

Open Line Communications

By  Jessica Tennant

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Following on from Mother's Day, I thought it fitting to chat to mother and daughter, Paola Chellew and Lia Mundell (respectively) who launched their PR business in March this year.

Open Line Communications is based in Johannesburg and specialises in PR strategy to help create a strong narrative for its clients and build significant, long-lasting relationships with key media and stakeholders.

The agency specialises in lifestyle and hospitality brands and small businesses in general, helping startups get off the ground without costly campaigns.



Lia Mundell and Paola Chellew

Here, Chellew and Mundell explain why they decided to go into business together and the pros and cons they had to weigh up...

Why did you decide to go into business together, and why PR?

Mundell: I think we decided to go into business together because we both love different elements of PR and creating stories for different and unique brands. Where we are similar in our work is that we both have a passion for lifestyle businesses in the SME sector: we love working with small and interesting brands that provide us with creative content that we can talk loads about.

“ We aim to close the gap between brand and media by creating relationships and an open line for communication – it is not only the big brands with big budgets that have interesting stories to tell. ”

Where we are different is in the way we work and the roles we take on: I am into strategic communications and planning, so brands are prepared for anything, whether it's good or bad. My mom is a writer at heart, so her interests lie in content writing that introduces the brand in an eye-catching and relevant way.

Chellew: I have been in PR since 2004 but wanted to focus more on writing. It seemed like a good balance to have Lia doing the PR side of things as she has some really original ideas, while I concentrate on writing content. The flexibility time-wise is also a factor. Lia has a small son just starting school and my youngest is also still at school, so between the school runs and extra murals, we have to work smart.

■ *What are the pros and cons to a mother-daughter team?*

Mundell: The pros are that we know each other well enough to focus on our strengths rather than our weaknesses. What one can't do, the other can. We are also first and foremost best friends, so we keep each other going and motivated. For us, work is supposed to be enjoyable, and so the best part of our little business is working with someone we enjoy, and that allows us to get really creative. The cons are very few, but I guess trying to keep a balance between mother, daughter and business partners is tough.

Chellew: Cons: It is said that 'familiarity breeds contempt', so generally it isn't a good idea to go into business with a family member or friend. However, there are many successful family businesses! The challenge is to maintain a professional attitude, notwithstanding the familial relationship we have. If we disagree on strategy, for example, we'll have a discussion on why a particular route is the best way to go. Pros: Because we understand each other and have a strong relationship, we can cut out a lot of time-consuming discussions when brainstorming. We think alike and work in a similar way, so it's pretty easy going.



Which SA brands won Mother's Day this year?

15 May 2018



■ *What are some of the barriers Open Line has had to overcome in its first year of business?*

Mundell: We have definitely found it hard taking off and establishing ourselves in the PR and media world. There are so many large and diverse agencies that it gets harder and harder to compete. But when we found our niche and figured out which field we wanted to play in, it became easier to communicate our own unique service offering. We are no longer intimidated by huge budgets and activations.

■ *What has been your most notable learning so far?*

Mundell: Definitely the rise of new media and interactive media. It is becoming essential for brands to have an online presence, no matter how small. It is also becoming clear how reliant old media is on advertising, so those relationships between PR company and the media are essential. The media is the number one gateway to a brand's stakeholders, so maintaining those relations are key.

Chellew: Always be very clear from the start as to what is expected of you. Many clients seem to blur the line between PR and marketing, which are two entirely different things. Some clients seem to think that PR should directly affect sales, but it is not always so. Also, in PR there is never a guarantee that media editors will give editorial space just because you have a newsworthy story – this is where media relations are important.

■ *What does the future of PR look like to you?*

Mundell: Digital. More video, infographic and visual content are on the rise and it is becoming more and more apparent how short the average consumer's attention span is. Visually appealing and disruptive content is the way forward. It is also so important to understand who you are talking to. That affects the 'how' and the 'why' of your communication.

Chellew: There is an upsurge of small businesses and a lot of healthy competition. Many businesses, such as restaurants, are coming up with innovative ideas in terms of their strategy (like new menu tastings, First Thursdays, Fillet Fridays, etc.)

because they have to. There is an enormous amount of competition and if you don't up your PR game, you might end up closing the business. Social media platforms are useful, but they have to be managed professionally or it looks like a DIY job. Many of these businesses are turning to PR consultants for unique strategies as well as spreading the news to media platforms.

■ **What's next? What are your focus areas for 2018?**

Mundell: We'd like to expand our client base and engage with more brands. We have a passion for lifestyle – entertainment, art, food, wine, beauty, fashion – and communication here is just as important as corporate communications. After establishing ourselves and Open Line as a specialist brand, we'd like to expand even further by finding the right people to work with us.

Chellew: We love a challenge and would particularly love to help women with startups, who are in the same position: mums who are wanting to be at home for their children, but also run a business successfully. Editorial gives credibility to a new business and our economy needs entrepreneurs of all ages to thrive in the business place.

To find out more, visit www.openline.online.

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