

Think-Piece on the public affairs and strategic communications lessons arising from the MJC – Orion – ETV halaal certification debacle

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Introduction

Until now, I have resisted the urge and temptation to write anything of a substantial and constructively critical nature on the recent debacle surrounding the relabeling of meat products by Orion Cold Storage and the subsequent public outcry and concerns about the halaal certification standards and procedures of the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) and the MJC's responses to these. However, in the wake of ETV's 3rd Degree airing the expose on the matter, I have engaged in much contemplation and reflection in an attempt to understand the perspectives of the various parties involved and concerned with the matter. I would finally like to share some thoughts.

As a practicing Muslim I have my own personal concerns regarding the matter, just like many Muslims and even non-Muslims who are consumers of products that are certified halaal by the MJC, as well as numerous other halaal authorities.

The purpose of this article, is not to dwell on the Islamic, Shariah (Islamic law) and theological perspectives of the issues - important and integral as these may be. I am simply not qualified to do so. There are many other individuals and institutions more capable and frankly speaking, more appropriate to do so, many of who are already in engaged in clarifications of this nature.

Instead as a professional public affairs and strategic communications practitioner, my analysis in this article is aimed at making some constructive observations and contributions of a professional nature about the important lessons emerging from the matter and what the implications of these for an august body such as the MJC to enhance and professionalise its public affairs and strategic communications approach going forward.

My comments are neither an unconstructive criticism of the MJC, nor an attack on ETV or Orion in anyway whatsoever. It has been written out of my own free will and volition, as an attempt at making a meaningful contribution to the debate around the matter.

Observations and Analysis

Firstly, in the South African Muslim community, news and information regarding issues affecting the community spreads like wild fire. This can be attributed to three factors:

1. The size of the community relative to the broader population – its ‘small’ enough to be deeply connected and linked.
2. Is the general emotiveness of that characterize issues because of its obvious religious link.
3. The high level and prevalent use of social media, internet based and mobile technologies in communicating these, as well as the impact of the mainstream and community media channels.

It was therefore no secret when it first became public knowledge in late 2011 that ETV would air an inquiry into the MJC-Orion debacle. At the time, the only parties talking about the inquiry by ETV into the MJC was ETV itself (advertising the broadcast into the matter) and South Africa consumers (both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, but especially Muslims for obvious reason that do not require any further clarification, explanation or elaboration.

The point is that the MJC knew it was coming and took no pre-emptive or early-warning interventions, even though the airing of the expose on ETV was rescheduled for 2012. As a result, the South African Muslim community was caught unaware. The MJC had no choice but to go into reactive mode to clarify its stance and position. This needn’t have been the case.

Lesson #1: The importance of being proactive

The MJC could have been far more proactive and preemptive in preparing the South African Muslim and non-Muslim public for what they would encounter on the ETV screening, especially since the MJC denounced the undesirable manner in which the entire screening had been conducted and that ETV has misrepresented the facts according to the MJC. I don’t believe that the MJC did not employ a proactive and preemptive approach because they did not want. I simply think that the MJC did not know how to do it or even realise that they had to do it. Instead, the MJC was caught in reactive mode, having to clarify its position, explain the facts as they actually transpired according to the MJC and recapture the confidence and trust of the South African Muslim public. This is no easy task, firstly and especially when it is reactive and ‘after the fact’. Secondly, it is made more challenging by the emotiveness of the issue and the South African Muslim public’s emotions running high. Lastly, it is exacerbated by the fact that in the short time since the ETV feature was broadcasted and aired on national television, not only had it been widely viewed at the time of broadcasting, it had also gone viral on social networks and mobile platforms.

As result the debacle had reached not only a significant South African Muslim publics, but a broader public audience comprising non-Muslim South African and Muslims abroad. By this time, certain impressions and perceptions of the MJC had clearly been created and taken root. The old adage that “first impressions count” does hold some truth to it. There is no doubt that the MJC’s image and reputation has been damaged in the wake of the saga. This is made all the more disparaging for the South African Muslim public in a possible context where the MJC claims not be at fault at all. For instance, at the time of the first information coming to light of the debacle at Orion and the possible ETV feature, the MJC should have been the first to give its side of the story publically and through its own volition (not necessarily through ETV), including the steps it would be taking regarding the halaal certification previously issued to Orion. Quite simple actually. If the MJC knew the facts at the

time, why did it not state it? It should have. It could have. It did not because it did not recognize the reputational risk at stake and how to counter these proactively under the circumstances. The MJC would only have been able to respond to these risks if it knew what these risk were, had been proactively monitoring them and response strategies in place to counter them.

Secondly, the MJC embarked on an extensive social media campaign thanks to the help and counsel of the social media consultancy [Procliviti](#), utilising multiple social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) to get its message across and clarify its position in the wake of the saga. These were combined with news conferences, public meetings and media interviews to respond to the media barrage and demands for answers and explanations from the community.

There is no doubt based on the level of engagement, viewership and activity, that the interventions prompted by [Procliviti](#) got the MJC ‘out there’ and helped it broadcast its message. Kudos to [Procliviti](#) for a job well done. However, its remains after the fact, with perceptions and impressions already running deep and negative at that.

Lesson #2: The importance of integrated public affairs and communication

Despite the reach of the social media interventions prompted by [Procliviti](#), its remains after the fact (no fault of [Procliviti](#) of course) and it therefore remains to be seen how effective these interventions will be salvaging the image of the MJC and the trust, confidence, impressions and perceptions the South African Muslim and non-Muslim public have of it in the long run. – sustainability is key. Notwithstanding the ingenuity and innovativeness of the campaign managed for the MJC by [Procliviti](#), it is but one aspect of the public affairs and strategic communications tools the MJC should constantly have in its arsenal as part of an integrated, coordinated and strategy-led approach to public affairs and strategic communications at all levels (e.g. consumers, businesses, stakeholders, law makers, the media, social commentators and influential public opinion makers). It is evident that no such strategy and approach exists at present. This makes the MJC vulnerable in the future. Pertinently, it is not clear whether in the aftermath of the Orion-ETV debacle, the MJC recognises and appreciates the need to have the capacity and capability of an integrated public affairs and strategic communication strategy and approach at its disposal. Considering the importance of these is not so much about trying salvage its public image in the aftermath of the Orion-ETV debacle, but more importantly about what it does to strengthen and professionalise its public affairs and strategic communications practices and approach based on the hard lessons learnt from the debacle.

The MJC is an authoritative body of Islamic scholars, intellectuals and elders fully capable of imparting and clarifying the principles of Shariah (Islamic Law) and the teachings of the Quran, with a single public relations officer. This is not enough, as the Orion-ETV has illustrated. As I stated earlier (in Lesson #1), if in the wake of the Orion debacle first surfacing and with the MJC having had knowledge of the facts surrounding it at the time, as well as the MJC having knowledge of the screening of the ETV program in late 2011, why did the MJC not proactively communicate on these? The answer is simple. With due respect, a single public relations officer and the comfort of being an authoritative Islamic judicial body is not enough. More is needed.

The MJC needs a broader and more integrated public affairs and strategic communications strategy and the resources to implement the strategy. It needs to see the big picture. Critical considerations in this regard are:

1. What is the MJC's public affairs and strategic communications strategy? Does one exist? If not, then what should the salient and critical features of such a strategy be in the future? Who should develop it and how should it be implemented?
2. Who are the spokespersons on behalf of the MJC and on which issues?
3. Who handles the media on behalf of the MJC and how they are handled? Are there media and access to information policies in place?
4. Who monitors the MJC's presence in the media and across which media platforms and channels? (You cannot possibly know what to respond to, if you do not know what is being said about you).
5. How regularly should the MJC proactively communicate with its key stakeholder audiences (e.g. consumers, businesses, stakeholders, law makers, the media, social commentators and influential public opinion makers)? Does the MJC even know who its key stakeholder audiences are and how they should be ranked, prioritized and managed? Does the MJC have a stakeholder relationship management strategy in place?
6. How does the MJC conduct market research and business intelligence about itself among key economic constituencies and stakeholders such as consumers, businesses and regulators, as well as its competitors and threats, and the factors influencing these?

The MJC needs to take into its confidence strategic public affairs and communications advisors and strategists, with the competency, religious sensitivity, economic intuition, political savvy and emotional intelligence to provide it with strategic counsel and whom it (the MJC) can use as a sounding board in this regard. There is nothing wrong with this. It is not a sign of weakness. In fact it is a sign of the MJC's commitment to strengthen its public affairs and strategic communications capacity and capability to serve the South Africa Muslim public more effectively and the mandate which the South African Muslim public entrusts it with.

The MJC can do much better and much more to communicate more effectively and more regularly on its activities. Whilst it is not obliged to do this, the perception created by the Orion/ETV debacle is one of an organisation that is not transparent, open and communicative. Arising from the debacle, various critics and commentators were publically calling for a unified halaal certification standard in South Africa. In response, the MJC suddenly announced that it has for some time been engaging in discussions and negotiations with the four other major halaal authorities around the transition to a single halaal certification standard. I don't know about other members of the public, but this certainly came as news to me.

Surely this is the kind of public purpose information that the MJC can shared with the South African Muslim public and business community free and without divulging sensitive information, either on its own or in conjunction with the other halaal certifying authorities. Instead, the MJC became reactive to these calls for a unified halaal certification standard, whereas it is actually in a strong position together with the other halaal certifying authorities to lead and inform the public opinion and debate on the matter.

Thirdly, much as halaal is an emotive issue because of its religious connotations, the fact of the matter is that because of the ‘world’ we live, the time in which we live in it and because of how this ‘world’ works, halaal has also become a major economic and financial issue. Lets not beat around the bush about this. Lets call it what it is – it has become a business, an industry, an economy and an engine for profit-making and wealth creation. The facts speak for themselves. Lets consider these.

In 2010, the World Halal Forum estimated the global halaal industry and marketplace to comprise of 1.8 billion halaal consumers in a US\$3 trillion industry (that’s just less than the GDP of Germany, Europe’s largest economy at US\$3.31 trillion and China at US\$5.88 trillion at current prices in 2010, and more than India’s GDP at US\$1.73 trillion – the world’s largest democracy).

Globally, the halaal industry has remained one of the fastest growing industries, having survived strongly against the global economic and financial downturn and declining economic spiral first spurred on by the sub-prime mortgage crisis in the USA and then the financial collapse of European economies. During this time, the halaal industry has shown growth rates exceeding traditional industry sectors, with supply of products and services dominated by non-Muslim countries (US\$15.3 billion in North America; US\$820 million in Central and South America; US\$69.3 billion in Europe; US\$418.1 billion in Asia; US\$1.6 billion in Australia; and US\$155.9 billion in Africa).

These figures are not insignificant. They point to the large untapped potential for countries and companies to be major halaal industry players, regulators and trading partners through trade and market access and regulatory harmonization. Effective public affairs and strategic communications are critical in this regard. It is critical for product marketing, branding and placement. Critical for talking to consumers, business and regulators. Critical for clarifying issues of halaal standards and certification. Critical for creating positive influence and opinion. Critical for managing and changing perception. Critical, critical, critical

Aside from product quality and cost, it is this high level of public affairs and strategic communications effectiveness that has helped Malaysia achieve its status as a global halaal hub. Its companies, its halaal authorities, its government and governmental agencies and its media (both mainstream and Islamic media) are effective at working together and communicating effectively in establishing and maintaining its halaal certified products and the certification standard itself, as the gold standard in the halaal industry globally. Nothing is left to chance. Malaysia’s halaal authorities draw on and invest in the required level of market expertise to ensure this, with the resultant effect of having established a sizable market of dedicated and specialised industry consultants and advisors across the halaal value chain who are at the disposal

of the halaal authorities and private companies to support the sustainable growth and development of the Malaysian halaal industry based on the strength of their halaal certification standard.

Lesson #3: Halaal is a brand

This is the reality of the halaal industry and economy. Halaal certification is not only a question of religious preference, it is also about economics. How else would we explain non-Muslim owned companies and business certifying their products as halaal. It is a market for profit making. Clearly Africa with its US\$155,9 billion market for halaal products, goods and services is a sizable market and South Africa with its strong trade infrastructure and manufacturing potential is a gateway for halaal products and services into the rest of the region.

However, a halaal certification that is not credible will not be able to access these opportunities, irrespective of how good the quality of the product is. If there are religious doubts, it will hurt both the standing of the product and the standing of the certification. Halaal certification itself must also be seen and managed as a brand.

In South Africa, the MJC certifying brand already competes with at least three other certification authorities. There are strong ideological and religious persuasions based on the thoroughness of the halaal certification procedure that inform consumer preference across these certification brands. This is not just a consumer issue of course. Businesses too would not want to incur costly compliance with a halaal certification which they are uncertain will attract consumers to spend money, if there are clear consumer doubts or reservations about it. It remains to be seen whether or not in the long term there will be major damage to the MJC's halaal certification as a brand choice as a result of the Orion-ETV debacle. What is clear however in the short term is that it has not done the MJC and its halaal certification any favours. Making up the ground on this is not altogether impossible, but I suspect will prove immensely challenging based on the harm done to the MJC halaal certification as a brand to date.

Lastly, I have throughout this article referred to both non-Muslim consumers and businesses. When thinking about halaal certification as a brand and as a market, in South Africa is increasingly becoming not only a market and brand for Muslims, but for non-Muslims as well, at both the consumer and business level. As a brand, halaal certification is increasingly representing an alternative socially responsible label (similar to eco-labeling or organic foods), which is good for the body and the environment. I travel frequently and I often encounter non-Muslim travelers on airplanes, at conferences and seminars and at hotels looking for halaal catering options in order to have a guarantee that whilst away from home, they have access to food choices that have been prepared in the most hygienic and uncontaminated manner.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that the MJC needs to take a number of steps to ensure the optimal management of their halaal certification as a brand and as part of enhancing and professionalising their public relations and strategic communications image, capacity and capability.

1. Moving public relations from the backroom to the boardroom:

The MJC's traditional public relations function needs to be elevated as a critical support and advisory function to the highest levels of the organisation's structure e.g. the President, Deputy President or Secretary-General's office. The PR function should be elevated from merely being a community and media liaison activity, to one which is the custodian responsible for driving an integrated public affairs and strategic communications agenda across all public affairs and stakeholder audiences e.g. consumers, businesses, law makers, media, other halaal certifying authorities, social commentators and influential public opinion makers.

2. Integrated public affairs and strategic communications

The pursuit of an integrated public affairs and strategic communications strategy and implementation plan must become the central pivot around all of the MJC external outreach, communication, advocacy, lobbying and positioning is proactively informed, rather than only being responsive to external pressures and demands. Critically this entails identifying and setting clear public affairs and strategic communications targets and goals that are linked to the broader strategies, goals and objectives of the organisation.

3. Proactive stakeholder management and engagement

The MJC must engage in a proactive approach to stakeholder management and engagement that is informed by an audit of the extent of its current influence on its stakeholders. Critically this entails identifying, ranking, prioritising and segmenting its key stakeholder audiences and customizing messages and engagement strategies for each of these. This includes advocacy, lobbying and informing and influencing public opinion, regulatory and governmental decision-making, as well as the ability to build strategic alliances and coalitions.

4. Appointing specialist consultants and advisors

The MJC must recognize and take the bold steps of appointing and contracting specialist public affairs and strategic communications consultants and advisors with the capability, competency, capacity, religious sensitivity, economic intuition, political savvy and emotional intelligence to provide it with strategic counsel and whom it (the MJC) can use as a sounding board in this regard.

The opportunities provided by the challenge of the present time and space for pursuing these interventions are historic and unique for the MJC. It is likely not to be the last issue in the complex web of Shariah (Islamic law), consumerism, economics, public opinion, politics and public confidence and trust in the realm of halaal to confront the MJC. It is however the kind of interventions which can place the MJC on a new trajectory in its public affairs and strategic communication dealings, as opposed to a constant collision course characterised which is the result of a reactive, uncoordinated and ad hoc approach to public communication.

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