

Chris Moerdyk reflects on a lifetime of storytelling: From war zones to iconic ads

 By [Brendan Seery](#)

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The golden rule about marketing, says advertising guru Chris Moerdyk, is identical to the golden rule of journalism: You are not the target market.



Chris Moerdyk has had a lifetime of experiences. Source: Supplied.

This from a man who, after dodging bullets in the Congo as a foreign correspondent for the likes of the BBC back in the 1960s, found his way into advertising as a copywriter with the Lindsay Smithers ad agency in Durban.

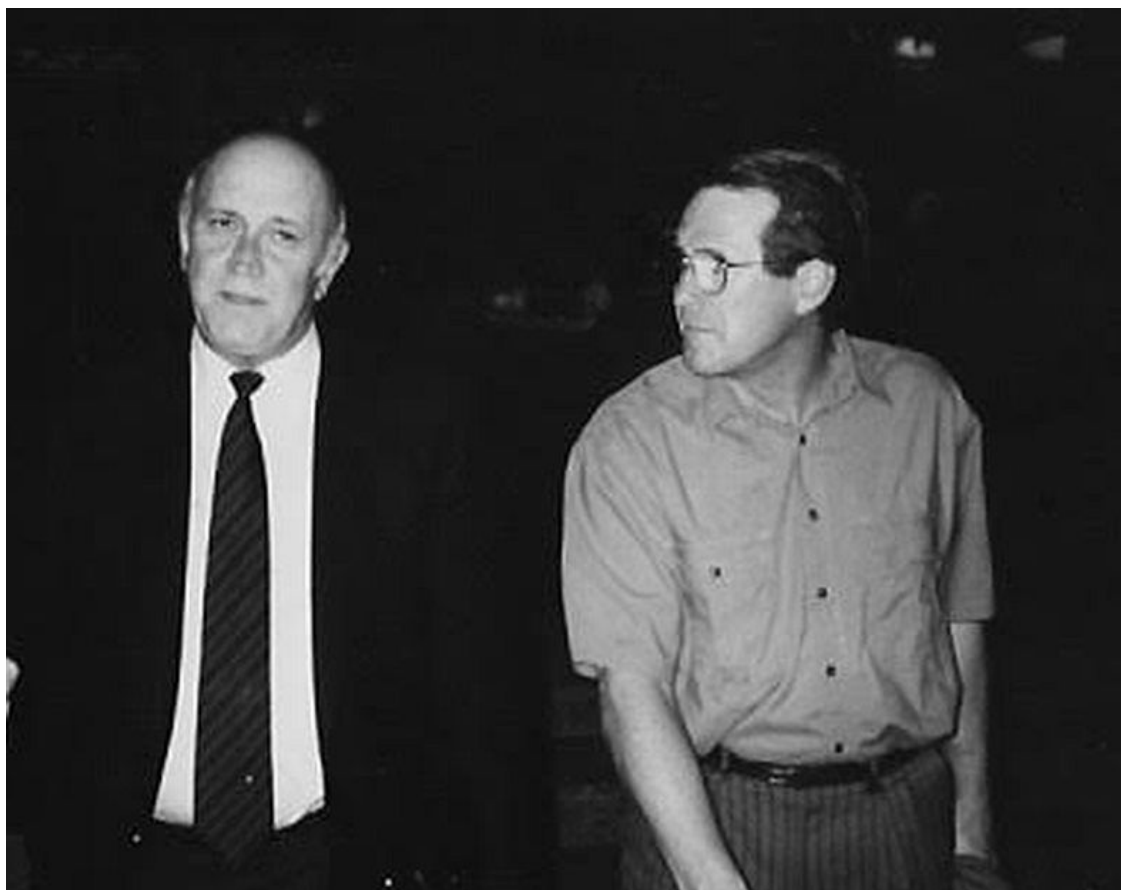
Golden rule

He realised, early on, that there is a "high level of bullsh*t" in advertising – but he had to apply the golden rule from the start, with one of his first copywriting assignments being to do an ad for tampons.

"What the hell did I know about the subject?" he laughs now at the memory.

But, once you're a writer, it's not that difficult. The young Moerdyk grew up in Pretoria, with his Dutch ancestors being prominent in the then civil service of the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek of President Paul Kruger. Yet he went to the English-

medium Pretoria Boys' High (still a "bloody good school", he maintains) and was unsure about his future until his matric class was regaled with tales of journalism by a *Rand Daily Mail* reporter.



Chris Moerdyk with the last apartheid president, FW de Klerk. Source: Supplied.

"I knew then that is what I wanted to do with my life."

At this point, as a journalist who occasionally questions his life choices (should I have gone where the money was better?), I have to ask: "Any regrets, then?" The answer is immediate: "Not for a moment!"

Moerdyk went from school to the cadet reporter course of the then Argus company and then was posted to the Pretoria News.

As a greenhorn reporter, he saw some things which have remained with him ever since. There was a case involving anti-apartheid activists at the High Court in Pretoria, where there was a solitary woman protesting outside. As the prisoners were led away, one of the guards hit one of them in the ribs with his rifle butt. The woman lunged at the guard, punching the man in the jaw. It turned out it was Adelaide Hain, mother of Peter, who later became the force behind the anti-apartheid movement's sports boycotts.

"I asked her why on earth she did that and her response was: 'Sometimes you can't just watch, you have to attack'... what a woman!"

Head-hunted

Later, he was head-hunted by foreign news agencies and worked for *United Press International* and the *BBC*, as well as an outfit producing news on a freelance basis run by legendary cameraman Ernie Christie.

One of the areas he covered was the tussle between the then Rhodesia and the British government over the former's unilateral declaration of independence in 1965. At another series of endless talks between them and African countries, this one at Victoria Falls, Moerdyk was outside the venue when the then British prime minister, Harold Wilson, went outside for

a smoke break. Moerdyk snapped a picture of the politician without his tie on, which induced a fearsome rage on the part of Wilson, who fumed that he would not look like a politician.



A younger Moerdyk in the field. Source: Supplied.

Moerdyk says he went into advertising because he had got married and suddenly acquired responsibility – and running around Africa covering coups and wars was not the best way to foster a stable family life. His time at Lindsay Smithers brought him into contact with the man he regards as probably the best ad man this country has produced, the agency's boss man, Colin Adcock. He was so good that one of the agency's big clients, Toyota, poached him away to become CEO.

It was there that Adcock looked at the car brand, decided its main selling point was its reliability and came up with the slogan "Everything keeps going right..."

Moerdyk thinks it's amazing that, more than 20 years after that slogan was discontinued, many South Africans not only recall it, they think it is still the Toyota slogan.

Memorable events

Moerdyk spent time in the motoring industry himself, heading BMW South Africa's communications team and being involved in memorable events, like arranging flips in the Concorde supersonic passenger jet for the launch of a new BMW model.

What a time to be alive! What a time to be in that business!

As a commentator on advertising and marketing, as well as a consultant to a host of well-known blue-chip companies, Moerdyk still, at the age of 80, doesn't pull punches when it comes to telling clients what they're doing wrong.

"I often audit advertising spend and I estimate that 20% is effectively wasted..."



The world has changed dramatically and, he believes, "people don't watch TV ads any more".

He goes on: "Advertising used to be about showing consumers what you had to offer and then trying to push them to buy. Today, though, people find what they are looking for by going to Google and searching..."

Going viral

This, of course, requires a new approach to advertising and not everybody in the business "gets it", says Moerdyk.

And don't get him started about why creativity in advertising has declined.

“ Nobody is prepared to do anything risky, to take a chance. Brands are controlled by bean counters and ad agencies are heading the same way. So, you're seldom going to see anything which breaks the mould... ”

So, what ads does Moerdyk think really broke the mould?

"Of course, I would have to say BMW's 'mouse on the steering wheel' (to promote the arrival of power steering across all three series models) was stunning."

He adds: "Best of all was the fact we spent very little on flighting that ad, but we got huge amounts of coverage for it in the media...what you would call 'going viral' these days."

Another favourite is Nando's "tail gunner" ad – which is, like the brand itself, "a bit saucy". If you've seen it, you'll know what he's talking about it... but we won't go into details here.

Journalism and advertising have given Moerdyk "the best life". It's been a "life of many masks" – as reporter and copywriter have to be something they're not, both in acquiring information and producing words.

But, you get the sense, there's still a lot more to come.

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ABOUT BRENDAN SEERY

Brendan Seery has been in the news business for most of his life, covering coups, wars, famines - and some funny stories - across Africa. Brendan Seery's *Orchids and Onions* column ran each week in the *Saturday Star* in Johannesburg and the *Weekend Argus* in Cape Town.

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