

# How Kilmer & Cruise got started over a weekend

 By Leigh Andrews

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While they may not be Val Kilmer and Tom Cruise in real life, Kilmer & Cruise agency's co-founders have the larger-than-life personalities you'd expect from movie stars and successful entrepreneurs alike. Here, co-founder and MD Danny de Nobrega tells us more about the agency that really is named after *Top Gun*'s two main actors.

It's quite the agency origin story to hear unfold, as De Nobrega says they've been on this crazy ride since mid-2015 with the oft-tossed around joke being that the agency was put together in a weekend. "Which, you know, it was in a way. A weekend a year in the making. It grew out of my frustration with large agency processes, their sluggishness and how 'digital' was – and still is – treated as a completely separate entity in the marketing mix."



Kilmer & Cruise co-founders, photobombed by Bob, the office bokkie.

That's all it took for De Nobrega to decide it was time to open shop, and on one fateful Thursday evening he messaged co-founder Francois Wessels and asked him if he wanted to open an agency together. He got an instant 'yes', and on the Sunday after that they met up to put the plan together. They had worked together before on filmmaking projects and even brewed beer together, so knew each other's strengths, style and approach.

"Yes, we wanted a classic name that both harkened back and paid tribute to the legendary agencies of old, but with our unique tongue in cheek twist added. After a few ridiculous options, Frank texted me 'Kilmer & Cruise' and that was it right there." De Nobrega adds colour by clarifying that throughout the years they've also spent quite a bit of time arguing who was the better pilot between Maverick and Iceman (he insists it's Maverick – they liked the duality in their styles, so it's a good fit as name for the agency).

## Startup agency life

Sharing the ups and downs of being an advertising agency startup in SA, De Nobrega calls it "a sh!tty and glorious place all at once". He explains how as a growing agency, you go through the motions almost daily, from growing pains to new client wins, great work, seeing talented people thrive in what they do, smart clients, big ideas, budget cuts affecting brands, a marketing landscape in flux, too many egos and 'gurus' and an economy hamstrung by a broken education system and dizzying unemployment. That said, he wouldn't trade it for the world, as, "We have incredible agency people in this country and such a sense of camaraderie. Top leaders that inspire and humble us daily."

Looking specifically at what aspiring entrepreneurs in the creative industry need to know in order to succeed, De Nobrega says, “Passion! You have to have a deep and enduring passion for what you do. We bootstrapped from nothing and have learned so many lessons along the way.” He also cautions that while there are certain business truths, you shouldn’t be blinded by the hundreds of ‘how-to’ articles on entrepreneurship. Instead, find a way that fits and complements your style.

While they may not be the classical entrepreneurial types, they’ve made it work in their own way and proven the value of building and relying on a strong network of contacts, as they’ll be potential clients, motivators, talent, mentors and partners when you need it most.

With too many agency highlights to mention, De Nobrega says two things stand out: seeing clients’ eyes light up every time you present great work; and the encouragement, motivation and mentorship that they’ve received from their peers and industry legends.

## **True rewards of agency success**

De Nobrega jokes that they’ve also finally won the respect of their parents, but says for an agency their size – at this point anyway – it’s just too expensive to enter established award shows, so they’re rather investing the money back into the business. He also feels there are too many award shows! That said, they do enjoy a good awards *jol*, but will be very selective in which they enter when they get to that point. As an industry, he says South African creativity is right up there with the best in the world, so he’d like award shows to get away from the “choose a cause, slap a brand logo on it” work they’ve seen win in the past as it just doesn’t represent or support true “business for good” models.

In typical startup style De Nobrega shares they’re constantly growing, so there’s always a lot happening. For example, they’ve been invited into more chemistry sessions or RFI discussions and are looking to partner with another two or three really good clients – this year alone they picked up Hill’s Pet Nutrition, which has been “an awesomely collaborative relationship,” as they have an incredible marketing team that allows Kilmer & Cruise freedom when exploring ideas and creativity. Matched with their industry expertise and smarts, this has achieved great results (Production: Espresso):

They were also recently appointed by Selfmed Medical Scheme to assist with their consumer and digital transformation. As Selfmed has an experienced and passionate team, De Nobrega says “It’s truly an exciting time” for Kilmer & Cruise to come onboard with them. They’re also launching an agency podcast soon that De Nobrega fears is most likely going to be quite terrible, but fun. He adds that “advertising agency” has become a bit of a dirty phrase lately, but they’re trying to build the advertising agency of the future. While they’re not sure what that looks like just yet, they’re confident that agility, creativity and collaboration will get them there... “Also, no egos or wanky jargon.”

And while they’d prefer to leave the crystal-balling to others, De Nobrega says he is looking forward to seeing more big brands giving smaller, creative hotshops a chance on projects that are better suited to them; as well as more collaboration between marketers and agencies – especially using creativity to drive growth and address business challenges.

“We live in a country with incredible potential... I hope our national leadership will step up in 2017. And may the Springboks return to winning, world-class form again.”

Here’s hoping! [Click here](#) for more on what makes co-founder and ECD Francois Wessels tick (again photobombed by Bob), [here](#) for more on the agency’s origin story, and be sure to follow them [on Twitter](#).

## ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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