Lessons from the League
(the youthy one)

Great brands and great leaders have similar qualities. In the past few weeks South African media have been swept up by the frenzy around the disciplinary hearing of Julius Malema (ANCYL President) by the African National Congress mother body. I can only imagine how frustrating the process must be for a mother body trying to discipline what appears to be a leader in the making and a formidable politician.

Since Malema appeared in the political picture, he has become iconic in that he is the most talked about politician in South Africa. The frustrating reality facing the mother body is that, after all is said and done - Malema could be a great leader. He has displayed the qualities of some of the most resilient brands on the planet.

Let’s have a look at a prima facie comparison between Malema and some qualities of enduring global brands.

Consistency - the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour

Ever since Malema appeared on the scene, he has been known to bark loud – carelessly, but very strategically. His calculated rise to political stardom required a combination of internal lobbying for the correct structural and financial support and sufficient hype in the media to keep him relevant. While his style and approach appear crude and ill-informed, he says what the masses want to hear and he ignites national debate. One wonders if nationalisation would have even been up for public discussion if it weren’t for his extreme views on the matter. Since he appeared, without a doubt, he is one of the most consistent politicians in the South African landscape to date.

When ‘rom chocolates’, a national heritage chocolate brand in Romania ‘decided’ to change their packaging to the American flag through an extremely visible and above the line campaign, it ignited a nationwide furore at the gall of the Americans imposing their identity on the Romanian nation. The move, which was a cleverly calculated marketing behavior-change campaign, resulted in the immediate and extreme adoption of the traditional rom chocolate brand and the Romanian country values simultaneously. People reacted because the Americans appeared to have butchered the brand they knew and loved and that was consistently woven into the fabric of Romanian society whether they liked it or not.

Despite the anger and dizzying levels of confusion he sometimes incites, Malema, through his rhetoric and utterings has become part of the fabric of South African society and national debate – whether you like it or not.

How you start out, is not necessarily how you will end

For a long time, the trump card to his antics and running joke was Malema’s rural, uneducated background. Articles were written about his poor and non-existent academic performance. He was ridiculed time and time again for having failed woodwork, which seemed like a reactive response to someone who challenged the status quo. I think we can all agree that being a politician, much like any profession requires a certain amount of innate and natural cunning. You need to display certain tactical and strategic personality traits that we all overlooked in Malema to focus on his woodwork scores.

In America, there is a concept of ‘unschooling’ premised on the fact that children are likely to achieve more if they are encouraged to do what they wanted from an earlier age. The idea is to allow the ‘talent discovery’ process to run earlier in the life of a child so that the talent can be honed earlier. I wonder if Malema would have turned out differently if he had been ‘unschooled’. From being a ‘woodwork failure’, to the most talked-about politician in South Africa - interesting journey.

I can’t help but think that his journey reminds me of the journey of Coca-Cola - a product that failed to make it as a medicine and is now the number one most globally consumed beverage on the planet.

Adapt. Adopt. Survive

Starting out as a failure does not mean that is how it will remain. Building great brands requires mastering the art of consistency and truth in the belief of the end position of the brand. In a sea of global economic activity, the environment changes rapidly, and unless you are able adapt by being consistently nimble, adopt a new outlook as and when required, it makes it very difficult to survive in the market place.