

War in Zululand: Newspapers in advertising battle

 By [Glenda Nevill](#)

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The Advertising Standards Authority of South Africa (ASA) has sanctioned *Zululand Fever*, a title owned by Natal Witness Printing and Publishing Company, a Media 24 operation. The complaint was laid by rival publication, the [Zululand Observer](#).



The ASA's directorate found that [Zululand Fever's](#) claim that it had "the highest number of individually delivered newspapers in our footprint - more than any other paper in our area" was unsubstantiated, and in contravention of the ASA code that requires "truthful presentation and substantiation" when it comes to circulation figures.

The directorate went further. It said it was "mindful that the contravention at issue is repeatedly one of misrepresenting circulation figures, which would suggest that the respondent is not attaching any weight to the ASA rulings or the requirements of the Code".

Rival company, Caxton and CTP Publishers and Printers, which said *Zululand Fever* had used "misleading and unsubstantiated circulation or distribution figures with the intent of increasing advertising", laid the complaint to the ASA. It also accused the paper of having "absolutely no regard for the series of adverse rulings since 10 October 2008, each one dealing with the same issue, namely inaccurate and unsubstantiated circulation figures". Caxton owns the *Zululand Observer*, a competing publication.

Newspaper, management's 'ethical base thrown into question'

"The falsification or misstatement of figures and exaggeration of readership or circulation is regarded as particularly problematic by the media industry," said Caxton chairman, Paul Jenkins in response to the ruling. "Contraventions by media owners of their own self-regulatory Codes affect the credibility of the entire industry. Where a newspaper habitually misleads its readers and advertisers about its circulation, distribution and readership, and does not itself uphold the precepts of fair and honest advertising, then the ethical base of the entire newspaper and its management is thrown into question.

"The regularity with which the *Zululand Fever* has made unsubstantiated or inaccurate claims on these key issues is arguably unprecedented for a printed newspaper, in the history of the Advertising Standards Authority. What aggravates this case is that the offender is part of the largest media company in the country, namely Media24. As in the past, we expect that Media24 will turn a blind eye. The ASA is to be commended on its ruling."

'It won't happen again'

Greg Orsmond, the managing director of *The Witness*, responded to questions from The Media Online, denying they would ignore the ruling. "There was a problem with out-dated information being used by *Zululand Fever*, which has been

corrected and won't happen again as all future readership and circulation information will be sent to the ASA advisory service for pre-publication approval," he said.

As its sanction, the ASA directorate has listed the publication on its Ad-Alert database, which is issued to all ASA members including newspapers, magazines, television, radio, cinema, and outdoor companies. It has also ordered *Zululand Fever* to submit any future advertising that contains readership or distribution figures to the ACA Advisory Service for pre-publication approval. The sanction will be in effect for six months.

It was the argument used by lawyers for the *Zululand Fever* in its defence before the ASA. Lawyers claimed that past problems stemmed from sales staff unwittingly using outdated material from the archives, without the knowledge of the editor.

They also argued that because the claim had been published on the Media24 website, not *Zululand Fever's* site, it had escaped the attention of the editor, and had immediately been removed when the complaint from the *Zululand Observer* was received.

'Incomprehensible'

Zululand Observer's Mrs Reg Anthony, the founder and managing director of the paper, said it was "incomprehensible that *Zululand Fever*, under the editorship of Desire Terblanche and the management of Greg Orsmond, both experienced media people, has so consistently infringed fair advertising principles with such impunity".

Anthony said *Zululand Fever* had realised that "false advertising of circulation and distribution results in increased advertising and more customers who are willing to support the *Zululand Fever*, albeit under false pretences. This translates directly into more money".

She said she hoped the sanction now imposed "will illustrate to readers and advertisers alike that they should be circumspect in their dealings with the *Zululand Fever*".

ABOUT GLENDA NEVILL

Glenda Nevill is a journalist, editor and communicator with 25 years experience working in media. She worked for *The Sunday Times* in various roles for nine years. She edited *The Big Issue* for six years, before taking up the position as launch editor of *The Property Magazine*. She then moved into public relations, working for HMB Communications and Oryx Multimedia. Nevill is currently editor of The Media Online. Follow @GlendaN on Twitter.

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