

'Covidiot' take note...

 By [Brendan Seery](#)

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Don't be a moegoe: solidarity's Covid ads funny and on point; Belligerent Santam is hung out to dry in the court of public opinion...

In our modern, interconnected world, a virus can spread like wildfire. In the same way, disinformation and conspiracy theories go much further and wider than they did even 20 years ago because of our ubiquitous communication channels and, specifically, social media.

I've never doubted the reality of the deadly nature of this virus – my cousin was admitted to a hospital in London the week President Cyril Ramaphosa sent us into our first lockdown ... and only went home a week or so ago, still unable to walk properly or have the full use of his right arm.

This is not “just a flu” as many of the “Covidiot” – some of them in pretty high positions in society and beneficiaries of a good education – are maintaining.

The central core to the conspiracy theorists' prattle is that we are, somehow, being misled by our governments and that the medicine those governments have prescribed has been far worse than the disease.

While I have sympathy with the arguments about conflicting government and scientific information being disseminated, I think it is bizarre that many people believe Covid-19 is a hoax and that the “mainstream media” (like us) are in the pay of a shadow world government manipulated by the likes of Bill Gates and George Soros.

People fighting the “good fight” of trying to maintain awareness of the dangers of Covid-19 are, therefore, really up against it... Not only with the tinfoil hat-wearing brigade, but also with ordinary South Africans who have lockdown fatigue and don't seem to really care any longer.

So, I salute the work being done by two organisations – the Solidarity Fund and the CovidComms SA group – to continue to push back the frontiers of ignorance and denial.

The Solidarity Fund's campaign – put together by award-winning ad agency Joe Public United – urges us to not behave like a mampara, an ibhari, a mabena or chop. It repeats the safety advice: wear a mask, social distance and avoid large gatherings.



It's simple but effective in reminding people, in a humorous way, about what they need to make part of their lives – at least until we get a vaccine.

On the other hand, the message from CovidComms SA – which describes itself as “a network of comms volunteers working alongside government and others to produce and distribute accurate and helpful information on the Covid-19 outbreak in SA” – is more stark and realistic, given what is happening right now.

“We’re all tempted to let our hair down this December after a tough 2020. But don’t let this holiday season be your last!”
The visuals are stark: don’t take this seriously and you will die, is the message. There are images of coffins and of cemeteries, in case the words are not enough to get through.

Together, the two approaches combine to create a strong message about personal responsibility – which, far more than government rule-making, is what will keep us safe.

Orchids to the Solidarity Fund and Joe Public United and also to the people at CovidComms SA.

A brand persona can take decades to build up – as has shortterm insurer Santam’s. But it can take only a few days, weeks or months to destroy.

And, in the age of the internet, you can be hung out to dry very quickly in the court of public opinion.

This week, the insurance giant said it was going to the Supreme Court of Appeal to challenge lower court rulings on paying out restaurants and hospitality business claims for losses from Covid-19 and the associated lockdowns.



Already, Santam is taking stick on social media, where the digital tools of the internet enable memes to be generated at the cost of a brand. One of them was a clever shredded yellow umbrella – Santam’s brand icon – unable to keep the person under it dry on a rainy day... Exactly like a policy an insurer won’t honour at the time of a customer’s greatest need (the proverbial rainy day).

Santam’s “Stalingrad defence” of its refusal to pay out is stirring a fair amount of adverse comment.

As a potential insurance customer – especially one who has a business – you should be worried that you will be fought in the courts in a similar way by a company which has deep enough pockets to fight legal battles, but which are shallow when it comes to payouts.

Santam gets an Onion for its attitude, but also for the belligerent way it is handling the case. It’s about trust and trust betrayed.

ABOUT BRENDAN SEERY

Brendan Seery has been in the news business for most of his life, covering coups, wars, famines - and some funny stories - across Africa. Brendan Seery's *Orchids and Onions* column ran each week in the *Saturday Star* in Johannesburg and the *Weekend Argus* in Cape Town.

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