Professionalism with heart - the essence of TNS South Africa's new CEO

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TNS South Africa's newly appointed CEO, Rob Powell, brings a set of fresh new ideas, an eagerness to try new things and to innovate, and a real passion and energy into the business. Coupled with 15 years of experience in the market research industry, including stints as Executive Director of TNS Sydney and Global Account Director to SABMiller, it is clear that Powell's youthful freshness is backed by a solid foundation and real insight that can only add value to TNS's business offering.



Powell is ideally positioned to take up this new challenge, not only bringing with him a broad view of global markets - useful especially for the multi-country projects TNS undertakes - and an extensive network of connections, but also an inherent understanding of the South African landscape. He believes that being a South African at the head of a local company is certainly advantageous, especially considering the uniqueness of the country, which can make it difficult for foreigners to assimilate and develop a real understanding of its workings. Powell adds that given the relationship legacy around which TNS is built, it makes sense for him to continue to build on the relationships he has already developed, with people who already have a sense of who he is.

That is not to say that Powell is content to ride the wave of the hard work that has got him to this point. On the contrary, he comes equipped with ideas of change and growth. He explains that TNS is growing from a small family business to a substantial medium to large size corporate, with a significant reach into the rest of Africa. While it is important that the familial spirit is retained, it is equally important to develop professionalism and business sophistication - Powell terms this combination 'professionalism with heart'. In order to achieve this, he believes innovation is critical, commenting, "If we stay standing where we are we will become obsolete."

One of the ways in which Powell aims to approach innovation is to allow for specialisation within the business. He explains that while TNS's position as a smaller business called for its people to take on more tasks and build a broad portfolio, its growth now allows for a greater focus on honing the particular expertise of each person. Not only does this help to keep employees motivated, but it also offers the best to clients in terms of the level of service and expertise they can expect.

Of course, working towards this level of expertise does not make the company immune to challenges. Powell feels that the research industry as a whole is faced with the challenge to digitise data collection. In addition, he sees the need for a change in mindset from thinking about client interaction on a project-to-project basis, to having a more holistic view of clients' business and needs, and continuing the client narrative over time. Looking specifically at TNS, Powell comments that it is challenging in this sense to create a sense of 'professionalism with heart' that is meaningful to both TNS and its clients. He emphasises that the core of the business is to help clients make decisions, so the focus must be on developing client-centrality in every sense.

Stemming from this comes the need for TNS to continue to push the envelope in order to live up to client needs and expectations, as well remain at the top of the research game. Powell counts the push to digitise, to explore new avenues of data sourcing, and to find alternative ways of uncovering human truths as some of the ongoing work being done at TNS to ensure that these goals are achieved.

However, what truly sets TNS apart and ties Powell's thinking together is the foundation of the company's three pillars, which Powell explains are 'license to operate', 'license to compete' and 'license to win'. The license to operate speaks to the company's exceptional quality of data, which is critical not only because it forms the backbone of TNS's business, but

because it is the core of what is offered to clients. Following this is the license to compete, which involves investing heavily in the people working at TNS, in order to allow them to develop their expertise to become the best thinkers in their different spheres, as well as to be emotionally fulfilled in their working environment. Finally, the license to win is about having an impact. In the sense that TNS has built a relationship legacy up to this point, this means continuing to develop such relationships in a deep and meaningful way. The idea is for these relationships to foster open, trustworthy conversations in order to develop a real understanding of and make a real impact on client business and its growth.

There is no doubt that with Powell at the helm, and the equal measures of youth, experience, local understanding and passion for the market research industry that he brings to the table, TNS South Africa is set to move with and, in fact, lead the changes happening in the industry - which can only add much needed insight and value to clients, both new and existing.

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TNS advises clients on specific growth strategies around new market entry, innovation, brand switching and stakeholder management, based on long-established expertise and market-leading solutions. With a presence in over 80 countries, TNS has more conversations with the world's consumers than anyone else and understands individual human behaviours and attitudes across every cultural, economic and political region of the world.

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