

What does it take to be a digital marketing entrepreneur?

 By [Stephen Sandmann](#)

10 Oct 2017

What does it take to be an entrepreneur in South Africa's digital marketing industry? I've taken the plunge at running my own digital marketing consultancy going forward. To quote a friend, "Stephen has spun out his own consultancy but with none of the silly agency overhead."



alphaspirit - [123rf.com](#)

Part of this process of figuring what it takes to be an entrepreneur is personal reflection, data gathering, analysis, chatting to the pros and learning from it all.

I'm not completely new to this type of life. A few years back I did some digital-marketing freelancing for a few SMEs but that wasn't enough – I wanted more and fast. I'm an impatient type of person, which annoys my wife sometimes. So, I decided to leapfrog many years of business development by joining top digital SA agencies and worked on clients such as [Audi](#), [Capitec](#), [DStv](#), [McDonald's](#), [PMD](#), [Woolworths](#) and [VW Commercial](#) to name a few. I then went client side, joining Vodacom's world-class digital marketing team.

I had now dramatically expanded my skills through working with the best digital marketers on SA's biggest brands. But what would be next? I felt now was the time to start my own consultancy, which focuses on specialised digital marketing for brands.

What are the personal qualities of an entrepreneur?

This question intrigues me and scares me a bit (but in a good way). This quote from Inc. Magazine sums up where I am right now,

“*Shake off the fear of the unknown, dispel your self-limiting belief that hugely successful people are more talented than you. They're just a bit more obsessed.*” ”

I now have the time to be more obsessed with the work I love. I love learning and challenging myself – no, this isn't a script for an interviewee. I really do love to acquire knowledge and to test my abilities, maybe that helps to be an entrepreneur?

I think you must be slightly crazy to be an entrepreneur – I don't mean 'lick-the-walls' crazy but people may think you are crazy for taking such a big risk by leaving the employ of one of South Africa's largest companies to do my own thing.

Focus and dedication are more important than ever in my life. It's been fun. I've met more top marketers in a short amount of time than ever before. Courage and a positive mind are critical to being an entrepreneur.

I've always been a risk taker of note – often doing seemingly crazy things that punished me physically and mentally. The example I'm referring to was when I decided to rebuild the Citi Golf which I inherited from my late brother. I did some googling, joined the VW Club online forum and decided that I would do some advanced mechanical work (replacing the engine etc.) without any experience whatsoever – I would teach myself via the internet as it unfolded. It was extremely stressful, with the odd small injury but mostly fulfilling. My dad had this to say about my car restoration antics, "Steve, you tread where angels fear to tread."

I thrive on pushing my abilities to the max, research & development, selling crazy ideas and mingling with creatives and top entrepreneurs. This is the best way for me to make friends and to push my skill set to new heights. Technical solutions need to be married to creative ideas. We as digital marketers need to get that right.

I'm odd, I enjoy painting paintings and creating glass sculptures but I also love delving into data and research to develop 'proofs of concepts' and the effectiveness of my digital marketing output.

I'm rather a newbie when it comes to entrepreneurship. I'm looking for a more holistic view and insights from a more experienced person and I'm sure you, the readers are too. That's why I touched base with SA's top digital marketing entrepreneur, Rob Stokes. Rob founded the pioneering digital marketing agency [Quirk](#), wrote SA's leading [digital marketing textbook](#) and is now chairman of the [Red & Yellow digital marketing school](#), to name a few of his accomplishments.

I wanted to know what it takes to succeed as an entrepreneur within the digital marketing industry and what personal traits are required to succeed. Rob had this to say,

“You need to have the ability to innovate and an excellent work ethic to be a successful entrepreneur within the digital marketing industry. Most of all, you need to be brave and curious to make it through the ups and downs and to stay relevant. I've known Stephen for a few years and he has these qualities.”

What about education?

If you aren't into expanding your knowledge then this lifestyle isn't for you. I like to help those starting their careers because I learn new things when I teach others. I find it rewarding too.

After high school, I decided to go with [IMM GSM](#) for my tertiary education. It looked practical, concise yet comprehensive and well-recognised. I wasn't disappointed – it was worth it. My IMM GSM diploma in marketing gave me an excellent

foundation, setting the stage for my future career. Studying marketing I believe, is so broad that it will serve you no matter what you end up doing, even if it is just for marketing yourself. Marketing principles translate across all marketing channels. For example, a Swot Analysis applies to all forms of marketing.

This was many years back, when digital marketing education wasn't mainstream. I did manage to get a hold of Rob Stokes free digital marketing textbook, which blew my mind. It was so detailed but practical too. I was so broke that the 'freeness' of the textbook gave me access to a wealth of practical knowledge. I had read a few brilliant books about US digital marketing but they weren't as practical and were pricy too. Reading these books drove me to switch from a career in mostly traditional advertising (working on TV ads etc.) to going wholeheartedly into digital marketing.

Where to next for me?

It's been quite a month, my first month as a digital marketing consultant. It has been a refreshing challenge and it couldn't be more rewarding – you're doing it for yourself, not for somebody else's company. I'm steaming ahead, building up my client base. I've signed up a handful of blue-chip clients, exciting brands that are keen to do innovative digital marketing. The future looks bright. I'll be going under the "Sandmann Digital" name, fully branding my 'operation' soon, not only because I'm proud of my heritage but also, I wouldn't be here without my family.

I believe the future of digital marketing will be made up of freelancers who band together for brands' campaigns or on a more long-term basis. This is a win-win situation. Brands get to know exactly what talent they are hiring, what value they are getting and what results they can expect. The digital marketing freelancers get to work in a less restrictive way to potentially do more of the work they want to do.

Here's to many decades of digital marketing that is effective and creative, to adventure and to challenges. Whatever you do make sure you're happy doing it, really, life is short.

ABOUT STEPHEN SANDMANN

I have a keen interest in innovative, digital marketing-lead advertising and search marketing (SEO and paid search), which I've developed through my award-winning agency and corporate career at Ogilvy, Quirk (now Mrum), Vodacom and now a specialist digital marketing consultant at Sandmann Digital.

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