

Claire Cobbledick on new role, marketing agenda at Gumtree SA



By Ilse van den Berg

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Appointed recently as Head of Marketing for Gumtree South Africa, Claire Cobbledick shares about the transition from her previous role as MD at the Jupiter Drawing Room Cape Town to her current position at what is described as South Africa's largest online classifieds site.

■ ***Tell me a bit about your background and how you ended up at Gumtree. Were you looking for a new career challenge?***

Claire Cobbledick: I was in an ad agency for ages and I have also been in marketing before - I was the brand manager for Red Bull a *long* time ago and then switched to an agency, did time in account management, some time in strategy, and then moved into a management role probably about five or six years ago.

I realised that I had come to a turning point in my life - a time to reflect and evaluate where I was going, what I was doing. In management you just do so much 'little bits' a 'little bit of this, a little bit of that'... Clients, staff, and strategy, you know... a lot of dabbling. I felt like I really wanted to get deep into something again and so I resigned without really having a new path to follow. I just decided to open myself up to see what would follow.



Claire Cobbledick

The Gumtree opportunity presented itself and it excited me particularly because it was going to offer me focus, strategic thinking, planning and marketing again rather than just advertising. As a virtual brand I found it very interesting to be able to work with a Silicon Valley company (it's owned by ebay), to learn about a business that is actually search driven - its whole business is oriented around search and that was a really exciting opportunity.

Also the brand itself... It's remarkable when you just dig a little bit under the surface. There are like 20 ads placed every minute on the site, it has between four and six million users - it's mega. There is a lot of activity, it's big, it's been around for a long time, but the brand doesn't feel as big as the site is. I think somehow the brand just doesn't carry the authority it deserves. There's some kind of legacy issues I think in general about classifieds as a category and what classifieds represent.

For me there was such an opportunity to really harness the power of the local community and build the brand based on what it's actually already doing. It's not like we need to build a brand from scratch, it's actually just representing the service that it's already offering, the community that's already using it.

■ ***How have you experienced the move from being an ad agency to your current role at Gumtree?***

Cobbledick: It's a big move. It's very different roles and I've found that it's been quite a different shift in focus and attention. Like I said, I wanted to get back in deep into something but I realised that my brain had been trained to multitask and operate in a fast turnaround, superficial level. So it's quite an effort to get myself *really* thinking deep, not getting distracted. The pace of things are also naturally a bit slower, working in a corporate and working with different time zones, you know, we are nine hours apart from the rest of the team. It's just finding a new rhythm. I must say I love not managing people for a change so I can just get stuck into thinking about the brand and thinking of plans and testing stuff.

It's also been a shift in discipline because I was so focused on communications and advertising and since I was in marketing before - maybe it was more than ten years ago - how the marketing landscape has changed. I am learning a lot

about different sorts of tactics and methods that we are trying and experimenting with - that has been enlightening. What I'm also quite enjoying is that the results are all in the traffic, monitored all the time and it's wonderful to be able to test things and see whether they are working or not. It's amazing to watch how we can actually influence behaviour. It's quite a welcome change from what I was doing in advertising which was a lot of positioning communications.

■ ***How would you say the online classifieds sector in South Africa compare to other markets?***

Cobbledick: That's quite an interesting one... I think online classifieds as a category in South Africa needs a face-lift, or a repositioning. In a lot of the mature markets like Canada and Europe, online classifieds has a very feel-good, sexy, aspirational-lifestyle feeling because it's about passing stuff on, sharing and not having to get new stuff - so there is a thriftiness but in a fashionable and trendy way, whereas in South Africa it's still a little bit associated with print classifieds and even pawn shops. There is that kind of stigma and perception around online classifieds.

The other thing I find interesting is, because online classifieds is not e-commerce, it's an area of the internet that's not often investigated or researched. So if you look at our numbers compared to e-commerce numbers, they're significantly higher and I think that it's a real indication of market needs and potential for trading online that isn't necessarily transacting with a platform. It's often almost forgotten when it's already so substantial and big, continuously growing and larger than most e-commerce platforms. People also think it's straight to buy and sell (second hand TVs, sports equipment etc.) - which is the heart of a classifieds site - but it goes so much broader if you think about things like lift share in South Africa, or small business listings... to list an ad on Gumtree is free and the site is so well optimised that you generally get huge Google benefits by listing your ad on Gumtree and you don't have to pay for it, so instead of buying Google AdWords you can actually just list yourself on Gumtree. We are seeing lots of small businesses using it as a marketing platform for their services... the massive jobs section where lots of domestic workers, labourers, security guards - very entry level people - use the site for jobs... so it fills a much broader need.

I think classifieds is often neglected in terms of an analysis and also because of the size of the communities on the site, and the way that the site's set up (that it's free, it doesn't require registration) it facilitates a whole lot of other engagements, promoting small businesses, finding lifts, carpools etc.

■ ***Anything exciting on Gumtree's marketing agenda that you can share at this stage?***

Cobbledick: Well, I can't give too much details on it, but there's a big celebrity, PR activation concept that we are working on. But what has been very interesting is that we are shifting a lot of our focus to content marketing and engagement marketing. We've got over 800,000 fans on Facebook, we've got 1,2 million registered users on our email database, so we're really focussing on harnessing the strength of an existing community - getting them to pass us on and to endorse the brand.

One big piece is that we want people to share their success stories which are very powerful, especially when you overcome barriers of people being concerned about safety and security issues. When you hear from someone that you know that they have had a successful transaction on Gumtree, it is a very positive motivator. So we are doing a whole piece around using our database, our fans and our community.

The second piece is content marketing and native advertising because, the thing with horizontal classifieds is - and it's good and bad - we cross into so many different categories... from electronics to baby goods... it's a very broad target market and a very broad cross-section of products that we are marketing on behalf of other people, and so we think there's lots of content that you actually need to get into communities and share specifics, rather than just broad reach above-the-line advertising which is what we've been doing predominantly.

It's actually also a competitive advantage that we've got such a strong existing community, that we've got such a good stock of ads, that we've got so many buyers, so it can become a virtuous circle if you can get them to promote you on your behalf. On a recent News24 poll it was evident that a significant amount of people are just too fearful to engage with online classifieds. With 20 ads being posted every minute, that's a lot of people using it successfully and so we need to make sure that they're incentivised and encouraged to actually talk about their success more. So there are all sorts of fun activities that we can do around that.

■ **How does the online classifieds competitive landscape look in South Africa?**

Cobbledick: In some ways the competitor to classifieds is actually new goods because people don't think to look at something second hand, they just default to going to the shopping mall and buying a new one. And that's the positioning job around classifieds - that at a very macro level pushing classifieds forward and saying "why not consider classifieds"? There are obviously some issues around credit as you can't usually buy something second hand on credit, so there are some barriers, but we really see ourselves needing to push consideration of classifieds - even if it's just comparative.

At the next horizontal level our biggest competitors are OLX and JunkMail (which has moved from a print classifieds into the online classifieds arena as well).

OLX is very aggressive currently with marketing spend and brand awareness - it is really pushing itself forward. We do feel that we are still substantially ahead in terms of traffic, and most importantly for us is actually ad listings. We delete all our ads after 30 days, our competitors don't follow exactly the same pattern with deleting their ads and we always feel inventory is a good reflection of how utilised the site really is because the sellers are the people who use the site for their bread and butter, use it to find work, to sell their stuff, it's a very good indicator. We're significantly ahead... We also do manual counts to track new ads being published.

From a vertical space, within many of the categories that we play in, there are big competitors. For example, within the cars category, which is our biggest category, Autotrader is a big competitor even though it doesn't have the same volume of listings, and we have higher volumes of traffic because we're a horizontal classifieds - it's less specialised and that often is a barrier at the top end for example. But we find that, from an advertiser's point of view, Gumtree is almost the default and then Autotrader is the leading specialist. And then people also think they'll find more individual sellers on Gumtree and maybe a better deal.

In the property category there's Property24 that we compete with. Property for us is actually an area of real strength - other than general listings where I think we have more ads listed. Rentals is an area that we are very strong in. I think it overlaps a lot with our other business like jobs and getting into a first home, looking for a job, needing to get a fridge.

■ **In closing, any other points you want to touch on?**

Cobbledick: The very exciting thing for me is seeing how California and San Jose have recognised the strength of Gumtree in the South African marketplace. We've got a big team supporting us in San Jose and we're building a stronger local team and I really think there's going to be a lot of new good stuff happening. Also, we see mobile as a massive opportunity. We've got a great app that we're looking at extending and making more broadly available. Another thing would be interesting ways of partnering with different companies, business collaborations, joint marketing exercises and then also broadening our inventory of stock, so looking at bringing in partners to bring in different kinds of ads and stock onto our site.

I mean, there are so many potential opportunities... One of the big barriers to *selling* in particular is that people often just give stuff away, which is obviously a good thing, but we think that we can use the site to help people give away more effectively. So in essence, matching NGOs needing stuff and people giving stuff away - instead of people giving stuff away at their doorstep. It's not a bad thing but maybe people could give it to an NGO that would use the stuff more efficiently. We've been speaking to a few NGOs and we are very excited about that kind of opportunity and type of partnership.

So at the moment it's really prioritising. There are so many possible options, it's now about focussing and selecting the most important ones.

ABOUT ILSE VAN DEN BERG

Ilse is a freelance journalist and editor with a passion for people & their stories (check out [Passing Stories](#)). She is also the editor of [Go & Travel](#), a platform connecting all the stakeholders in the travel & tourism industry. You can check out her work [here](#) and [here](#). Contact Ilse through her website [here](#).

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