

Better reflecting the true SA client and consumer with VML

 By Leigh Andrews

20 May 2019

In what's become known as the [most diverse and inclusive session](#) of the Red & Yellow School's #digitalagencyshowcase, VML South Africa's marketing director Loki Magerman was joined by Tumelo Popela, Jason Kubheka and Louise Steenpoorte in showcasing how their work gets to the true heart of the SA consumer.

“ Time to hear from some old friends [@VMLSouthAfrica #DigitalAgencyShowcase pic.twitter.com/waLDduO2Hs](#)—
Deen Schroeder (@DeenSchroeder) [May 16, 2019](#) ”

Magerman began by explaining that the agency has evolved many times over the years, from when three agencies came together over a decade ago to form Native, with the commonality of being native both to South Africa and to all things digital. They then partnered with VML to give their clients access to global work and in 2018 became a full-service digital agency.

Orchestration is the new specialisation

In its current iteration, VML South Africa is an umbrella for the six tribes at VML, all of which are seen as autonomous agencies that run themselves and liaise directly with clients to ensure better service as it's more of a personal 'small agency' approach within the larger VML South Africa.



Brands, pay attention to these new urban tribes

Juanita Pienaar 3 Apr 2019



This 'tribe' approach works because there's also a focus on brand orchestration at the agency.

Magerman said we don't need to be reminded that we live in a connected age, but brands often do need a reminder that this plays a part in every touchpoint the consumer has with the brand.

We're coming from an era where brands were seen as monoliths. Instead, VML portrays them as connected networks, encompassing every aspect of the brand that the consumer sees and connects with, from TVCs to PR, retail, the call centre

and more, in ways that make sense to the ever-present consumer.



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Leigh Andrews 5 Nov 2018



Magerman explained that this involves everything from inspiration to engagement to commitment in order to build connected brands at an emotional level. That's why he says:

“Orchestration is the new specialisation. Picture an orchestra that you conduct perfectly, so the various parts come together in harmony, to create a beautiful sound.”

It's about creating an environment for operational excellence, which is what birthed VML South Africa's six tribes.



Native VML's new journey: Conducting the orchestra

Danette Breitenbach 15 Feb 2018



Three of these were represented at the showcase, to show how they meet the needs of today's client and consumer...

Banking on brand love to the social media savvy

Tumelo Popela admitted she was exceptionally nervous at the start of her session, but she sparkled with enthusiasm for her topic.

Popela shared that she has always loved communications and connecting with people, and found her niche when she joined Digify in 2014.

This Google and IAB SA-backed three-month digital boot camp run by youth agency Livity Africa upskills unemployed youth who have an interest in all things digital but need that all-important CV booster of experience.



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Popela excelled in the course and was appointed to VML as a social media intern, eventually climbing the ranks to the position of manager.

Popela is also project manager of the 'Dinaledi' tribe – This translates as 'stars', as the team loves doing purpose-driven work.

Sharing examples of this, Popela said that 2018 was about making meaningful connections in their work, and a shift from basic customer service to engaging conversations.

To bring this to life, they changed the look and feel of typical 'bank communication by using gifs in their social media communication as Standard Bank.

They also created personalised wallpapers based on customers' input. That's one way to show the bank actually listens, further boosting engagement levels.

“ Thanks [@StandardBankZA](#), I am mos def [#GoodToGo](#) 🎉🎉🎉🎉🎉. <https://t.co/aGEtOdW4g>— Tumelo Pope(la) (@TheLingo411) [March 13, 2019](#) ”

Popela said the true power of these projects is that they impact the lives of ordinary South Africans over and above the brand's metrics for campaign success.

She shared the following advice:

“ Never be afraid to think beyond the scope, ensure you understand your brand's objective and work to make a difference beyond just sales and leads. ”

Fishy recipes and running for your life: All part of a social media manager's day

Jason Kubheka, now mid-weight social media manager at VML, explained that he got his start early, having applied for a learnership at VML on his second official day out of varsity. To ensure he found the right fit, he jumped around all departments before settling on social media.

He spends much of his time behind a screen but also gets to attend client events, and enjoys the complexity that comes from each social media brand having its own voice. He gets to switch from the fish-filled lingo of Lucky Star pilchards to selling insurance for Holland, and also does reporting and event coverage.

Touching on his Lucky Star work first, Kubheka explained that the brand had initially been communicating on social media with recipes and stock images, but the challenge was to regain iconic status.

This was achieved through deeply researching the consumer and tapping into their conversations, resulting in their 'Meals around the world' campaign, which tied into a topic everyone was talking about: The World Cup.

“ O-fish-ally... Nothing like a good pun 🐟🐟🐟🐟🐟 [@VMLSouthAfrica](#) [#DigitalAgencyShowcase](#) <pic.twitter.com/fVqlshR6qi>— Deen Schroeder (@DeenSchroeder) [May 16, 2019](#) ”

They suggested some new South Africanisms you've probably not thought of, like a pilchard bunny chow and pilchard gatsby. While this tone has been likened to Nando's, Kubheka explained that they steer clear of anything political and have successfully changed the brand's community management style.

To illustrate this, he showed Lucky Star's #MyFirstMoments work, pitched as a way to better engage with Afrilenials as a reminder that once they start to make money at work, they shouldn't forget the Lucky Star pilchards.



The rise of Afrilenials and how to communicate with them

Nandi Zambodla 22 Jul 2016



Kubheka says after all this noise, there was a spike in each of the influencers' own channels – proof of Lucky Star being with them from the start and helping to build their careers.

Further adding on the consumer engagement aspect, certain recipes they shared, like the #MyFirstMoments 'heartbreak mac 'n cheese' or 'voting day vetkoek', are set to appear in a special Lucky Star cookbook.

Shifting focus to work that makes the world a healthier place, Kubheka said that social media management can also lower the number of customer complaints and queries.

For client Hollard, they did this by tapping into their CSI projects like the daredevil run, which is held to boost awareness of male-specific cancers.

“ This year, over 4,000 men took part, including Kubheka. The team also engaged influencers in an 'ice bucket challenge' style, where each was encouraged to rope in another runner. ”

“ At Hollard now [#DaredevilRun2019 pic.twitter.com/2iPrqJ6dfE](https://pic.twitter.com/2iPrqJ6dfE) — #SingayisusaNanini 💎💎 (@Bathandwa95) [March 15, 2019](#) ”

The aim was talkability and engagement, which they achieved as there was a 46% increase in entries over the previous year.

That's work that truly changes consumers' lives for the better.

Brand refreshes to reflect their true consumer base

Last up from the VML team was Louise Steenpoorte, associate creative director at VML from the Phoenix tribe, who shared how they've worked to revive the Edgars brand.

It's been around for 90 years but the store wasn't relating to the South African consumer of 2019. It was still looking to the West from a fashion and consumer perspective, thereby missing what's relevant to South Africa, so had to effectively reimagine the brand from scratch.

One way they opted to showcase the diversity and vibrancy of the land was in moving from models who are not seen as relatable, to not just influencers but culture creators – locals with a large following for doing interesting things beyond posting to Instagram.

Steenpoorte explains that they collaborated with the likes of body activism poet Siphokazi and even DJ Arch Jr, the youngest DJ in the world who won *SA's Got Talent* in 2015, for the brand to truly celebrate who we are as South Africans.



Edgars campaign celebrates self-expression and creative collaboration

4 Jan 2019



This resulted in an integrated campaign across social, stills and TV, resulting in the *Don't tell me what to do* African musical, in which Edgars collaborated with Sho Madjozi for a range that speaks of the SA zeitgeist.

The campaign successfully relooked at how brands can speak to consumers in an authentic and fresh way.

In an era where everyone can have their allotted minutes of fame, the time for unsolicited ads that merely interrupt is gone, as consumers have the power and decide when they engage with the brand.

Ample inspiration to help brands better engage with their true consumers. The Red & Yellow School's Digital Agency Showcase turns the spotlight on the six top-ranked digital agencies from the [IAB SA's Bookmark Awards](#). Watch for more of my [#DigitalAgencyShowcase](#) coverage, and follow [Red & Yellow School](#) and [VML](#) on Twitter for the latest updates.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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