

Stir merges with HaveYouHeard

 By Evan-Lee Courie

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Stir, a full service digital offering that was started on the back of the R1,000 Challenge on 702 and CapeTalk in 2012 has merged with HaveYouHeard, a communications agency immersed in culture.



Kirsty Bisset

Kirsty Bisset, founder of Stir, chats to us exclusively about the merger.

■ Firstly, tell us about Stir, a digital marketing agency you founded in 2012.

Entrepreneurs are born out of necessity or passion. In my case, it was both. I saw digital marketing as an exciting development and one of the most viable opportunities for small and large businesses alike. I had built up a strong personal brand for myself online and figured that if I could do it for myself, I could do it for brands, too. I had just resigned as a business analyst at a business incubator and started reaching out to agencies in Johannesburg for a position. Nobody would hire me. With two degrees, I couldn't find work. I went on and turned down two offers from a bank and a mining company, because all I wanted to do was marketing – I'm still deciding if that was stupid or savvy.

No one would back me so I backed myself. I went on to participate in the R1,000 Challenge on 702 and CapeTalk and with the help of my former boss, Pavlo Phitidis, we took R1,000 and turned it into R67,000 in six weeks, which was donated to the Starfish Foundation. Pavlo sold the business to me for R1 during a live show and that's effectively how STIR was born. Since then, we have serviced clients in SA, USA, and the UAE across multiple industries

■ Since then, you've launched several other entities. Could you share more?

I can't tell if I love or hate myself for starting multiple businesses ;) My second business was called Braai Free – we sold meat hampers and other food stuffs online. The success and astronomical rise in revenue was a joy to be a part of, but

unfortunately with working on such small margins and difficulties with suppliers, we were unable to sustain the growth, and we had to decide to walk away from it. It took me a long time to be able to talk about the learning from this publicly, but it has served me well to have a failure under my belt.

Dream Republic sold mattresses online. I sold my shares back to my partners.

Steam Punk'd was an online collection of home décor and accessories. I also sold my shares back to my partner as I wanted to consolidate work and be able to focus more on Stir.

I am still involved in multiple tech businesses including a crowd equity investment platform called AZUZA, a platform to build fintech products called Fraxeum, and a platform matching customers and service providers called SIRVIS.

■ ***Now, in 2021, after nine years as an entrepreneur, what's the big news that you want to share with the industry?***

I'm elated to announce that Stir has merged with HaveYouHeard – a world-class insights- and culture-driven agency with offices in Cape Town, Johannesburg, and London. They work with brands across the world and the opportunity for us to bring our experience and vision together is truly exciting.

■ ***How did this come about?***

I believe every entrepreneur's purpose should be to sell – be that in the form of a merger, acquisition, straight sale, or succession. So this was always in the back of my mind, and everything I did – every system I built - was put in place for the purpose to sell. I didn't think it would happen now, but lockdown provided me the opportunity to put a microscope on STIR's future and questions began to flood my mind. What was I going to do about the hockey-stick growth approaching in 2021? Did I want to do it alone for another nine years? How could I have a bigger impact on my industry?

A merger or acquisition was the obvious answer, so I looked at my business through the lens of an investor or buyer and started to consider my options.

■ ***I'm sure this is quite a nerve-wracking process. What sort of challenges did you encounter? How do you find common ground?***

I had gone through the conversation and process with agencies prior to HaveYouHeard. And while I don't have a negative word to speak about those agencies, my gut has never failed me in 33 years and something nagged me to keep looking, which is when I decided to approach HaveYouHeard. From the very first Zoom call, we had heart eyes and knew we were right for each other.

HaveYouHeard doesn't have a traditional agency outlook – every piece of work is driven by insights, culture, creativity, and research, which translates into bottom-line results for our clients. The founders, Jason Stewart and Ryan McFadyen, are so open and collaborative – a culture that permeates through the company.

Barring one short meeting in Cape Town in December 2020, this entire deal was done virtually. As Jason says, we had a short Summer romance before getting married.

■ ***Mergers often take place to diversify business operations by entering into new markets or offering new products or services. Can you share what the merge between Stir and HaveYouHeard will offer?***

I believe that most importantly, it extends HaveYouHeard's presence to Durban. The growth in KZN can't be ignored, and we are looking so forward to providing clients here with a unique offering that directly benefits their bottom line. My network will also bring in business from the UAE, which continues to drive my efforts to position South Africa as a formidable communications player globally.

In two weeks, we have already brought on 2 new clients, both with international footprints. We are also working on a few products, but one step at a time...

■ ***What has the overall journey been like for you?***

It's honestly been one of the easiest, most fun journeys I've ever been on. There have been multiple occasions where we've looked at each other and said, "This is so simple." Despite obvious financial and systematic viability, there was an instant culture fit. It wasn't just that we could benefit from one another but most importantly, we actually liked each other. I'm the kind of person who will think of the worst case scenario first in order to be prepared and even that scenario couldn't put me off moving forward.

Often, the first question from people I've told has been "But, Kirsty... You're giving up your baby." I've taken the emotion out of my businesses and see it more as my baby graduating to go on to do bigger, better things. I'm beaming with pride.

■ ***What will your role be?***

I always knew that I didn't want to hand Stir over and run, so I am coming onboard as the managing director of HaveYouHeard Durban with a seat on the group board. I will be responsible for acquiring and managing new business both locally and internationally.

■ ***As an entrepreneur yourself, what advice would you give to others when building to exit successfully?***

My advice to entrepreneurs is boring and what they don't want to hear. Build airtight processes and systems and constantly think about how your business would run if you stepped out of it tomorrow. It took me years to take the emotion out of my businesses and look at them objectively and from the eye of a potential investor or buyer. Also, never lose your sense of humour. You have to be able to take what you do seriously, but never take yourself seriously.

■ ***Lastly, is there anything else you would like to share with the industry?***

As a business, brand, entrepreneur or creator if you're not obsessed with culture – understanding it, commenting on it, being a part of it and ultimately creating it – you're going to get left behind. It's the reason everything HaveYouHeard does is driven by insight - the why behind what people want – which is uncovered by our own internal insights department through a combination of deep research, data analysis, and observation of the global cultural Zeitgeist every day.

ABOUT EVAN-LEE COURIE

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