

The art of brand war

 By [Mike Silver](#)

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Travelling one early evening back from Joburg to Cape Town, my tired mind was concerned only with berating myself for leaving my *Slow Lounge* card at home. En route to a rubbery toasted sandwich, I stopped, impressed by this large netted installation of empty bottles.

As a proponent of experiential marketing, I quite enjoyed the innovative engagement approach the brand had adopted in proving a cause-related marketing point. SodaStream saved you from destroying the environment through creating your own in-house cool drink factory. I got it. Cool. *Mental note*: I must talk to the strategy department about brand installations.



One of the global Cage Challenge installations. Source: Forbes.

[click to enlarge](#)

Now back to longing for the free newspapers and avocado soup I wouldn't be enjoying. That was the end of my Sodastream fling. Or was it?

The Big Red guy, also known as Coca-Cola, had other ideas though. It wasn't content with my fleeting brand acknowledgement of an indirect competitor. It instead chose to take this very obvious PR trap and maximise its impact.

If one chooses to follow [Sarah Britten's approach to adopting the Loeries case-study model to marketing and PR fails](#), it

might read a little like this:

- *The mission:* Ensure Mike Silver has perfect recall of the 4x4 metre SodaStream display stand he came across on his travels and foster a little brand love for our competitors in the process.
- *The solution:* Send a harshly worded 'cease and desist' letter to the culprits in question. Create an expectation internally that Soda Stream would ask 'How high?' and that Coke would achieve a glorious one-punch knockout. Be blindsided though by [nationwide digital and PR coverage](#) of this epic David & Goliath battle. Continue fighting to ensure a social media revolution gains momentum and that Mike (and thousands more) are able to receive daily updates from the underdog about this epic battle.
- *The results:* Astounding. Coverage in all Mike's favourite major South African online and print media publications, including [News24](#), [Cape Times](#) and [iol.co.za](#). Story even picked up his most-respected global media giant, [Forbes!](#) Long-term communication platform established for Mike (and thousands of others) by him 'liking' the '[Cage Challenge](#)' [social media movement](#).

You would think that a global behemoth like Coke would have been able to learn from some of its friends' case studies:

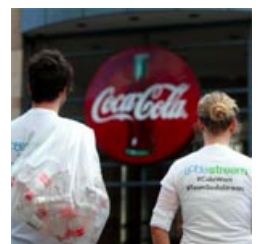
- Remember [Bavaria Beer at the 2010 FIFA World Cup?](#) Well, you certainly did after its ambush-marketing stunt for the previously unknown beverage. Budweiser and its friends at FIFA turned innocent Dutch promotional staff into murderers. The media lapped it up, and so did consumers, with a [global increase in Bavaria brand-awareness](#) through millions of dollars of media coverage traffic to Bavaria-owned online and social channels.
- Staying on the subject of football, most recently Denmark striker Nicholas Bendtner celebrated the unlikely feat of him actually scoring a goal at Euro 2012 champs by pulling his shorts down to reveal branded



"Cages" have been rolled out globally, including this display at Times Square, NYC. Source:

www.facebook.com/SodaStream

[click to enlarge](#)



PR face off stunt at Coke headquarters. Source: Cage Challenge, Facebook.

[click to enlarge](#)

underwear for a UK bookies chain. Very quickly he was fined and Paddy Power (the bookies in question) was being picked up by media across the globe.

- The [Frankie's Cola debate](#) did wonders for a previously niche brand now receiving national attention and admiration for its fight against the corporate greed of an upmarket grocery chain (also known as Woolworths).
- The list goes on and on of the public warmly embracing a David.

So, what are the lessons that can be learnt from this whole affair? Am I saying we should do away with [copyright law](#)? Are sponsorship agreements null and void? No.

Of course, brand assets and benefits need to be protected as best possible. Laws are made to be broken, though, and smaller brands generally employ smaller agencies with a bigger and more disruptive approach to creative thinking on shoestring budgets.

From a consumer perspective, the 99% is looking for a reason to fight back. The cause-related marketing trend is here to stay because caring is cool and supporting the underdog is a bit like hugging a tree or working in a soup kitchen; it clearly says something about who you are and what you stand up for.

So I say, let the cliché ring true; if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

The best example of this would be the Nando's vs Santam match-up. After having poked fun at a conceptually intelligent but innately corporate campaign for the yellow umbrella, Nando's proved to be anything but chicken, giving it right back to the fast-food chain with a CSI (corporate social investment) challenge aired on national TV.



Santam retort to Nando's taunt. Source: Timeslive.co.za.

[click to enlarge](#)

The end result was the brands ensured *relevance* among consumers through their tongue-in-cheek approach, poking fun at one another while taking care of those less fortunate. The media were obliged to tell the story, because well, it's what the consumer wanted. And the fight was declared a draw (the win-win type, not the kissing-your-sister variety).

In summation, when heading to war, brands would do well to pause and heed these three pearls of wisdom from one of the world's oldest battle manuals:

1. He who knows when he can fight and when he cannot will be victorious.
2. Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.
3. [If you must go to war,] build your opponent a golden bridge to retreat across.

Source: The Art of War, San Tzu

ABOUT MIKE SILVER

Mike Silver is the founder of Elevator, a brand experience agency now part of the Smollan Group. Mike has been working in the below-the-line and brand experience arena since 2000. Current clients include Lipton Ice Tea, Old Mutual and Pernod Ricard.

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