

What makes Hero agency super

 By Leigh Andrews

9 Apr 2015

It often takes a lot of digging beneath the surface to unravel what really makes an agency work well. For Hero, that digging reveals deeply digital roots...

Let me count the ways that Hero agency is super. It may well be the numbers that give Hero's work resonance. After all, Hero's no newcomer to the digital marketing, engagement-based and below-the-line realm.

With 18 digital team members alone and 19 years of full-service digital credentials, it's little wonder the channel- and platform-agnostic agency's members are seen as "masters of digital marketing channels".

Or maybe it lies in Andrew Hall, Co-Managing Director of Hero's explanation that Hero offers "everything the most powerful agencies offer, and then more" - this entrepreneurial understanding and strategic, tactical and technological excellence serves as a base for every task, no matter its scale.



The full Hero team - see there are more than 18 of them

Perhaps it's this combination of exceptional technical skillset along with a deep and experience-driven understanding of real business and business strategy, all coupled to a strong entrepreneurial (read: risk-taking) approach that makes Hero worthy of its cape. It's these superpowers that allow the agency to not only understand their clients' businesses at specialist level but also to work closely with them in crafting every aspect of the value chain, which ultimately affects their marketing and communications outcome. That's a key stand-out from the constrained "cookie-cutter" agencies out there, constrained in terms of their offering and approach to clients and only engage at the end of that value chain - a recipe for non-alignment.

I asked Hall to reveal what's really beneath that superhero cape...

■ 1. *How and when did the agency start?*

Hall: In 1996, James Burton and Douglas Lockhart took over a then loss-making, one-person design agency to use as a shell company, within which they could germinate their own focused below-the-line company. At the same time, they established a digital/web design agency - one of the first in South Africa, which today, in its current guise as Hero's powerful digital capability, is perhaps the longest-standing survivor from that incredible era.

■ 2. *Impressive. Explain the agency name, should we take it at face value?*

Hall: Yes, it's kind of self-explanatory to be honest, and represents who we are and how we view our clients and their products and the positioning thereof in their markets' eyes. It is also impactful, short and sweet and, above all, timeless - in effect embodying what makes for excellent marketing and advertising. It also avoided the inevitable pitfalls of combining owners' personal surnames to create an often pompous and/or weird sounding agency name.

■ **3. That's for sure. Tell us more about the agency's creative process.**

Hall: Put simply, we always begin with the end in mind. That means we start with the business objectives driving the task/brief at hand. Once we are satisfied these are in place, we then craft a sound strategic response, outlining how we plan to achieve the aforementioned business objectives. Only then do we look to create or hone an executive brief, if supplied by client - involving a marketing, communications and advertising response. At every stage within this process, we measure our efforts versus the "upstream" component's requirements. Where possible, we look to create a feedback loop allowing us to modify the end execution according to its real-time performance - this is especially possible within the digital space for obvious reasons but should not be forgotten in terms of conventional initiatives, if time and circumstances allow. We have a saying: "If you cannot measure it, you cannot manage it."

■ **4. Sound advice. List any exciting new developments that have made Hero more heroic.**

Hall: Our current deep and broad systems and development (.Net and PHP amongst others) capabilities have allowed us to make significant and successful forays well beyond the bounds of traditional digital agency endeavours. In this sense, we've built and implemented multiple enterprise level platforms - typically in the customer relationship and marketing automation arena - as well as designed and built our own business spin-offs around the development of our own systems-driven offerings.

The latest of these is the recent launch of our high-end WordPress Plugins business, cunningly named [Hero Plugins](#), which is aimed at the huge global community of WordPress developers, servicing a market which constitutes well over 65% of all CMS-driven websites being built today, which is over 20% of all websites in existence. In essence, we create functional modules, which are "plugged in" to WordPress-based sites. This allows site developers to avoid having to create/code functionality and rather plug in whatever functionality is required and then populate the resultant framework with the required content. This has a massive implication in terms of the time required to build a web presence. Incidentally, our digital generative team today outnumbers our conventional staff by a ratio of over 2.5 to 1 - reflecting not only our technology-driven focus but also the conventional roots and services that will always play an important path in shaping our broad ability to take on any task we may encounter.

A further exciting development was our spinning out of a new division, focusing on (excuse the pun) film and audio visual. This operation has been an immediate success, breaking even from month one, and is currently (like its parent company) being forced by market demand to grow far faster than its current premises can accommodate!



Moving at superhero speed in the Hero office space...

■ **5. Wax lyrical on your awards stance.**

Hall: Well, for 17 of our 19 years in the business we followed a clear, stated policy of not entering awards. We have recently begun to explore the "interesting" and somewhat strange world of ad awards. But frankly after an initial toe-dipping, we are more than a little concerned as to how much time and effort seems to be required to craft the entry itself, such that it achieves traction with the judges - in essence, the packaging has become paramount and not the product being entered. Ironic, but somehow fitting, I guess.

This does not mean we have not realised that we were perhaps a tad naïve in believing that the world would recognise our prowess through purely passive, organic awareness growth. So it is that the near future will see us begin to enter relevant and results-driven awards contests on a regular basis - if we can find the time to divert our top people from producing top quality client work to producing top quality entries for that work!

■ **6. Too true! Building on this theme, talk about the state of the local advertising awards industry.**

Hall: The standard of South African advertising has always been very highly regarded internationally, as evidenced by the fact that South African agencies win big at Cannes virtually every year. The Loeries are obviously the eminent awards show and it's been getting progressively tougher to score there each year. I think it has to do with the fact that our CDs are also always on international judging panels and have good insight into the kind of work that makes an impact. I think we still lag behind on the digital front, especially when you consider that no agency has won bigger than Silver in digital (at the big shows) on the international stage. I stand corrected, but pretty sure this is accurate. This presents us with some great opportunities.

■ **7. That it does. What's next for your agency?**

Hall: We have some extremely exciting developments, which will be announced in the very near future, about which we cannot speak at this stage. Suffice to say that we will soon be changing our scale, shape and offering in a way that will definitely represent a new take on the agency space. And, as usual, we will be doing it in a completely different way to the norm. We also have quite a few new business ideas ready to be germinated alongside our existing businesses. We will continue to look for new ways of engaging our client's brands and delivering solutions through new technology and innovative thinking. We like to be at the forefront of the industry and we have every intention of making our presence felt.

■ **8. Sounds exciting. What trends do you see as the biggest to come in 2015?**

Hall: In terms of communications, financial services and entertainment, "more of the same, only better", is probably an apt summary, with current offerings, services and product/technologies being refined and developed rather than brand new stuff being invented and launched. Creating campaigns that are relevant to varying target markets and are able to break through in today's media landscape demands innovation and understanding technology of the highest order. Getting this right will reap great rewards.

The single exception to this is, without a doubt, immersive virtual reality. This is the next big consumer thing and, after properly debuting over the last year or so, is now poised to move from the developmental phase and enter the mainstream in a big way. We are currently working on multiple projects in this space and can confidently say that we were probably the first agency in this country to identify the technologies - and procure them for our own development purposes - and opportunity from a marketing perspective. That Facebook bought an [immersive VR company called Oculus](#) for \$2billion when they didn't even have a product to sell to the broader market says something about how this space is viewed.

On a broader philosophical level, I think work that is done with conscience in mind, work that makes a difference and work that delivers tangible results will see great results for both agencies and clients alike. The time is right for big brands to show their commitment in making a sustainable difference and I think you will see media campaigns delivering on this.

Interesting times. For a taste of Hero's work, view the agency's 2014 film show reel embedded below.

Click [here](#) to view the most recent staff appointments at Hero, and visit their www.hero.co.za, [YouTube channel](#), [Twitter feed](#), [Facebook page](#) or [LinkedIn profile](#).

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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