

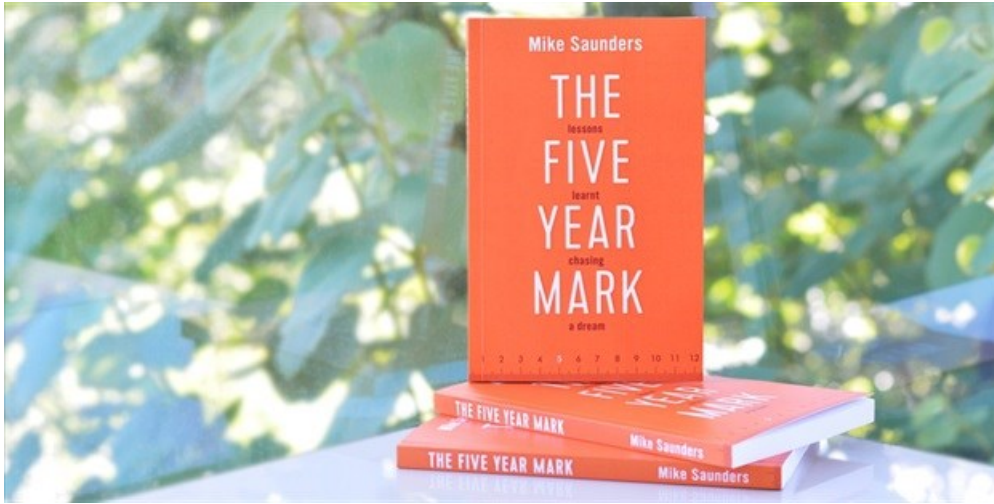
Be a change agent, help others grow their own businesses

 By Leigh Andrews

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Mike Saunders, founder of Durban-based digital agency DigitLab and entrepreneur of note, shares what it takes to launch a startup agency in particular and how retrenchment helped him hit the road to business success.

Last year, Saunders authored the book *The Five Year Mark* as a way of making sense of the ups and downs of starting and running his own business. In addition to serving as a way of figuring out that elusive work-life balance – ‘What’s that,’ business owners tend to ponder as they effortlessly flit between the different aspects of their lives – the book is an excellent platform through which Saunders reflected on what he’s learned in his journey of chasing the dream.



The Five Year Mark: Lessons learnt chasing a dream

To the bright-eyed among us who hope to emulate his success, Saunders shares practical advice to startups on the essence of entrepreneurial success, how he made it to the ‘five-year mark’ and how you can, too...

■ **Let's start with the basics – talk us through the importance of entrepreneurship, especially in SA.**

Entrepreneurship is one of the most valuable contributions an individual can make to South African society. The everyday challenges of entrepreneurship develop stronger, smarter and more dynamic people. It brings out the best of people and inspires leaders to make the most of their lives.

I believe that entrepreneurship is also one of the most powerful solutions to poverty, as it is a way for individuals to take ownership of their own destiny. It's about people reaching the point of complete discontent with the situation they find themselves in and, instead of waiting for someone to hand them the solution, finding it themselves. Entrepreneurship is

where real and lasting job creation lies.

“ *It is through entrepreneurship and the creation of enterprises that hire and upskill employees that we'll be able to grow the skill set of our population, increase the tax base of our country and, as a result, grow our economy.* ”

I also believe that I am not on this earth simply to start a business; I'm also here to help as many people as possible start and grow their own businesses. I have purposefully over-simplified the concept, but I believe it's true: entrepreneurship adds true value to people's lives, the economy and society.



Saunders in action.

Entrepreneurial thinking promotes a new lease on life, a positive outlook and an insatiable desire to make a difference. We need more people like this, we need more entrepreneurs.

■ ***That's for sure. Explain your own entrepreneurial journey thus far.***

It actually started with a retrenchment. I decided that I would work for myself until someone hired me. So, I started out working as a consultant helping people understand social media. My work ranged from running social media accounts to doing keynote presentations at conferences. After about a year I was approached by an international consulting firm to move my presentation work into their business. It was a great idea and became an incredible learning experience for me to fine-tune my presenting skills.

In the background, I continued to manage social media accounts for clients and started hiring people to help manage the workload. After a while, we realised that we had started a social media agency, and later that year we officially named and started DigitLab. That was six years ago.

Over the last six years, we have transformed DigitLab from a social media agency into a digital marketing agency and have had the privilege of working with the likes of KPMG, Beiersdorf, Hulets, Spar, Game stores, Corner Bakery and Bidvest, to name a few. It's been an incredible journey, one that we are all very proud of.

DigitLab opens Johannesburg branch

Digitlab 20 Apr 2014



Last year I decided to sit down and write down some of the things learned as we built DigitLab. There were so many lessons that I inadvertently ended up writing an entire book of 36 lessons! The book is called *The Five Year Mark* and has become a strong marker in my entrepreneurial journey to date.

■ **What does it take to launch a startup agency in particular?**

This is a loaded question! I don't think there is a magic formula. Each startup agency has used different methods to develop and grow, usually based on the specific skills and personality of their founder. Many agency leaders are great creatives and have built incredible creative agencies using those skills. I'm more of a strategist and motivator, so I built our business with a strong focus on strategy and culture. I hired great creative talent to build our creative competency but focused my energy on driving good strategy and helping people win.



Saunders on *The Five Year Mark*.

I can say this though, every entrepreneur that I have seen succeed carries a high degree of *grit*, the ability to stick to things and make the most of the opportunities before them. It's putting in the time, driving hard when it counts and putting in every ounce of energy possible to make their dream a reality. No matter your approach, the biggest winner is the hard worker who never gives up, considers all their options, hustles non-stop and makes the most of every single opportunity that comes their way.

Every business should have a long-term plan that guides their decisions today. To build a business that contributes to the economy in a meaningful way you need to sustain it past the five year mark. So a new startup business should not be looking to be a one hit wonder about to crash and burn at any minute. The founders and owners should be looking at ways to take their idea and create a sustainable business that continues to contribute to the economy and build lasting value.

That's how you make a real difference.

■ **For sure. Why is it so important to inspire/encourage other entrepreneurs then and to be a 'change agent'?**

I'll answer the second part of this question first! A change agent helps people and organisations move to the next necessary step. They help you see the future, can identify how to get there and are capable of helping you get there.

Personally, I enjoy change, I'm comfortable with it. I get bored when things aren't progressing, improving, moving and shaking. Most people, however, don't enjoy change. It scares them, makes them anxious and uncertain. Change by its nature pulls the rug out from under our feet and unsettles us. So, that's why we need change agents. We need them to guide us through the uncertain times, to give clarity where we can't see it and to remind us why we are changing in the first place. Change agents are leaders who specialise in helping people through uncertain and unstable times.

With this in mind, entrepreneurs themselves are change agents: They deal in the uncertain and unstable every day. They themselves need change agents to help them navigate their entrepreneurial life, to remind them it's possible, to keep their hearts strong as they face big adversity, and to share their own stories of success or failure.

“ It's lonely being an entrepreneur. The decisions we make are not always understood by others and the things that consume us seem strange to others. Alone, an entrepreneur can achieve a fair amount of greatness, but together with others, encouraging them along the way and inspiring them through their challenges, entrepreneurs can achieve so much more. More than you could imagine. ”

Inspirational stuff! Click through to [DigitLab's press office](#), as well as Saunders' [MyBiz profile](#), his [website](#) and [Twitter feed](#) more the latest updates and insights.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

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