

How SoloUnion SA's plugging the senior-level agency brain drain

 By Leigh Andrews

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When former SA creative Matthew Bull started the SoloUnion talent collaborative in New York, he quickly realised this was just the model SA needed, so he recruited Rob McLennan and Gillian Rightford to lead this industry game-changer. Neither an agency nor a collection of freelancers in the strictest sense of the word, here's how their 'heads without the overheads' sharing economy creative solution works!



Rightford and McLennan, responsible for running SoloUnion SA.

Formerly, McLennan was creative founding partner of King James II, now King James Group JHB. Having been on the receiving end of over 30 Cannes Lions awards alone, he says creativity has exposed him to so many different experiences over the years. He elaborates:

“ We get to work on everything and anything, and interact with so many awesome creative people from diverse creative industries. We're very lucky. It's the ideal industry to be in if you're a little attention deficit. ”



#CannesLions2016: SA judges thank creativity

Leigh Andrews 13 Jun 2016



Following a similarly extensive and varied career in marketing, advertising and management, Rightford started the Adtherapy consultancy to help agencies and marketers make better creative products through better relationships, and effectively 'rid the world of bad advertising'.

Rightford remains involved in AdTherapy and, known as an industry thought leader, she's also a popular conference speaker and prolific on social media – so much so that she's been called, “a combination between an agony aunt and a freedom fighter.”

Asking the right questions means that you answer the right question

Gillian Rightford 29 Jan 2019





Now, McLennan and Rightford have come together as creative lead and business/strategy lead respectively for the SA version of Bull's SoloUnion. Here, McLennan and Rightford explain just how this new offering meets the needs of the local sharing economy...

■ ***Talk us through the context of launching SoloUnion SA. Is there a specific conversation with Matthew Bull you can pin point?***

Rightford: Matthew and I met for coffee on one of his trips to SA and he asked whether I would like to start SoloUnion in SA. I gave it some thought, as I am very happy with my Adtherapy offering, which is still going strong.



#BehindtheSelfie with... Gillian Rightford

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But the one bit I miss with all the work I do with the Adtherapy side – helping agencies and clients work better together, and the training that helps with that – is actually coming up with strategies and platforms to drive better work.

Not **doing** the work, just solving the clients' problems and creating creative platforms. I'm good at it and I miss it.

Simultaneously, Rob had spoken to Matthew as he was interested in starting it up in SA – it was a perfect solution. Rob is the lead for SoloUnion and I work alongside him to do the business and lead strategic thinking. Between us, we have an incredible network of talent and clients – and we've both seen first-hand how this offering answers a need in the industry.

McLennan: At this point in my life and my career, I was looking for a way to extricate myself from the parts of the ad industry that I don't really enjoy.

I feel most fulfilled and happy coming up with and making great creative ideas happen with a team of like-minded people. After chatting to Matthew, he suggested I start SoloUnion in South Arica as the model he created in New York does exactly that.

■ ***Fantastic. You've already worked on a few briefs, what's the process like? How does it differ from what you've done elsewhere?***

Rightford: The process is quick and seamless. We work with a senior client. We take a verbal and if there is one, a

written, brief. Because we work together directly, there is no traffic, no account management, the planning is effortless.



Caring for those client/agency relationships

Gillian Rightford 1 Dec 2009



The projects we have worked on already were for an in-house agency, an interim agency, and creative direction on a massive production with a regional agency and client. The model is flexible enough to plug into any of these. In all of these, we were able to turn around really good work, fast. We provided different levels of strategy, creative direction and proof of concepts with each job.

McLennan: So far, so good. It's similar to the approach I've always taken when doing pitches, and just as exciting – but without the pain. I choose the right creatives to work with on the brief, and Gillian chooses the right strategist.

“ We plunge ourselves into finding out as much as we can about the problem, the brand, the competitors, the environment. From that, we present a creative strategy and potential creative platforms. When we and the client are happy, we're heading in the right direction, so we move on to the big idea and how it can be executed. ”

When everyone is happy, we move on to the next project. Simple as that.

■ **We know it's early days yet, but any obstacles or highlights you can share with our readers?**

Rightford: The biggest challenge is how to cost it. It's certainly not on hours, because we're too fast! Having said that, of course the speed is relative to the scope of the job.

But it's a value question rather than an input cost calculation. We're experimenting and I think we're getting there.

The other obstacle, which isn't massive but could be a thing, is that the agencies might see us as competition. We're not an agency though. That's very important. The other area is that we have to explain why we're not just a collection of freelancers.



The great business/marketing/advertising disconnect

Gillian Rightford 3 Aug 2011



Whilst we all work independently, we aren't all freelancers in the strict sense of the word. I prefer something like a “collective of curated independent talent”. The benefit we bring is the strength of the people we can call on as the project requires – so the curatorship that we are able to offer is not something others can easily replicate.

Also, we won't always be calling in freelancers – we may call in partner companies that are right to solve the particular challenge at hand.

“ Freelance implies a ‘gun for hire’, while we are bringing more of a consulting expertise to build strategic creative platforms. Also, very important, we don't plan on charging out by the hour, as freelancers do, but by the value of the project. ”

McLennan: This model is quite different from traditional ways of working, particularly from a client/agency relationship

point of view. It needs explaining and understanding to see the benefits.

Also, that conversation needs to happen quite high up the decision-making chain. It also will live or die on the talent we have access to, and the trust we earn from clients, from the reputations and experience we have assimilated over the years, which is pretty extensive.

■ **Love that. You mentioned that you work on a project basis rather than longer-term retainers. What's the advantage to new clients?**

Rightford: You pay for what you use, when you use it. The line Matthew came up with is: "The heads without the overheads," and it's exactly that.



#BizTrends2016: Integrate, collaborate, flatten and rebuild

Gillian Rightford 22 Jan 2016



You're not paying for a building, or an accounts department, or coffee machines, or junior AEs. You brief us – we assemble a very senior and very experienced team, and we do the job. Then we leave and you or your agency/client/production house implement, and live happily ever after until you call us for the next brief.

McLennan: We have access to a very wide set of very talented and experienced people, both here and overseas, and that's something no other business model could afford in the long term. We will find the right talent for the particular problem or project.



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Gillian Rightford 24 Jan 2018



We don't need to pay for that expensive resource of talent to maintain the ongoing communications for the client once the idea has been established and entrenched, either. Many clients now have their own in-house social management teams and production facilities to run the idea, without input until the next project comes around.

■ **Sounds like a win-win. Speaking of wins, will SoloUnion SA follow the NY version's profit-share model?**

Rightford: We hope to do so. We are in the process of assembling a team – it's 90% there, but of course the team can be anyone who fits the bill of the people we need to deliver against a particular brief. So it's not static.

The plan is that we allocate a percentage to a profit share, which then gets paid out to members at the end of the year. It's a work in progress getting the structure right.

McLennan: The benefit for our members of SoloUnion is that they are part of a greater whole that is also self-feeding.

“ SoloUnion launches in South Africa. A poignant and proud moment for me. A blurb plus an interview with Maggs On Media. <https://t.co/cn4Yd2gaG0> — MatthewLC Bull (@StixBull) March 26, 2019 ”

SoloUnion offers the opportunity to work on big solutions and big ideas that are great to work on and that they have been chosen because they have a reputation for doing exactly that.

They also have access to a much bigger resource of strategists and creatives within SoloUnion to offer their own clients, as obviously not all of our members are busy all the time.

■ How does this tap into the current 'gig economy' and way of work as we approach 2020?

Rightford: It taps into the desire for experienced people to get out of the holding companies and do the work they love, with people at senior levels in business, and get paid well to do it.

McLennan: It's essential and necessary for our industry to look for new ways of working. It's changing so fast at the moment, and there are huge pressures and problems in the way it currently runs.



#BizTrends2018: It's not on top, it's inside

Gillian Rightford 2 Feb 2018



We must adapt and change the way we work, as our world's communication habits mutate.

“ We're not saying SoloUnion is the answer. It's just one of many different ways of making it easier to do what we love, and what we've been paid for most of our professional lives to do. And, most importantly, it should result in the best possible work for the clients. ”

■ **Excellent. Let's end with how SoloUnion intends to better to overall calibre of creative strategy in SA.**

Rightford and McLennan: There are lots of agencies doing that really well, but of course there is also a massive – largely unspoken and undocumented – brain drain taking place in agencies, at senior levels. We can help plug that very much needed gap.

Sounds like an excellent addition to the local landscape, coming at just the right time. Get in touch with [McLennan](#) and [Rightford](#) over email, or follow [Bull](#), [Rightford](#) and [McLennan](#) on Twitter for the latest updates.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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