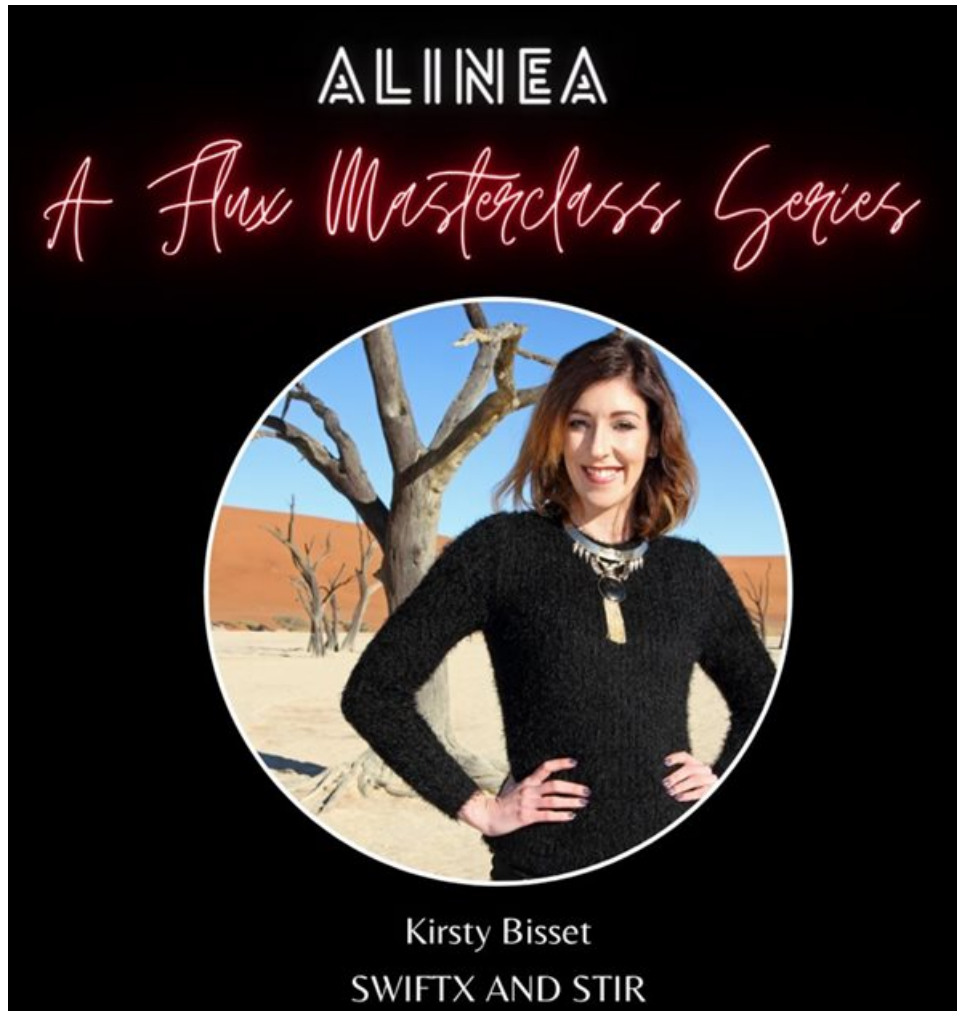


Navigating marketing solutions for SMEs post lockdown

As part of their ongoing efforts to help South African SMEs navigate the post-pandemic "Great Staggering" back into the new post-normal, post-lockdown world, Dion Chang, founder of Flux Trends, interviewed Kirsty Bisset, founder and CEO of STIR and SwiftX at the Alinea Marketing Master Class to find out how cash-strapped businesses can get a greater ROI on their marketing spend.



Kirsty Bisset, a highly successful serial tech entrepreneur and public speaker, has already launched five businesses and been honoured by numerous leadership awards. Most notably, in 2012, she started her digital marketing agency, STIR, off the back of a Radio 702 "Start a business with R1,000 challenge".

Within the first month she had turned that R1,000 into R54,000 in turnover. Since then, STIR has grown into a formidable international digital marketing agency, making her the perfect person to share her insights on how South African businesses can take a leap of faith into an uncertain future.

■ **How can small businesses connect with customers other than through social media?**

So, this is going to sound painfully obvious, but the first step is to have the best service or product you're capable of providing. I'm a digital marketer, but word of mouth is still the most powerful form of marketing in the world.

“ Focus on the service and the quality of your product and deliver a great service and your business will grow. That

really is the number one the number one thing you can do. You can turn that reputation into referral marketing. ”

The biggest challenge with SMEs and small business is budget; every cent has to stretch as far as possible and deliver returns. And for many SMEs, there isn't any budget. So we have to look at free options, or at least the most affordable options. PR is one of these options.

This is why I advise reaching out to community and local broadcasters and publishers, serving local markets. It's really important to engage with these community broadcasters as allies, and form key relationships with them.

“ Try to build relationships that are not purely digital. You want to put a face to your business. ”

Now, most entrepreneurs have a story, so don't be afraid to share their story. Broadcasters and publishers are always actively looking for good stories and human-interest content, so don't be afraid to share your personal entrepreneurial journey with the media.

As entrepreneurs, we notoriously sufferer from imposter syndrome. But we have to get comfortable being uncomfortable and sharing our journey in order to sell our products and services.

■ ***What about non social-media online channels? What are the options SMEs should be exploring?***

There are so many platforms out there for SMEs to showcase their businesses. So look where you can list your business that makes you more discoverable to your customers. Look to platforms like Upwork and Fiverr and Freelancer.com. There are always more of these platforms becoming available across every category and sector. Keep an eye out for every opportunity to showcase your business.

If you're looking for a local platform alternative, I may as well mention a side project that we've just launched Sirvis, which connects service providers in over 140 categories to interested customers.

■ ***Obviously, everybody's cash flow is restrained at the moment, but for those businesses fortunate enough to have budget for marketing. Are there any broad tips you can offer, in terms of where to focus spend at the moment to maximise ROI?***

Eight years ago, when I started STIR, and there was no real competition online. Online marketing was so cheap. Now, while the cost is certainly more, it's still the most affordable way to reach your market. It's not cheap. Don't be fooled, but it's definitely the most affordable.

Furthermore, one of the powers of digital marketing is the richness of the data that the platform's own regarding their users. From a marketing perspective, this is very powerful.

“ The granularity targeting offers us across a myriad of demographics, locations and interests, gives SMEs more power and control over their messaging and the results of those messages than ever before. ”

To answer your question though, on how to get the most ROI, you really need to go back to your marketing strategy. Ask yourself: Who are your customers? How old are they? Where do they live? What do they love? What problems can I solve for them?

Once you know these answers, then make your way onto Google Ads or Facebook Ad Manager and plug those answers into a campaign and content strategy. Commit some budget and then monitor it closely. You want to stretch your budgets as far as possible. Pay attention to your campaigns that are achieving your objectives - be it reach or sales conversions.

Digital marketing provides the most targeted advertising options at a price that you can determine. Eventually, after a bit of research and testing, you can say, okay, cool, a customer or a lead is worth X to me, and costs me Y, so I'm going to go ahead and spend the money as long as X is greater than Y.

Another really simple way to maximise your ROI is to climb into bed with Google.

“ Your website is your shop, your landing page is your reception area - make the investment in making sure it's looking beautiful and being functional. Then register your company on Google Business. ”

Make sure you have taken the time to complete all the behind the scenes best practice required to make sure Google embraces you. Then you can start making your way up the search ranks with further digital marketing efforts. I would also say that it is a good idea is to get your product or service into the hands of influential people. (I specifically didn't use the word “influencers” here. People who are influential aren't necessarily influencers!). Get these influential individuals tasting your offer, get them giving you feedback, get them to post testimonials and reviews on your website.

You'll sometimes be surprised how what you think of your business differs from what your consumers. There's no more powerful combination of marketing than word of mouth and online advertising. It's digital word of mouth, which is exponential.

Lastly, I want to make mention of e-mail marketing; people really are set in two camps with e-mail marketing. It really is the primary reason why one of my e-commerce businesses, a brand-new brand in a brand-new industry, hit almost a million Rand turnover within six months. E-mail meets people where they are, and, if you offer value, your e-mail marketing will be super successful. And it's really affordable as well. I mean, Mailchimp, up to 2000 subscribers, is free. So, email is a really a good tool, very affordable, and very direct.

■ ***You've just launched a new business, and you're a serial entrepreneur. So, do you eat your own cooking? Is there a marketing template you follow for your own businesses?***

You know, I think from the marketing side, the best advice is to focus on your business of which marketing is a component of that business, but it shouldn't detract from it. So, I always start out by setting aside some time to create a marketing strategy. And it doesn't have to be this massive 90-page document. If you can afford it, enlist a specialist, it's really something that will benefit you and spill over into other functions of the business if you get it right at the start.

“ *You always start by defining your market. Who are they? What do they need? How does your product or service benefit them? You want to either solve a problem, or speak to a passion.* ”

In terms of first-hand marketing, my advice would be for businesses to pinpoint what they are really brilliant at or what their customers think they're brilliant at, and then position yourself as an authority.

“ *Become obsessive about your industry and the problem you're solving and get loud about it. Tell people. You can do this through posts, through blogs, through LinkedIn articles through Instagram Live broadcasts.* ”

For my agencies, those channels have been social media platforms, e-mail, and ironically actual in person events and expos when they were allowed. For the e-commerce stores I've learned the channels have been Facebook, Google, Instagram, and in some cases, live markets and expos.

Another personal marketing lesson I've learned is to remain authentic and true to my business values. Digital is such a broad space, it's really easy to get greedy, and try and be everything to everyone. But we took a step back and say hang on, we're exceptionally good at websites, digital strategy, e-commerce, paid media, we're not going to hang onto every piece of the pie, we are rather going to take our expertise and focus it on what we're really good at for our target market.

This interview was part of the Flux Trends Alinea Mini Masterclass Series dedicated to helping South African entrepreneurs and SMEs use trends as business insights to get back to work after the manifold challenges of 2020.

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