Vuma Reputation creates Africa division to drive expansion

By Louise Marsland

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South Africa's Vuma Reputation Management announced last month that it was expanding into Africa with the signing of partnership agreements with four leading African communications agencies to bolster its footprint on the continent. It also created an Africa division and appointed Nonye Mpho Omotola to head it up as business director.

Nonye Mpho Omotola.

Omotola is a communications specialist with more than 15 years in strategic brand experience across the United Kingdom, South Africa and Nigeria. She has been a guest lecturer at Gordon's Institute of Business to full time MBA students on *Executing Marketing Strategies in Africa* and senior executives on *Doing Business in Nigeria*. Omotola has gained extensive experience within the global branding and advertising spheres having started her career in London at Maynard Leigh Associates; followed by TMP Worldwide. She has worked in a number of leading firms in Europe and in other parts of Africa, including: Jupiter Drawing Room, Johannesburg; FCB, Durban; and Insight Grey, Lagos where she was director of strategic planning and new business. She was also the group head of corporate communications at Oceanic Bank

Nigeria (now Eco bank).

The African PR agencies that Vuma has signed agreements with, are: BSD Group in Nairobi, Kenya; Zeleman in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Prosper Agbenyega in Accra, Ghana; and Design Innovation in Lusaka, Zambia.

Vuma grows reputation management business in Africa

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Why is the time right for Vuma to expand into Africa now?

To answer this question, it will be divided into three parts:

- The business is in its 12th year of operation, having been founded by Janine Hills, a renowned expert in reputation management. Over this period, we have built a phenomenal culture, a diverse staff base and an executive team that will take us into the next 12 years and beyond. This has resulted in us having a strong client portfolio, with robust relationships and a healthy balance sheet, ultimately attracting multi nationals, based in Europe and South Africa with operations on the rest of the continent.
- Given global trends and the dynamics in African markets, there is an imperative for strong reputation management for corporates and professionals alike. At Vuma our tag-line is, 'Africans Working for Africa'. This is something we are passionate about, given that we are a home bred African company, so expanding our presence in Africa was the next logical step.
- As Africans working for Africa, partnering with our clients in the markets they operate in is a journey. It has taken us two years to ensure we found the right affiliates who understand our work and share the same culture and business values. Most importantly, we are proud Africans who want to do great work representing what is great about our continent.

What is your strategy?

If you look at the economic outlook of Africa, across sectors there is a favourable outlook for 2017 and 2018, with an expected economic growth of just under 4.9% of GDP. East Africa is the fastest growing region at 5.3% growth, which means companies looking to take advantage of those numbers need to either maintain their strong reputation or build upon it - and that is where we come in. We keep in mind that the work we do here in South Africa will also be a representation for our affiliates in Africa.

How has reputation management grown across the African continent?

Reputation management has grown because of the easy accessibility of information today, largely due to the digital era and various trends including the big data revolution and the fact that data will have consequences for reputation management. Companies will need to either maintain a strong reputation or build upon it in line of what is expected of them in the market. This is where we are able to lead.

How do you expect reputation management to evolve in the near future?

The principle of reputation management won't ever evolve because it is about being authentic. However, the work being done will always evolve because this is now dictated by the digital era. Companies have to be authentic and agile in responding to queries, complaints and disgruntled stakeholders, managing their employees effectively and fairly. The surge in alternative facts (fake news) has meant that brands and companies need to control their share of voice and narrative more than ever before.

How did you choose your partners on the continent?

We went on a road show in the market where our affiliates operate to meet with potential companies. After taking them through our credentials we saw there were significant commonalities in terms of business principles, values and culture, leading to ongoing discussions and a final Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by both parties.

How do you hope to make an impact on the industry in Africa?

As South Africa's leading reputation management company, our aim is to replicate our work in Africa, enhancing brand reputation and defining a positive African narrative. We also wish to contribute to sustainable economies by ensuring local communities thrive. This is why it was important to partner with local country affiliates.

What is your business focus right now?

Our focus is to consolidate our partnerships with clients and affiliates, increasing growth and brand presence over the next three years, creating opportunities for our valued employees and our clients.

How does Vuma as a brand differentiate itself from competitors?

Vuma is a corporate reputation company and a partner to our clients. The professional work we do and the relationships we have built demonstrate this. Over the years we have achieved accolades and great client respect.

The biggest trends to note in your industry?

Easy accessibility to data and information via social media and online. The more data costs come down, the greater the accessibility, which will put increased pressure on companies to tighten up their own security and to understand that your employees are the most valuable ambassadors of your brand. Stakeholders have and will always be vital to the reputation of the business. Reputation will continue to play a bigger role in the value of your brand or company.

What is your main challenge?

Main challenge is finding the right skills at various levels, it could be writing, effective media relations, crisis management and work ethic.

Where do you draw your creative inspiration?

Creative inspiration is all around us. South Africa is a very diverse society. Working in Africa means that you always have to customise your approach and your attitude adapting to local nuances, people and culture. This is where curiosity and inspiration comes from. Even our team is diverse so we learn from each other every day.

How do you inspire others?

By enthusing passion for Africa and a desire for growth across sectors and communities as Africans working for Africa, our experiences, understanding and respect of cultures will ultimately enable us tell a greater more impactful African story.

Your life philosophy?

Be the change you want to see!

ABOUT LOUISE MARSLAND

Louise Burgers (previously Marsland) is Founder/Content Director: SOURCE Content Marketing Agency. Louise is a Writer, Publisher, Editor, Content Strategist, Content/Media Trainer. She has written about consumer trends, brands, branding, media, marketing and the advertising communications industry in SA and across Africa, for over 20 years, notably, as previous Africa Editor: Bizcommunity.com; Editor: Bizcommunity Media/Marketing SA; Editor-in-Chief: AdVantage magazine; Editor: Marketing Mx magazine; Editor: Progressive Retailing magazine; Editor: BusinessBrief magazine; Editor: FMCG Files newsletter. Web: www.sourceagency.co.za.

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