

Unintentional brand ambassadors: Mark Esterhuysen

 By [Stacey Rumble](#)

20 Oct 2011

Objective: To understand the mind set of your market and how they react to specific events in their environment.

- Who are they?
- What are their values and beliefs?
- How strongly will they organise around/toward a particular need?

Case: Last month Mark Esterhuysen, a night-shift radio presenter for Talk Radio 702, voiced a particularly impassioned and political rant on-air. Strong language and poor choice of opinion (relative to the brand) resulted in his being fired, which cost the company a significant amount of negative publicity.

Online conversation about Esterhuysen gathered speed and went viral, amassing 4384 mentions in only five days across social media and the Internet at large. For better context, South African banking brands, on average, would only receive as many mentions in two months.

Based on the influence of each speaker in this conversation, approximately 6 172 750 people had the opportunity-to-see (OTS) and be reached by the Esterhuysen on-air rant saga.

Intended brand ambassadors

Companies spend millions on investing in brand ambassadors who are congruent with the values and following of their brands. Let's call these intended brand ambassadors - those influencers who have been legitimately empowered by the brand to represent it (de jure, for the legally or politically minded). These individuals are generally sought out after careful scrutiny for them being an appropriate co-branding match, for not only the child brand but the parent company as well.

So what happens if someone, who not only is in complete disjoint with your brand's personality and values, also becomes famously associated with your brand, either because they crossed the line or they were publicly dissatisfied with their brand experience?

The converse character is then an unintentional brand ambassador, who is unintentionally afforded a degree of authority or notoriety because of a specific event that connects them to your brand (de facto, for the legally or politically minded). This implies that, since many people heard about the story and considering that the 567/702/Eyewitness News/Primedia brands were so inextricably tied to the incident itself, those brands would have suffered a considerable loss in brand equity value.

De facto brand ambassador

Moreover, if your de facto brand ambassador is someone who either does not fit your brand or does not have your brand's interests at heart, your brand's equity will be the one to compensate for it.

In the case of Esterhuysen, the 567/702 stations comprise a relatively liberal, democratic and slightly right-of-centre brand. At face value, Esterhuysen's late night opinion could undoubtedly be associated with anarchistic and somewhat further right values. It was the strength and vulgarity thereof which made both the story and the audio segment go viral.

The traditional PR belief generally states that all publicity is good publicity. The same may not always be true in digital. Negative PR that goes viral will cost you a fortune in damage control. However, for more context, had Primedia paid for this negative coverage, it would have cost the company an advert value equivalent (AVE) of nearly R 1.5 million. R1.5 million, which undoubtedly could have been much more wisely invested.

Who was speaking?

So, exactly who was speaking? Mostly consumers, which generated 91% of all conversation about the Esterhuysen case, with enterprises and the press contributing to a lesser extent - a 4% and 5% share each.

And what did they think? BrandsEye noted vehemently strong support for Esterhuysen from 11.8% of authors involved. These tended to be more easily influenced and/or younger personalities, as well as from those:

- With particularly far-right values
- With even further left-of-centre as well
- Or those disillusioned with the current system and its leadership
- Who, by definition, would not consume 567/702 media as it does not meet their political values
- Who, then likely found out about the story via viral media and its overall hype

Most people (71%) however, either spoke about the story neutrally or merely shared it with their respective networks for its shock factor.

BrandsEye also noted negativity towards the incident from 16.2% of authors. This sentiment tended to come from somewhat older, working individuals who were:

- Generally disapproving of the outburst
- Expressed overall irritation with/apathy towards youthful ignorance
- More likely to be 567/702 listeners - as they displayed more loyalty to the brand

Interestingly enough, both supporters and protesters of the case were less concerned with him and more with the example he showed either for or against their own values.

Also interestingly enough, off the back of thousands of tweets and status updates, with [YouTube](#) views close to 200 000, this [story](#) not only reached but trended in overseas shores, particularly from Commonwealth countries - which have become hubs for many South Africans abroad. The UK and Australia each drove 4% and Canada 3% of the total share, mostly focusing on more political sentiment and the subject matter of Esterhuysen's rant.

Going forward, the situation wasn't stitched up as well as it could have been, as Esterhuysen didn't quite apologise but rather loftily affirmed his anarchistic values in a personal blog post.

What can be learnt?

Every brand has a defined community who chooses to consume that brand's media and services because that brand is

aligned to the values of the community members.

- 567/702 listeners listen to those stations because its relatively liberal brand values match their own.

When brand failure takes place, the brand risks alienating its community for failing to live up to its promise of value. Value then, implies both how much a brand experience is worth to a consumer and what they expect of that brand.

- Expecting relatively liberal, if not slightly right-of-centre content - it is no surprise when the 567/702 community reacted so negatively

A smarter hire is a staff member whose values are aligned to those of their employer's. Loyalty is cultivated by natural value alignment: out of their own accord, they will actively promote and uphold those brand values to their networks.

- Even if Esterhuysen worked the graveyard shift, his opinion created enough controversy to get the attention of a vast and international audience. In terms of internal marketing, this makes it critical for every consumer touch-point, from CEO to janitor, to be positively influenced by the brand's values.

Always quality over quantity: a brand's community size is irrelevant if the market's values are not aligned to those of the brand.

- So purchasing community following or seeding content to the wrong market is risky because the consumer community will protect and promote the brand's values of their own accord.

ABOUT STACEY RUMBLE

Stacey Rumble is a reputation analyst at BrandsEye (www.brandseye.com @brandseye), a market-leading ORM company based in Cape Town and Johannesburg, with clients in 89 countries. With qualifications in international relations, marketing and neuro-linguistic programming, she approaches the world with just the right mix of process, ingenuity and strategy. Stacey is passionate about the capacity of digital space for political and socio-economic change. Email stacey.rumble@brandseye.com; tel +27 (0)21 467 5960; follow @staceyrumble.

■ [2012 trends] An amateur audience - 25 Jan 2012

■ Unintentional brand ambassadors: Mark Esterhuysen - 20 Oct 2011

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>