

Outsurance's Father's Day debacle is a wake-up call for business to understand social issues

By [Walter Pike](#)

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A few Mother's Days ago Bic insulted women, then there was Helen Zille, Rivers Church, Spur Steakranches, Chris Hart and Penny Sparrow. The list of social media disasters goes on and on. It is almost inevitable that your company will experience the wrath of social media some time in the future. Probably in the next year to 18 months. Worldwide surveys have established that only 30% of companies have a crisis plan in place.

This week it's Outsurance's turn. They put out a social media video on Father's Day to celebrate all the "good fathers" out there. The video showed 20 different fathers interacting with their children. With the exception of one, all those fathers were white. It was no surprise that Twitter picked up on this to imply that black fathers are not good fathers and climbed into Outsurance accusing it of racism. The first "apology" by the head of marketing, Peter Cronjé, a white man, offered by the company, blamed a junior, a woman, for the error and apologised for the lack of the diversity in the ad that did not reflect the nation's demographics. Later during the day the Group CEO, Willem Roos, a white man, in a Skype interview with ENCA apologised again. He confirmed that although the staff of Outsurance are very diversified, the board is mostly white and male. If the social media commentary is accurate many have cancelled their policy and many people have decided not to support the company in the future.



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Outsurance responds to its 'racist' Father's Day ad, blames junior employee

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As a case study ignoring for a moment the poor leadership that resulted in the junior employee being thrown under the bus, there are some very interesting takeouts.

A significant proportion of social media crisis in South Africa is due to racism of some sort. In Outsurance's case this has become a pattern. A Mother's Day video along the same lines, followed a campaign in which an person in blackface appeared and one in which a white family had a dog named Boipelo and adverts showing black people only in the roles of servants. These are all huge errors. Although much of the social response was divided on racial lines with many white commentators calling it a non-issue while many white South African's on social media were in solidarity with the black response, which is also an increasing trend.

The most important lesson to learn, is that it is clear that this business is white managed and the market response to racism is poorly appreciated. In fact I would go as far as to say that racism is not understood as an issue. Racism is not merely about prejudice, it's not about making sure that all the Outsurance pointsmen are black, a point they have used in defence, that is like saying as a defence that "I have black friends."

When Outsurance tweeted: "We apologise for our Father's Day video. It did not appropriately represent SA's demographics. It was an unintentional oversight," they completely missed the point.

Racism is a system, a social and economic racial hierarchy introduced into South Africa by colonisation and codified by apartheid.

What Outsurance did was to feed a narrative that black fathers are not good fathers and white fathers are. They have not yet acknowledged that. Like many white run organisations they do not yet appreciate the essence of racism and that to be excellent corporate citizens it is important that they are anti-racist not merely non-racist.

No matter how "concerned" corporate South Africa wishes to position itself it is absolutely vital that they move beyond dictionary definitions of racism and address this issue in training for their boards and at least their marketing and sales staff. The need to be driving towards transformed management is not a point that I need to make.

The same thing goes with other social issues such as sexism. Cronjé said, "This advert was created by one of our junior ladies in the social media department and I believe she made an innocent mistake when she created and posted this video." Why was it necessary to mention that the junior employee was female? Does that communicate that women should be excused for this type of error?

Cronjé went on to mention that it is their policy to offer some responsibility to junior employees in the social media department and that they don't approve content at management level. This is also a huge error – social media has proven to be a very powerful tool, minimising its power is a serious management error.

Condemning racism has become a mega trend in South Africa. The social networks have become empowered ever since the out of work estate agent Penny Sparrow's rant on Facebook. It's a trend that all marketers should take cognizance of. It's no longer possible for business to leave it to chance, unless the board, management and staff bury their own views and make an effort to understand the issues underlying racism, homophobia, and feminism to mention a few they are bound to end up splashed all over the electronic and broadcast media. That means that they are bound to lose business.

It has become an imperative for business to understand and appreciate the social issues driving the country.

ABOUT WALTER PIKE

Walter has decades long experience in advertising, PR, digital marketing and social media both as a practitioner and as an academic. As a public speaker; Speaks on the future of advertising in the post - broadcast era. As an activist; works in an intersection of feminism & racism. He has devised an intervention in unpacking whiteness for white people. As an educator; upskilling programs in marketing comms, advertising & social in South, West and East Africa. Social crisis management consultant & educator. Ideaorg founder

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