

Carling Black Label | The Bravest Thing

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This month's Marketing Mastermind is Arne' Rust, Carling Black Label brand director. He discusses The Bravest Thing; a campaign that showcased how brands can quickly pivot during the time of Covid-19, while making great impact within their communities.

"There were times when it felt like we weren't going to pull it off. But then the first message came through, three hours after launch. It was 7am. A woman in an abusive domestic situation needed help. She did the bravest thing she could do in that moment. She reached out and someone was there to help. I knew immediately that we were on to something and that this was going to be bigger than we thought."



Arne Rust

How did this idea come about?

Carling Black Label wanted to be a force for good during the lockdown. It joined the GBV conversation in 2017 with its [#NOEXCUSE](#) initiative and [Soccer Songs for Change](#) campaign. Since then, #NoExcuse has been a core part of Carling Black Label's responsible marketing.

Still, it's an uncomfortable conversation for an alcohol brand to have. [Research](#) has shown that alcohol and drug abuse are common triggers for violent episodes. As an industry, we'd be naïve to think we're not part of the problem, so why not be part of the solution?

One of those solutions was The Bravest Thing, a WhatsApp line that we launched in partnership with [LifeLine](#) and [Father A Nation](#). It offers help to men and women in abusive relationships and is a non-judgemental place where victims of abuse and men seeking mentorship can be put in touch with different organisations to get the help they need, silently.

Why was there a need for a solution like The Bravest Thing?

In March, before South Africa went into lockdown and alcohol sales were banned, Lifeline received about 12,000 calls for help. In April, one month into the lockdown, calls surged by 500% to 80,000.

Over 40% of the calls were from men reaching out for help. They were facing enormous uncertainty and in many cases, were not sure how they would be able to provide for their families. Dealing with that pressure, that stress, was just too much for them to bear. To make things worse, alcohol-dependent abusers were forced into an unsupervised detox. Rather than lash out they got in touch with us to get the help they need.

It's a global trend. Countries that implemented a hard lockdown as a measure to curb the spread of the Coronavirus saw a significant increase in gender-based violence in the weeks that followed. The UN calls it the Shadow Pandemic.

In South Africa, many families live in close proximity with each other, they have very little chance of reprieve or privacy. In these cases, the result is that victims of abuse can't call for help without their abuser potentially overhearing the call. And the shame of admitting that they need help will stop many men who need mentorship from making the call if there is a chance of someone hearing it.

There was no way for anyone to get help silently and the volume of calls was leading to burnout for councillors at LifeLine. We needed another way to get people the help they needed, and The Bravest Thing was it.



How does it work?

By WhatsApping the word “Brave” to 0800 150 150, users can start chatting – silently – to a bot that will route them according to their needs. This could be as diverse as dispatching emergency services to a dropped pin or chatting to a counsellor or getting in touch with a mentor. It performs as a dual platform for getting men in touch with mentors and abuse case management. For the FAQ part of Gender Based Violence the bot routes to a Facebook Messenger bot run by [rAlbow](#).

We also partnered with high-profile influencers who have been part of the #NOEXCUSE campaign since 2017, including Dr Musa Mthombeni. We can’t address an issue like GBV without positive, masculine role models.

Why did you choose WhatsApp for the campaign?

We chose WhatsApp for its familiarity, functionality, and because it’s discrete. Victims can drop a pin, so Lifeline knows exactly where to send the police or emergency responders. They can also upload images as proof of the abuse, which serves as irrefutable evidence of the incident.

Tell us about your campaign approach.

To raise awareness of the solution, Carling Black Label ran an engagement campaign on Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms. It repurposed existing #NOEXCUSE content in English and Zulu, and ran adverts on radio and television, to reach people who didn’t have access to digital channels.



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**WhatsApp 'BRAVE' to 0800 150 150
to start a silent conversation.**

And what were the results?

Much, much bigger than expected. We were targeting 500 engagements on the platform in the first week. But 5,176 people reached out for help. A month after launch, there had been over 8,000 unique engagements, 2,000 of which were with men. Users sent an average of 10 messages each. The campaign also trended three times on social media during the launch.

Since this was not a commercial campaign, we only tracked engagement, sentiment, reach, and brand perception. We wanted to have an engagement score of at least 5% and we achieved 4.8%, which was great. We also wanted to reach 30 million people with this campaign and managed to reach 90 million.

Brand perception – not only of Carling Black Label but also of its parent company, SAB – also improved. Only 40% of people associated Carling Black Label with #NOEXCUSE, but of those, 88% said #NOEXCUSE improved their perception of Carling Black Label (82% for SAB). The remaining 12% had a neutral sentiment – not one person said the campaign negatively impacted their perception of the brand.

Campaign sentiment was quite low, at only 29% positive. But, in hindsight, that was to be expected, and perhaps our 60% positive sentiment target was ambitious. Most language used to talk about gender-based violence would be flagged as negative by sentiment analysis tools and with a subject as emotionally laden as this sentiment might not be the right metric to track.

However, while the results above are encouraging, the fight against GBV is far from over. The violence and brutality that we've seen over the last few weeks are a testament to a deep and pervasive evil that needs us all to stand up and take action against. The goal can be nothing less than providing women with that most basic need; safety.

Where there any unexpected benefits?

#NOEXCUSE provided funding for more counsellors at LifeLine because the amount of people reaching out was overwhelming. It was encouraging to see men create smaller WhatsApp groups – almost like Bands of Brothers – to help each other through these difficult times. This was an incredible result because it made the campaign scalable and meant that the mentors could have a bigger impact.

Do you have a stand-out memory from this campaign?

The morning that we finally got the line working stands out very strongly for me. It was early, at our launch meeting, around 7am, before we had even communicated that the line existed. Suddenly a message comes through; a woman in Gauteng whose son was being chased out of the house by an abusive husband needed help. She did the bravest thing she could do in that moment. She reached out without knowing that we were there. I knew immediately that we were on to something and that this could be bigger than we thought.

Our stance is that it takes true bravery to fight gender-based violence. It takes bravery to report it, to talk about it, and to reach out and get help. Our role as #NOEXCUSE is to make this difficult process easier for those in need and this WhatsApp line has surpassed our expectations in terms of making help more accessible.

Do you have advice for other companies considering a similar campaign?

Manage expectations, know that things will probably take longer than planned – especially when there's tech involved – and give people the freedom to push their ideas.

What was your biggest learning?

This campaign was ultimately about changing perceptions: that men can't ask for help – even if they're the abusers – and that alcohol companies can't help solve gender-based violence. In everyone owning their role in this, we can work together to find a solution. The Facebook campaign results were incredible and showed that there's a desperate need for a solution like The Bravest Thing.

How can people get in touch?

If you are in an abusive relationship – as the victim or aggressor – and you need help, or even if you think you might be in an abusive relationship and just need some information or if you just need another man to talk to without judgement or commitment text the word "Brave" to 0800 150 150 and start having a silent conversation.

To find out how you can contribute to the cause, visit [ForGood](#).

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