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Why I'll never go big: what 10 years of running DUO has taught me about work and life

By Judith Middleton, issued by DUO Marketing + Communications

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A decade ago I decided to open a small niche PR agency focused on Cape Town's then-burgeoning technology sector. This year DUO turns 10. Reaching the milestone has given me pause for thought: to take stock of the journey so far, to remember the choices I've had to make along the way, and reflect on how these choices are likely to guide the further evolution of DUO over the coming years.

The beginning

After returning from the UK in the late nineties, I started working for the Cape IT Initiative (CITI), a section 21 initiative aimed at developing a thriving IT industry in Cape Town. There was huge tempo in the tech industry, both locally and internationally and the energy was intoxicating. Working closely with the tech startups being incubated in the Bandwidth Barn, one of CITI's projects, helped foster a real and lasting love of technology. However, despite the great ideas being developed by passionate entrepreneurs, there was a missing element.

Local tech entrepreneurs didn't always know how to take their products to market in way that their prospective customers could understand. Globally, tech entrepreneurs had started to catch on to the fact that marketing can influence product development and needs to be part of director-level influence.

Some entrepreneurs were just lucky; others failed despite having world class tech products. Certain unconscionable ad agencies preyed on these entrepreneurs' fears, telling them they would never succeed unless they spent millions on advertising campaigns that they couldn't afford.

At a time when Google's Gmail was just a thought and the iPhone hadn't even been imagined yet, I decided to open DUO's doors to meet this niche need: to become a safe place for local tech brands to discuss, develop and implement commercially driven marketing and PR campaigns that would help grow their brands. Our goal was to become a one-stop shop for growing and evolving tech brands. The first staff member was hired in March 2004 and we moved into our offices in Newlands, where we still remain today.

Lessons today

Sitting in that same office today and looking back at the last ten years, I see the biggest lessons I've learned during my time running DUO:

1. **It shouldn't be easy** - that's a one-way trip to boredom. DUO has evolved continuously over the past ten years, from adding new digital services to changing reporting methodologies to adding design elements to PR campaigns and holding back on adding social media services until the hype had died down, we've had to adapt quickly in order to stay sharp. Running a PR agency shouldn't be an endless series of life-or-death drama, but it also shouldn't be easy. Happiness is in the balance and culling bad wood is imperative, never easy.

2. **Don't believe the hype** - at least not without questioning it. 'Africa' is currently a buzz word of all local companies (and many global ones) but realistically most of our clients won't invest in PR into Africa at least for the next few years. Our expansion into Johannesburg took ten years, and it's served us well to wait until we were mature enough as a business to make the most of the opportunities presented by the Gauteng market.

3. **Trust your intuition** - looking back this has been my one major mistake. Since I turned 40 I have become much more

comfortable trusting my intuition when making decisions. I used to think it was a flaky way of making decisions, but I've learned that I have good instincts and the biggest favour I can do myself (and the company) is to trust those instincts. Lack of integrity for example, often shows up very early in a process and I now know that I can, without question expect that behavior to remain - before I would excuse it again and again in the hope that it would change. It doesn't.

4. **Learn from your clients** - I have been blessed with some truly amazing clients who have taught me about life, business and how to strike a healthy balance between the two. Sometimes even just listening to a client during an interview has provided me with some much-needed inspiration, helping me take brave decisions and looking more incisively at certain aspects of my business. Having clients in other parts of the world also gives me an international perspective that has often proved valuable when deciding when to adopt new service offerings.

5. **The value of integrity** - DUO was built from the start to be a values-based company and we strive to be honest and fair in all our dealings with clients, staff, suppliers and media. There is still such a perception of expensive fluff in the marketing & PR industry that being true to your word is sadly still a distinguishing factor for us. We hire staff with high EQ, which has the benefit of helping attract smart people that are not hampered by ego. And our clients truly benefit from this - the results normally speak for themselves. Being accountable for a brand is a big responsibility but one that never goes unappreciated by our client base

Reaching ten years has put us in a new category, and the level of staff approaching us for employment is really inspiring. We've been able to develop and solidify our values and vision, which has allowed us to attract clients who share the same values as us. Through this we've also earned our seat at the boardroom table and this for us is where the real work fulfilment lies.

The future

Looking ahead at the next ten years, I definitely see us opening up satellite offices in Kenya and Nigeria, with a possible presence in Singapore. The level of tech innovation happening in these emerging markets is truly inspiring. Europe and the US are not on our radar as we'd rather go to an emerging market environment where technology has life-changing potential.

In terms of staff: the number one skill of the PR pro that I will look to hire in ten years' time is commercial writing. It sounds elementary, but with the convergence of so many marketing disciplines it's become increasingly important to be able to articulate specific messages across diverse traditional and new media platforms. Being able to reach a depth of understanding of a certain client's industry and the factors influencing it, and then to develop short, sharp, memorable messages that can be communicated to the key influencers is a skill that will set great PR people apart from the good ones.

Whatever the next ten years hold, it remains a privilege to be part of South Africa's world class tech industry, and I look forward to my next chapter of lessons and opportunities.

ABOUT JUDITH MIDDLETON

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