

Digital Agency Showcase 2020: King James

By  Juanita Pienaar

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Recently Red & Yellow Creative School of Business held its 2020 Digital Agency Showcase online, free to attend because they believe education is the only way to drive meaningful transformation.



King James co-founder and group creative director, Alistair King.

Red & Yellow selected six of South Africa's top digital agencies to share their knowledge, insights, wisdom and experiences in 30-minute slots, followed by Q&A sessions to allow attendees to drill deeper.

2020's participating agencies included:

- King James
- Ogilvy
- TBWA Hunt Lascaris
- VMLY&R
- Make Reign
- HelloFCB+

I have selected one agency for each of the two days that stood out to me and for Day 2, King James co-founder and group creative director Alistair King was a big highlight. I split my coverage of his talk into two parts. In part one, King gives us some insight into what agencies are faced with during the Covid-19 pandemic and how it's affecting creativity. Part two will cover a comparison between Covid-19 and WWII, specifically how ad agencies dealt with the impact of the war.



Digital Agency Showcase 2020: MakeReign

Juanita Pienaar 29 Apr 2020



Contrarian view for business

King kicked off his presentation by stating this was the second time he's spoken at this event, but the first time in such a

manner. He said he remembered when Rob Stokes briefed him he said:

"Don't pitch your agency"

"Don't play us your showreel"

"Just tell us everything you know."

That was back in October 2019, and he said that no one could have anticipated we'd be sitting here now trying to invent a way of working while literally trying to keep ourselves and our clients alive as a business.

He said frankly he wasn't sure how to approach this talk, when everything that working for us may never work in the same way again. And when it's not in his nature to make predictions on what our agency will look like when this is over.

What he does know is this:

"We're all grappling with the same challenges. We're all working remotely and struggling with everything that goes with that. We're all facing personal challenges, financial challenges, emotional challenges, isolation challenges, work challenges, creative challenges and executional challenges."

He said it felt a bit weird to talk about the work they've done, work that's won them some awards and how they work because even as he was speaking, they were changing how they were working.

So, he decided to do things a bit differently and said he wanted to bring something to the table that might be useful for agencies in these crazy times we find ourselves in.

About three months ago, King said he posted a tweet that caught the attention of *Business Insider* and they then called him and asked him to elaborate on what he had said. King said that he suggested that in 22 years of business, King James hasn't really had a business plan. They tend to work in six-month increments and focus on 'the now'. They leave themselves open to evolve their company, and rather than add pressure to the business by setting themselves on a path they're committed to, they instead "roll with the circumstances". King said it was a very big response at the time because obviously it's a very contrarian view for business.

“ Someone asked me what our company's 5-year plan was. I replied that we've never really had a 5-year plan. But in our 22 years of business we have had 44 x 6-month plans which seem to have worked for us.— alistair king (@ALsparkles) [January 28, 2020](#) ”

He remembered saying things like, "Business is tricky and unpredictable. Lots of things happen outside of your control. You can't talk about being the agency of the future if you can't be the agency of now." He said this all happened in mid-January and here we are right now, with unforeseen circumstances. "We are all just making it up as we go along. We are all scrambling and grappling with how to make advertising."

On top of that, we are all dealing with the same challenges. We are all remote, struggling with everything that goes with that. We are all facing personal challenges, financial challenges, emotional challenges, isolation challenges, work challenges and creative challenges.

Extraordinary conundrum

Continuing, King said, "Some of our clients have products and services that are not considered essential items, so they're not available to be purchased. They're closed or simply not allowed to sell. Some clients are fighting to keep their clients from cancelling their policies. Some are actively investing, directly and indirectly, in the fight against Covid and they want their customers to know about it. Some just want to say their thoughts and prayers are with you. And of course, our job as marketing partners is to find a way to do that in an appropriate way, in a way that adds value to our clients rather than erode it. And that throws up a lot of debate as you've noticed."



#Loeries2019: Hall of Famer Alistair King on the industry's current seismic shift towards a more inclusive creative future

Leigh Andrews 24 Aug 2019



He mentioned that there's a lot of social media chatter about how brands communicate over these crises and whether in fact they should be communicating at all. King said:

“ Everyone appears to be an expert in everyone else's communication strategy. And I get that. Social media is where you get to mind everyone else's business. But it seems to me that the loudest voices opposing brands advertising over this period are people in advertising itself. And that confuses me a little. Our entire industry relies on us keeping busy, on us helping keep our clients' brands alive and healthy. We can talk about priorities, but most of our clients employ people who are also our priority. That's why we exist. That's what we do. ”

Creativity. An unexpected casualty of Covid-19

Other than keeping his company healthy and his people busy, King wanted to talk about the one thing that keeps him awake at night: creativity, and the fact that it is taking a battering over this period.

"Now I know a lot of people will already say, not true, Covid 19 is forcing us to be innovative and resourceful by finding solutions to challenging situations, and I wouldn't disagree with that. But creativity, as I think of it, is a very fragile thing. Not just in advertising but across all artistic expressions of it," he said.



Creativity. The answer to every question on TV

Damon Stapleton 15 Apr 2020



King said that it's so easy to smother and suppress creativity. "My view of advertising is hardly profound."

“ The best way to capture anyone's imagination is to show them something they didn't expect to see. Creativity is no more complicated than that to me. The very essence of creativity is originality. And originality comes from diverse ideas, diverse perspectives, diverse interpretations of the same thing. ”

He said that the things that usually grab his imagination and that hit him with real emotional weight and impact always come

from left field. They are always unexpected and way off-piste and they (King James) strive for that as an agency. It's often as simple as not doing what everyone else is doing. Yinging when they yang. Simple principles that are easy to talk about but quite hard to pull off. Because many clients simply feel uncomfortable when ideas don't feel like other ideas.



#DigitalAgencyShowcase: Lessons on idea-led ideas with King James Group

Leigh Andrews 21 May 2019



It's like playing Pin Ball

King asked us to think about life before Covid. Think about the absolute volume of ideas that you've got to enjoy and the way you want to enjoy them. If you think about film alone, there was in 2019, *The Joker*, *Parasite*, *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, *1917*, *The Irishman*. The only thing that these films have in common was that they were films, and every film is as different from each other as you can imagine. Every film has it's own creative curveball.

He said that it was the same with music in 2019. "One minute you were heading down *Old Town Road*, and the next you were *Dance Monkey*. That's the beauty of living in a world that's firing ideas at you constantly. It's like playing Pin Ball, you really don't know what's going to come at you next and it's that unpredictable randomness that thrills us and makes us feel alive."

However, King said that we were not getting that from advertising right now. Every piece of communication feels heavy and sentimental and he said that he, for one, felt that he was drowning in human empathy and not necessarily in a good way.

"I was wondering if we were the only ones being weighed down by the situation, which is obviously a serious one. So, I called a close friend of mine, who is a musician and who writes and performs his own music. I asked him how his songwriting is going and what he was writing about. His reply was interesting, and he said, 'This Covid-thing is really heavy,' and that it doesn't sit naturally with the themes that he generally writes about. So, he's just not finding the inspiration where he needs it right now, it's draining him creatively, and I know how that feels, personally," King said.



Innovation and creativity in the time of Covid-19: Alternative ways of thinking and doing

Shaune Jordaan 26 Mar 2020



"That's the thing about Covid. Unless you're talking about Covid, or singing about something that relates to Covid, you just look like you're tone-deaf. You look like you aren't aware of the state of the world and you look like you're insensitive to those experiencing it for long.

"You can't really put a song out about the beautiful woman who caught your eye or riding down Route 66 with the wind in your hair. People would say, 'Dude, you're just out of sync with the world. You need to write about separation and loneliness and fear and hope. You need to write about Covid things.'"

Creativity is paused

King told us that he saw a BBC insert about the next wave coming out of Hollywood as we speak, and apparently all of the films are about Covid. "Romance films – people in lockdown falling in love, people in lockdown falling out of love. Crime films all related to Covid. Murder during Covid. Heists during Covid. Horror films. People stuck in lifts with Covid patients. Hero films about the people at the front line. This is all coming out of Hollywood right now," he said.

"Covid is not just the biggest subject in the world today, it's the only subject, and our entire output, is relative to Covid. Everything we do is framed by Covid and you couldn't really put out a movie right now with gnomes falling in love with

goblins because the context wouldn't feel right.

"Even poor James Bond, the ultimate escapist film movie franchise, was halted because it had the word "die" in it. But be honest, who of you wouldn't give up your eye teeth right now to watch something escapist that's not about Covid."

King said he had to admit that obviously it's justified given the enormity of the challenge of what we're dealing with, but for now, creativity, as we know it, has paused and we now have to apply our creativity to this particular subject.



The role of creativity post-Covid-19

Rohan Reddy 20 Mar 2020



He talked about 'before Covid' and said that you'd sit with the brands you worked on— beer brands, chicken brands, insurance companies, banks, sports shoe brands, whatever you work on, and you would think, "What is so good about this product? What makes it useful and important to people's lives?" There were no limits to what we could do with those questions. Now we're wondering how this brand remains relevant when Covid is the only thing on people's minds.

King said that right now, they are starting to build Covid-related themes into their brand narratives because it feels insensitive not to. Although sometimes it feels insensitive to do so.

To be continued...

ABOUT JUANITA PIENAAR

Juanita is the editor of the marketing & media portal on the Bizcommunity website. She is also a contributing writer.

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