

VMLY&R's Live from the Edge, its genesis and revival

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

1 Sep 2020

Jarred Cinman, CEO of VMLY&R South Africa talks through the genesis of VMLY&R's Live from the Edge event series, born from the agency's Digital Edge podcast.

“When I was much younger, about eight years ago, I worked with someone called Saul Kropman to start one of the first South African podcasts, ‘The Digital Edge’. It was a weekly news, analysis and interview show that focused on the broader digital advertising industry. What was radical at the time was we interviewed our competitors and gave profile to businesses other than our direct clients as a way to grow the entire industry. After a year or two, the podcast evolved into a live event – starting small and ultimately exploding into a 1,000-person show with Spike Lee headlining in 2015.”

The podcast or Digital Edge brand has been dormant for several years, but with the arrival of Covid-19 and a burgeoning demand for good quality virtual conferences, Cinman says he decided to revive it in its new incarnation ‘The Edge’ – a show about the future of marketing, as he describes it.



Jarred Ginman, CEO of VMLY&R South Africa

■ ***Tell us about the theme of the upcoming edition, 'From Cultural Clichés to Brand Authenticity', taking place on Thursday, 3 September?***

“ Every agency (and most brands) bandy around the word ‘culture’ these days. Everyone is ‘connecting with culture’ except that most of it is appropriated, misapplied or weighed down by stereotypes. We agree that cultural relevance is key to breaking through to consumers but it only works if it’s driven by authentic insights and a sincere regard for people’s own perspectives. ”

Our lineup of market leaders will help to map out how agencies and brands can do that.

■ ***The event will investigate how marketers build brands that get noticed amid intense competition from global and local competitors. What are some key talking points around this that we can expect to learn more about?***

We have global and African experts sharing their knowledge. Our topics vary, so there's something for everyone.

MTN and Unilever, both highly regarded brands on the continent, are sharing two very different success stories.

Some of our global speakers include London-based Neil Davidson from HeyHuman, who is giving a behavioural perspective on connecting London to Lagos.

César Melo is the former president of multiple big brands, including PepsiCo, Mondelez and Colgate. He's worked across the globe so is sharing his lessons learned from marketing to diverse audiences and verticals.

Jocelyn Cooper, who co-founded Afropunk, the number one destination for alternative Black culture is coming to us from NYC.

Local speakers include a panel conversation between Siya Metane, MasterKG and Focalistic about what it takes to make local music that is globally relevant - between them they have millions of stream downloads and YouTube views, so they know what they're talking about...



Siya Metane to speak at VMLY&R SA's Live from The Edge

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I can neither confirm nor deny whether MasterKG will be teaching us the moves to his 10-million view Jerusalema dance.

And because it's important to keep it real, African business analyst, Dianna Games will provide the economic and business context for us.

■ ***What is the format of the event?***

Like everything these days, it's virtual. We are using Bluejeans Events if you want to get technical. Following from our live shows of old, we will have really short (10 minutes or so) interviews, panels and presentations, mixed together with some fun surprises.

■ ***You've been able to host international guests like Barack Obama's CTO Harper Reed and Hollywood director Spike Lee and other global industry thinkers lined up for the upcoming event, such as; Jocelyn Cooper, co-founder of AfroPunk; César Melo, former president at PepsiCo, Mondelez, Colgate-Palmolive and Foster Grant, and Neil Davidson, CEO of London-based HeyHuman, who is experienced in successfully bringing global brands to the African mass market. How do you go about attracting this level of international thought leadership?***

Well, in the case of Harper Reed or Spike Lee we paid them a small fortune – so no magic there. But that was back in the day when we could sell tickets to live events. These days it's a combination of networking via the mighty VMLY&R network as well as just asking. Because everything is virtual, it's much easier for people to say yes.

■ ***And comment on the importance of a global mindset, especially now given the global crisis and how it has impacted our industry.***

The internet and its many applications are fundamentally global and always have been. To us benchmarking against the best in the world is something we've been doing since we started working 25 years ago. The pandemic has been a strange kind of leveller – regardless of where you are on the planet, you are facing some of the same challenges. That makes stories from the US or China relevant in our market despite all of our differences.

■ ***What has been the response to the series?***

We had two events this year during lockdown. The first was full of novelty and felt surreal. The second was at a point when people were grappling with the realities of remote work and amateur schoolrooms. Overall, we've been happy with the response and feedback – albeit we know we are asking people to sit on yet another video call. This time around we're going to try and shake people out of their monotony.

■ ***What are you most looking forward to for the next event and going forward?***

For this event, it's all about the multi-national nature of our speakers and topics and a celebration in particular of our own continent. I hope people come and find value. Beyond that, we intend to keep going but obviously keeping a beady eye on whether virtual events remain in vogue. With the currency where it is, we won't be bringing Spike Lee back out anytime soon.

■ ***And then comment on the timing aspect, why you think a series such as this is particularly relevant at the moment?***

Apart from the virtual aspect, which I've addressed, I think people are always looking for well made, concise and inspiring business content. So much of what we need to know comes packaged in so much 'bumpf' that it doesn't reward time spent. We try and remove the padding and just leave the good stuff.

■ ***What would you say to encourage marketers to attend?***

I'd hope the programme sells itself. I honestly believe the schedule is jam-packed with diverse and interesting stuff and there's a lot of bang to be had for your buck.

Register to attend for free [here](#), taking place on Thursday, 3 September at 8:30am, and follow Cinman on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

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