

Agency Scope Insights: Tough times call for agile measures

 By [Johanna McDowell](#)

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Marketers have been looking for agility for some time, writes Johanna McDowell, CEO of the Independent Agency Search & Selection Company (IAS) and Scopen partner, and while some agencies have been able to meet the call, others have been somewhat slower. Then, along came Covid-19...

Even as the marketing sector responded to substantial changes in marketing technology (martech) and many managed to keep up with a steep learning curve, some agencies and even brands seemed to adopt a slower, wait-and-see approach.

Then came the outbreak of Covid-19 with its global lockdowns, and many an agency must have felt like that impala on the outer edges of the herd when the lion roared.

Aside from the heartbreaking devastation of human life and the economies of so many countries, what the IAS is hearing in online conferences and Zoom seminars is the seeking of opportunities that always appear when risk is heightened.



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The green shoots that have started to appear in our industry are encouraging, even while being as cautious as this pandemic demands. There are still pitches being made and procurements departments – traditionally the time-keepers of the pitch process – are allowing leeway for the way in which pitches must happen at a time when we can't meet face-to-face.

Some marketers and their agencies are reporting being 'busier than ever'; and we're seeing a number of ads on television made locally and quickly – a boost for South African talent and the sector as a whole. While marketers remain loyal to their agencies, Agency Scope 2019-2020 shows relationship longevity with creative and media agencies growing closer to five years now. The IAS has also seen an uptake of ideas brought to marketers by micro-agencies in the digital space.

Far from being a threat, idea-generation by small operations or solo creatives could keep the wolf from the door for independents, and bring fresh, diverse ideas to marketers and their current agencies. In an economy likely not to be hiring full-time in the near future, paid arrangements with small businesses can provide a steady flow of creativity and remuneration.

Nothing will ever be the same...

No industry or business escaped the sudden turnabout Covid-19 effected across the board. We were collectively forced into acknowledging that so many number face-to-face meetings could indeed be emails, seminars didn't require booking a venue, and brands, marketers and agencies rapidly found themselves forced out of the 'but we've always done it this way' mindset.

In fact, I'd go as far as to say that Covid-19 could be seen as a step in human evolution. The shock of the pandemic is vast, but the lesson for business is that once consumers find an effective solution, they don't usually go back to conventional methods. Online shopping was growing and now it's normal. The delivery market that belonged to fast food chains now belongs to anyone with a license and a scooter.

The important takeaway for all industries is this: Take advantage of the experience of others and see who is meeting needs with the agility consumers will now expect. The perception will be, "If you could be agile during a pandemic, imagine the possibilities when all industries are running optimally."

So far, South Africa's response to Covid-19 has been remarkable. I am hoping that our industry does not attempt to go back to 'normal', but continues on this path of agility and client-centricity. I hope, too, that the standards we have set now result in a quicker economic recovery.

Agency Scope is a study of the creative and media agency landscape in South Africa. It is a biennial study conducted by Scopen Africa which is part of the Scopen Global group that is active in 12 countries. Our universe of analysis in 2019/2020 in South Africa consisted of 239 face-to-face interviews with the highest-level decision makers in marketing.

ABOUT JOHANNA MCDOWELL

MD of the Independent Agency Search and Selection Company (IAS), and partner in Scopen Africa, with a background that includes being on both the agency and the client side of the fence, Johanna McDowell is well-placed to offer commentary on marketing and advertising in the South African and international contexts. She built her career in marketing and advertising since 1974, holding directorship in both SA and British advertising agencies. She was MD of Grey Phillips Advertising in 1988.

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