

No 1

**BUSINESS DAY**

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Recently I had a number of discussions with business executives who asked me a difficult question to answer : "How can we improve our image with opinion forming Blacks ?" They may ask this question because the parent company in the USA, UK or West Germany is experiencing domestic political pressure for trading in "Apartheid South Africa", or because they find themselves in economic difficulties from the "Black market" in South Africa itself. Whatever the reason, the question is based on a negative self-perception amongst Blacks. This perception is generally speaking correct. At least that is my impression after talking to a number of influential Black spokesmen, both young and old.

"Business" or "capitalists" or "free enterprise" is seen to be in "cahoots with the Government" or "propping up the status quo" or "indifferent" to the crises in which Blacks find themselves at present. Some businessmen will immediately feel justifiably aggrieved at such distortion.

They may point to the FCI Charter condemning Apartheid and endorsing a democratic alternative. Attention may be drawn to social justice programmes from companies fulfilling the 4th Amplification of the Sullivan Code. At the same time a great deal of time, energy and resources is being given to housing, welfare and education and so on. All this is of course true, but the question is one related to "image" and images come about in rather unsystematic, sometimes irrational (not always) ways.

I would like to put a few questions to executives which I have to respond to from some of the more angry Black spokesmen I met recently :

- Take the Cavaliers "All Black" tour. Yellow Pages sponsors it with extremely generous backing from Government. The Government is responsible for Apartheid. The sports boycott came about as a result of Apartheid. The tour breaks the boycott. Is Apartheid gone ? No. Why is the private sector backing the tour? There are so many "yes-but-it-is-not-quite-like-that" responses that come to mind. But the image has been set in the mind of these people.
  
- Take "treason trials". If the FCI Charter commits industry to the maintenance of the rule of law, why does money for the defence of people accused under the Internal Security Act have to come from outside sources? Why does the "private sector" not pick up the tab every time and look after the dependants of those who are refused bail? They want to know how the private sector intervenes in the crisis **now** not only by means of longer term programs to upgrade socio-economic conditions.
  
- And then the more ticklish question. "Yes, we know you don't like Apartheid. But what kind of post Apartheid South Africa would you be prepared to live in ? One-man-one-vote, a non-racial democracy ? The moment the private sector fudges and coughs in response to this question a stereotype begins to shape up in the minds of the questioners.

I suppose the problem of image creation is that it takes one representative of the private sector to create an image for all and to undo the hard effort of countless others. The mistake could be a simple one. To be insensitive to the political consequences of what could be a perfectly normal business venture. But then we do not live in normal times in this land of ours.

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