

Issy Zimmerman joins Design Partnership

Issy Zimmerman, a successful merchant with excellent business acumen, has joined Design Partnership to head up its newly formed procurement division. His decades at the forefront of South Africa's retail sector with the Reggies and Toys R Us group, will be an asset to the agency.

The company has launched its new central aggregated procurement division that effectively provides its clients with direct access to sourcing and procurement possibilities from mainland China.

"By cutting out the middle man, we're helping our clients reduce their procurement costs and are able to pass all savings & added value straight onto them. Zimmerman is the ideal person to manage the division, as his 10 years' experience and success in the field as a direct importer from China, adds the much needed impetus and inertia required here," explains Callie van der Merwe, CEO of Design Partnership.

But it's not only Zimmerman's procurement expertise that clients now have access to; they're also able to tap into his extensive on-the-ground, operational retail experience for expert advice on matters surrounding leasing, strategy and general retail smarts.

"Providing our clients with prudent and targeted advice regarding issues such as leasing, landlord negotiation tactics and leveraging specification documents to extract maximum value, offers a number of benefits to clients. These include improved turnaround times (and as a result, earlier break-even points for stores) and the ring fencing of clients for the benefit of both the agency and retailers."

Sound sales credentials

Zimmerman was half of the dynamic duo behind the overwhelming success of the Toys R Us and Reggies brands in South Africa that saw turnover grow more than six-fold in a space of only 10 years, to in excess of R1 billion per annum.

At the time, Zimmerman had no hands-on operational experience in speciality retail, but he was an excellent salesman, having cultivated his craft selling short-term insurance years earlier.

Originally from Pretoria but schooled in Durban and Cape Town, Zimmerman holds a B.Com in Mathematical Economics & Marketing from the University of Natal; a B.Com Honours in Econometrics and Transport Economics from the University of Cape Town and a Bachelor of Social Science in Philosophy and Economic History.

"I received a call from my father saying that he was considering investing in a cluster of six Toys R Us stores and a few of the largely non-profitable Reggies stores. I took a chance and in 2002 headed back to South Africa to do an evaluation and do diligence on the local toy and baby business. Later that year I acquired a 50% stake in the stores' holding company, Redwoods, where I was appointed director and headed up marketing, store roll-out and real estate leasing and development," says Zimmerman.

"Like many of my Jewish brethren I am a born 'smous' - I am always selling something. I have a real love for retailing and time so far at Design Partnership has rekindled that passion. It has also awoken in me a latent appreciation for the creative process and making businesses function better through intelligent design and improved retail layouts. For eight years I was a client of Design Partnership, which favourably positions me to also see the picture from a client's perspective."

His new post supports his longstanding approach to retail, which revolves around meeting consumer need. "My mantra has always been to take the path of least resistance when it comes to satisfying customer demand. Consumers are the 'dog'; retailers are the 'tail'. Many retailers make the mistake of trying to wag the dog when it is in fact much easier - and more profitable - to respond creatively, competitively and quickly to customer demand. Incremental increases to top line revenue can help cure many lower level ills."

Eye on Africa

Zimmerman's role at Design Partnership is still evolving. Aside from assisting the agency's retail clients with sourcing finish materials and providing input on leasing and negotiation tactics, he is also playing an active role in new business acquisition and client pitches - two functions critical to the company's imminent expansion into the rest of Africa.

"The company is on the brink of expanding into Africa alongside several of our key, national retail clients. Since the start of 2014, we have visited and are actively engaging in projects in Lagos, Ghana, Namibia, Botswana, Zambia and Dubai.

"We have plans for a two-pronged attack on these markets that involves firstly deploying resources on the ground and accessing local skills through partnerships and joint ventures, and secondly delivering a 'store in a box' modular shop fitting service to our clients that are expanding into these areas. Both approaches will be done on merit with a singular view to cut clients' costs and fast track store builds. Through prudent acquisitions we aim to provide our current and prospective clients and businesses in South Africa with a unique end-to-end solution," Zimmerman concludes.

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