

# At a loss for words

 By [Michelle Mardon](#)

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Today, the role that technology plays in influencing the manner in which South African brands communicate with their target audiences is enormous. The obvious reasons include fast and convenient marketing message transmission through a multitude of technological platforms such as e-mail, social networks, websites, YouTube etc.

Consumers are bombarded daily with marketing messages; if the content is bland or unimportant it is very easy for those messages to fly over their heads. What grabs consumers' attention is an engaging, relevant message that aims to connect consumers to a brand with the view to create meaningful consumer-brand relationships.

Indeed, the means through which brands communicate with consumers have changed significantly thanks to technology; however, message content has also experienced a shift to introduce what some call a 'convenient' form of English.

Computer-mediated communication or CMC slang is a means of communication using fiercely abbreviated words and phrases, examples of which include 'u', 'lol', and 'brb'.

## Using CMC slang to communicate

The emergence of CMC slang can be attributed to the advent of mobile phones and the 160-character limit of an SMS that literally rendered many a text message at a loss for words. The notion that such 'substandard' English has seeped into brand communications may seem unfortunate to many, yet a means of 'moving with the times' to others. Scores of people around the world, not just in South Africa, use CMC slang to communicate every day, however, the question arises, 'is it acceptable for a brand to choose CMC slang as a mode of brand communications to better connect with the tech-savvy consumer?' It can be argued that CMC slang is acceptable in the world of branding since it's that the way of the future. Conversely, CMC slang can be viewed as a 'dumbing down' of a brand to set a poor example for a highly influential market segment: the South African youth. Message content that is tailored to a specific market segment or used as a differentiating tool for a brand in amongst the marketing 'clutter' could be a method for leveraging a target audience.

An investigation into Vodacom South Africa sheds light on the matter.

Vodacom won the title of best telecommunications brand according to the *Sunday Times Generation Next Youth Survey 2012*. Consequently, Vodacom sets an example for a large portion of the South African youth market. According to the *2011*

*Reputation Survey* conducted by Ipsos Markinor and Globescan, Vodacom's brand identity is compelling, exuding

attributes of responsibility, integrity, trust, meaningful engagement with consumers, and so forth. However, the research conducted implies that the use of CMC in the Vodacom Color campaign perhaps does not correlate with this strong, almost 'spotless' brand identity.

## The value of message content is still king

The Vodacom Color campaign is aimed at people below the age of 25, offers various discount deals with names such as 'Color ur life', 'Color ur friends', and 'Color ur tunes', displays the slogan 'The Voice of South African Youth', and so uses CMC slang to market the offering. It should be noted that the word 'color' of the Vodacom Color campaign is derived from American English and is incorrectly spelt in the South African context, perhaps imparting Westernised aspirations to the youth market. At first glance, this communication method appears appropriate seeing that CMC slang is popular among the youth market. Though, a survey of 100 people aged 17 - 23 revealed that not only does the majority at 68% feel CMC slang is an unacceptable method of brand communications, the 65% majority did not think that Vodacom's use of CMC slang made the brand appear 'cool'. A 71% majority felt that CMC slang usage by an unfamiliar brand did not cause the brand to seem 'cool'. Surveys' respondents included reasons such as 'unprofessional', 'not easy to understand', 'inappropriate', 'it is incorrect grammar', 'it is stupid', and, 'it is unappealing'.

This Vodacom campaign shows an active attempt to connect with the South African youth market in a way assumed to be relevant and engaging to that segment; however, it has in fact set an unsatisfactory example for the younger generations in terms of encouraging the loss of their ability to express themselves coherently and articulately with the written word. Maybe South African brands should consider that although the youth market values instant gratification at their fingertips, words still do in fact carry their weight. It is encouraging to notice that proper English usage has not lost its purpose or prestige in the mind of the consumer, placing brands who embrace the English language as it was designed to be written in high esteem among stakeholders.

It may be said that while the technological revolution continues to hustle the traditional print media industry with the emergence of online communications platforms, the value of message content is still king to the consumer.

## ABOUT MICHELLE MARDON

Im passionate about the world of branding and exceedingly fascinated by consumer behaviour.  
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