The Guardian* newspaper headline was "[Bic causes outrage on national women's day](#)". Local comedian and writer Anne Hirsch tweeted: "Dear @Bic_SA please help. My little girl fingers can't handle your man pens. What should I do?"



“ Dear [@Bic_SA](#) please help. My little girl fingers can't handle your man pens. What should I do?

[pic.twitter.com/PCM7PuoX19](#)- Anne Hirsch (@Anne_Hirsch) [August 11, 2015](#) ”

This is of course not the first time Bic pens have been bashed on social media - when they introduced their pink pens and packaging called 'Miss Bic' in the United States in 2012, comedian Ellen Degeneres no less, took them to task on her [show](#). But this also didn't stop Bic SA introducing the Miss Bic range to our market a year ago.



The thing is, this isn't just a #bashtag at the expense of BIC SA. Many other brands are also guilty of patronising women in their campaigns, more often than not. This is also about Women's Day in South Africa and what it means and what it should represent. Women's Day is not Mother's Day. I don't want to be wished 'a happy Women's Day'. I celebrate my gender, of course, and the history that led up to this holiday, but in the context of current extreme levels of violence and abuse against women and children in South Africa and continued discrimination in the workplace and on our streets, there isn't much to celebrate.

Yes, we need to highlight the victories won and celebrate the amazing, strong, female leaders in every sector of our society who are changing things for the better and smashing the 'glass ceiling', but we need to be mindful of how much still needs to be done. That fact is highlighted in this hard-hitting post by writer, books editor and gender activist, Helen Moffett ['Take your Women's Day and shove it'](#), which went viral on Women's Day. She vented her outrage at the holiday, writing: "Ditch the pointless sodding public holiday (estimated cost to the economy: seven billion). Stop bleating about the month of women. It's pathetic, considering it's open season on South African women 24/7, year in, year out. Our rape stats are a global disgrace, the worst in the world for a country not at war - the scale is unimaginable...".

I've seen some comments about how women have overreacted to the BIC ad and this is the context: we have to change the stereotypes in order to affect real change. Telling a woman that in order to get ahead, she must "think like a man", but still be pretty, negates any attempts at equality. That kind of thinking has to be challenged. We cannot let the status quo go on.

Advertising reflects the view of our broader society, mirroring it at times, at other times helping forge social change by

projecting a better reflection of ourselves and our world. It is important what we put out in the public domain, as advertising or content, because what we do has the power to influence opinion.

It is time for critical thinking on this holiday and what message it sends when we do 'celebrate' it and frame it in pink with hearts and flowers. What I want from my brands is to know you are supporting organisations that uplift women, that you are donating a percentage of your profits or running programmes that make a difference to communities, culture, solve societal problems, and in the context of this particular holiday: uplift women, whether in business, education, in their communities, or support them, through worthy organisations. The rest is just patronising promotional bullsh*t.

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