

Cigarettes and smuggling claims: turning around negative perceptions

By [Dharmesh Nagar](#)

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In a no-smoking era, promoting a cigarette manufacturer is not an easy task at the best of times. But when the client is engaged in a market showdown with a global monopoly and finds itself the victim of a smear campaign on top of it, turning around perceptions can be a challenge.



Dharmesh Nagar

This was the situation Media Revolution had to address in 2013, when our client, Zimbabwe's Savanna Tobacco, came under fire in the media.

Leading newspapers alleged involvement in Savanna Tobacco by Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, and claimed Savanna was smuggling cigarettes into South Africa to bypass taxes. None of it was true, but the company had not been given an opportunity to respond. The negative publicity was causing reputational damage and threatening to derail Savanna's contracts with distributors in neighbouring countries.

Our strategy was to go fully transparent, highly public and straight to the source of the allegations. We put Savanna's founder and then-executive chairman, Adam Molai, directly into the line of fire, securing mainstream TV and newspaper debates and interviews, where he could tell his side of the story.

This is not something that happens a lot. You'll often find that the CEOs hide behind spin doctors in the face of controversy. But we believe in transparency, and fortunately, our client supports this.

Adam Molai, a canny and experienced entrepreneur who is currently building a diversified business empire in Zimbabwe,

participated in the live interviews and stated his case.

He emerged with his professional reputation enhanced, and even his initial critics changed their tune. I knew that once the media had an opportunity to question Adam, they would see the smear campaign for what it was. He is a reputable and highly experienced businessman, with a great success story to tell.

This success story, which has seen the empowerment of tens of thousands of small scale farmers and the emergence of a significant tobacco manufacturing and distribution player out of Zimbabwe, is also the foundation of our marketing efforts for Savanna across the region.

While the cigarettes themselves might not be marketable, we have focused on building the brand exposure around its quality tobacco, the fact that it is a home-grown product, its lower cost and its innovation in packaging – which extends to packs for two or five cigarettes, so meeting a uniquely African need for low-cost, small packs of product.

This approach has seen steady growth in exposure and supported Savanna Tobacco's successful expansion into a number of neighbouring markets.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Media Revolution, part of the global Starcom MediaVest Group, is a full service marketing and PR agency for international clients across Africa. It was launched in 2005 and currently partners with five key clients - three of them blue chip companies - to drive their marketing and communications into Africa. Strategic Director Dharmesh Nagar, one of the founding partners, initiated the company after several years of handling pan-African clients for McCann Erickson and Hunt Lascaris.

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