

Forever blowing bubbles

 By [Brendan Seery](#)

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Slowly, perhaps, but the marketing and advertising world is starting to heal. And, every now and then, a non-Covid-19 ad pops up which relieves the cliched tedium of promotion spots trading on the virus crisis.

Vodacom's running one at the moment, doing all the right hackneyed things to celebrate "togetherness".

It's quite nice to hear the old Beatles song Come Together used in this context, although it's quite clear no one involved in the production bothered to think about some of its spaced-out lyrics.

One particularly memorable line goes: "Hold you in his armchair; You can feel his disease."

In the time of corona? (Sorry, even columnists can be infected by cliches).

But, I digress. The other night I saw a simple, sweet, yet effective ad for Aero chocolate – you know, the one with the light air bubbles right through it...

It was done over a year ago, but it's the first time I've seen it.

It features what the ad agency, the international JWT group, called the “bubblophone”.

That contraption – an old-fashioned needle gramophone plunged into a pool of molten chocolate – was actually made up by the agency, rather than using computer-generated imagery.

When the bubblophone plays a certain record, it plunges into chocolate and the bubbles are blown up by the sounds.

Research I did said the final machine was a combination of 10 precisely timed mechanical actions and 177 sequenced valves.

It took weeks to test and perfect and then a whole day to capture the effects on camera.

It's whimsical and as light as the air bubbles in the famous chocolate bar – and who among us hasn't savoured an Aero at one time or another? The look of anticipation of the consumer at the end sums it up perfectly.

It gets an Orchid for Aero (part of the Nestle group) and JWT because it is simple on the surface, complex underneath and captures the essence of the brand perfectly.

Now that Trade and Industry Minister Ebrahim Patel has graciously permitted online shopping under the lockdown regulations, you'd have thought that brands with an online presence would seek to get as good a start as possible by briefing their online teams about customer service.

This would be especially important because during the lockdown a lot of people who might otherwise be involved elsewhere are captive audiences on Twitter and Facebook.

Apparently no such caution applied to sports show and apparel maker New Balance South Africa.

A colleague, sportswriter Kevin McCallum, took to social media to contact New Balance (and, of course, made the tweet public so his followers could see it) following a thoroughly unpleasant experience.

He ordered a pair of New Balance shoes, only to find the price jacked up by R600 when he later went to the online check out.

“ Hey, [@NewBalance_SA](#) - when you get a chance could you explain this to me.

Pair of shoes advertised at R1399 this week. Good price. I put them in my basket. Wait an hour. Then go to check out. You push the price up R600.

Today you ask me if I'm interested in them again. Ja. Sure. pic.twitter.com/FesrZC0J2j— Kevin McCallum (@KevinMcCallum) [May 21, 2020](#) ”

When he queried this, New Balance's online team responded in public – but sent a private message to McCallum. He wasn't too happy – and you can't blame him – so he put that message out.

New Balance said, in standard South African “to hell with the customer” terminology: “New Balance reserves the right to change the descriptions, specifications, and prices, offered on the Service, at any time and without notice”.

“New Balance does not warrant that such descriptions, specifications and prices are accurate, complete, or current at all times...”

“ Thanks for the DM. I can see why you would send that as a DM, but it isn't your finest moment. Sending a standard waiver statement to explain how you boosted the price of a pair of “on sale” shoes by R600 because someone wanted to buy them is extremely bad customer relations. <https://t.co/14ti6lkIMU>— Kevin McCallum (@KevinMcCallum) [May 21](#).

2020 ”

Now, in a legal sense, the company is relying on a common law principle called E&OE (which means errors and omissions excepted). This means they cannot be held liable for a mistake made in good faith.

I am not a legal expert, but I don't think that applies to a blanket indemnity to change prices willy-nilly to maximise profit.

However, what it does say is that you cannot trust a word we say as a company or brand ... because we may change our minds in the next second.

Marketing basics should teach you that to gain customers you need to have trust and, once you have earned that trust, they will invite you back into their lives ... and may even do some free promotion for you through word-of-mouth to their friends.

McCallum, as is evident from his Twitter timeline, is doing just the opposite.

How difficult would it have been to have a laugh, admit you made a mistake and agree to a once-off goodwill gesture (while not admitting liability for any other mistakes, certainly)?

That R600 wasn't saved either, really, because McCallum is not going to buy New Balance shoes. Nor, I think, will many of those who read the Twitter exchange.

So, New Balance South Africa, you get a "The Answer's No! Now What's the Question?" customer-service Onion for shooting yourselves in the foot.

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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