Don’t you just love it when a plan comes together – and hate it when it all falls apart? The Minister of Environmental Affairs, Valli Moosa, has surely hovered uncomfortably between these two states of mind in the days and weeks following the great plastic bag ban.

Regulations making it illegal to supply free plastic bags, and requiring stores to sell heavier-duty plastic bags to shoppers, came into effect on 9 May this year. Initially when the legislation was drafted in 2000, the Minister wanted to ban all plastic bags for the sake of the environment. An outcry from manufacturers brought a concession: thicker plastic bags would be allowed – provided the customer paid for them. And government levied 2c per bag towards a plastic waste recycling plant.

The law and regulations were passed with the laudable intention of protecting landscapes and animals from plastic litter, while ensuring that jobs in the plastics industry are retained and new jobs created. All well and good. Before the fateful morning of Friday 9 May this year, there was widespread acclaim for the environmental and business goals of the ban. The media, labour unions, big business, the plastics industry (with reservations) and green NGOs (with anxiety about full enforcement) all expressed support for the Plastic Bag Agreement reached in September last year. But within hours of shops opening, resentful consumers who had ignored the warnings suddenly discovered they needed their own bags or had to buy them, and a whirlwind of negative reactions went spinning through the media. Ionic, because government had placed heavy reliance on officials and industry to inform the media and so spread the message of good intentions.

“There was a communications strategy for plastic bags,” says Rantsadi Moatshe, spokesman for the 12-person joint task team representing government, industry and labour, “but the strategy was that every party would do its own communicating with its stakeholders and the public, in terms of certain principles.”

Moatshe admitted that when things started to go wrong, the parties laid the blame on each other.

“Now we realise there is a need for one single mechanism for joint statements,” said Moatshe, speaking in late August. “An attempt is being made to combine and reach a common understanding.” Yet no single line of communication had, in fact, been finalised even at this stage.

BROAD STRATEGY BACKFIRED

Having a broad strategy for independent communication seemed fine in principle but it didn’t translate well in practice. The lack of a formal and detailed marketing and communications plan to co-ordinate statements from the top was a major source of differences. When the media somersaulted into adversary mode, task team members did what they could to defend their own interests – resulting in very public recriminations between the role players.

Supermarkets struggled to calm angry shoppers, there was confusion amongst smaller retailers, some chain stores said they had not been consulted and did not consider themselves bound by the agreement, the labour federation Cosatu came under attack from its own members for likely job losses, and plastics manufacturers admitted ruefully they were losing business with demand halved or worse. Even

Why did a well intentioned scheme to protect the environment and create jobs go off pop? Instead of projecting a common purpose with win-win benefits for all, the plastic bag ban caused infighting amongst key players and left the public confused and annoyed. Think marketing, says GRAEME ADDISON.
hawkers were up-in-arms having no cheap bags for
pavement sales, and the rural women who weave mats and
hats from discarded bags saw their livelihoods vanishing.

At the national level, major players in the plastics industry
attacked each other. To cap it all, officials attacked the press
for getting the story wrong and then ducked questions (as
happened to me when I tried to obtain answers from the
department’s media liaison section).

**Value proposition missing**

It was a fiasco. This, despite the undoubted level of public
and business co-operation that made the ban largely
effective within a very short time. Sensible people accepted
that a law designed to promote the repeated use of plastic
bags and encourage recycling is necessary and good. But
where was the value proposition for the consumer? A poll
conducted by Research Surveys during July, comprising
2,000 respondents in all major urban areas and covering all race groups and both genders, found that nearly 60 percent said their shopping experience had become far less enjoyable since the introduction of the law. Some 44 percent said they were embarrassed to carry old bags into the store, and 64 percent said the price of durable bags (46c for the heavier ones) was too high.

Minor as it seems to be asked to use your own bag when shopping, the change turned out to be a far-reaching, affecting attitudes, lifestyles, jobs and industrial production. Two months down the road, the ministry asserted in a press statement that, “government and social partners were succeeding in their initiative to rid the environment of plastic litter and thus contribute to sustainable livelihoods”.

This is absolutely true – fewer bags are blowing in the wind and killing livestock – but it ignores the outrage, confusion and real economic impact in the short term of a law and set of agreements that were simply not implemented with classic, simple, commonsense marketing principles in mind. Confusion and trauma could have been avoided with a little more thought, research, and attention to an action plan to ensure that real benefits were extended to everyone in a win-win situation.

**Research phase neglected**

Chris Skinner, joint author with Llew von Essen and Gary Mersham of the standard *Handbook of Public Relations* (now in its 6th edition), and currently Fellow of PRISA (the Institute for Public Relations and Communications Management) and chairman of the Accreditation Board has the following to say:

“**The research phase was clearly not conducted vigorously and independently, the objectives did not embrace all parties to the problem, the target audiences were not all consulted and the message was not clearly defined. As far as activities are concerned they were and still are partisan and self-seeking resulting in bitter recriminations.**

“With hindsight I believe we could have foreseen some of the problems that have arisen from the new regulations. For example if Cosatu had fully understood the implications of the cutbacks in production of existing plastic bags on jobs and markets, and the manufacturers on their turnover and profits, further in-depth research would have been called for.”

Skinner warns that there could be pressure to scrap the whole programme and return to the so-called plastic bag syndrome with all its harmful effects on the environment and problems of waste disposal. But, he adds, the PR and marketing professions, “now have a wonderful opportunity to make a difference as strategists and facilitators in solving a major crisis of conflicting interests”.

He proposes that an independent review panel of professionals should be put together to assess and evaluate what can be rescued from this package, and spell out the lessons so that society can move forward.

**Interference in free market system**

That’s one approach – recognising the crisis and offering help to put things to rights. A much less sympathetic stance is taken by Professor Christo Boshoff of the University of Port Elizabeth’s Department of Business Management.

“Any, any interference in the free market system by any government will come at a cost to someone. If you play with the free enterprise system you pay, some day, some way,” Boshoff told me.

It sounds radical and unfair to a social democratic government that has the public good in mind, but business orthodoxy stresses that consumers are ‘rational’ and will do what is in their best interests. Ultimately, goes the argument, it is the marketplace, not lawmaking, that shapes the outcomes. If the costs of public policy involve digging into the pocket, while experiencing both inconvenience and embarrassment to boot, then consumers will resist change.

To win their support requires a value proposition that consumers can embrace as positive for themselves. Very
“Experts in customer research and product launches should do for the country what they routinely do for their businesses: think marketing.”

little attempt was made to put such value propositions to the broader public, apart from stressing that their environment would improve and (perhaps) some jobs would be created. These are soft offerings. For individual shoppers there was nothing but annoyance and no tangible gain from the change. Worse, attitudes hardened around the suspicion that chain stores were now making money by charging for plastic bags.

PUBLIC’S TRUST LOST

Once the public’s trust was lost it was very tricky to advertise the benefits of the new policy. Had the benefits been identified and portrayed in advance, in a full-on public information campaign stressing real benefits, more consumers might have seen green rather than red.

I was in a Pick ‘n Pay supermarket when the announcement came over the internal radio channel that the cost of plastic bags was being halved. A bit mollified, though not fully persuaded that Uncle Ray Ackerman had heard our complaints, I proceeded to the check-out and bought two bags (rather than one). Like most males polled by Research Surveys, I don’t like to walk into a shop with bags and would rather buy one. Now I got two for the price of one. That’s a benefit.

For the chain stores, government and labour unions it has been uphill all the way since 9 May. Slowly but surely, rationality is penetrating the marketplace as the major players learn, to their cost, what it means not to have laid comprehensive communication plans in advance. The US marketing guru Philip Kotler repeats an old but valuable saying in his book on How to Create, Win and Dominate Markets: “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.”

The question is, what kind of information campaign could have been planned and waged on a public interest issue such as plastic bags? Because the post-1994 government takes its social responsibilities seriously, the SA public has already had to accept bans on cigarette advertising and on driving 4X4s on beaches. It is instructive to compare the costs and benefits of these initiatives (which had their own problems) with what happened with plastic bags.

- Tobacco: if you smoke it, you will die. The risks outweigh the loss of a minor pleasure and should bring even the addicted to their senses.

- 4X4s: It’s wonderful to drive along the beach, but not so great when 200 other vehicles pitch up at the same private fishing spot. Given this, the loss of beach access still hurts but maybe if you want exclusivity you had better pay for it on private rangelands.

For every benefit there is a cost, but in the case of plastic bags the costs were perceived to far outweigh the personal benefits. This problem can’t be overcome purely by devising slogans that put a spin on policy. In the case of job losses, a safety net was needed to protect families from retrenchments. For consumers there needed to be incentives – rewards, competitions, cost savings on foodstuffs – for the plastic bag ban to be rationally appealing.

Get it? Experts in customer research and product launches should do for the country what they routinely do for their businesses: think marketing.

Graeme Addison is a former Professor of Communication who writes on media, marketing and technology.

A RESPONSE FROM BILL NAUDÉ, PLASTICS FEDERATION OF SA

The MFSA Journal’s comments with regard to confusion and considerable bitterness is quite accurate. We need to understand that the plastic bag manufacturers do not normally have to communicate with the public at large and were therefore somewhat ill-prepared. The only marketing that they effectively do is to sell (on price) bags to their retail clients and/or distributors.

With regard to the communications strategy, the retail stores effectively offered and undertook to communicate the terms of the new regulations to the public at large. They indicated, however, that because this was a retail issue, they were not willing to share their strategy with the bag manufacturers. The effects of the strategy were definitely not co-ordinated; in fact, intentionally so, because the various retailers used the bag regulations as a marketing ploy. The result was confusion, and extreme differences, in what was being said.

SIGNATORIES NOT REPRESENTATIVE

The Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) on plastic bags was signed by government, organised labour, and organised business as represented by the Chemical and Allied Industries Association (CAIA), the Plastics Federation of South Africa, the Plastics Recyclers Employers Organisation, and a Retail Plastic Bag Working Group who signed individually for the four major retailers. The retailers made it clear that they were not signing on behalf of the greater retail sector.

Finally, there was no cohesive marketing and communications plan to co-ordinate the players in the value chain.