

# Nurturing genuine collaboration in the creative industry

 By [Mongezi Mlati](#)

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Unless you're a hermit or attempting a solo ascent of some intimidatingly towering mountain peak, it's hard to go it alone.



Source: [unsplash.com](https://unsplash.com)

People are social creatures, so by design, we're wired to work together – to partner and collaborate. When these partnerships work – between client, agency and creative team – beautiful work can be created.

## Understanding intention

When it comes to new clients in particular, Khaya Dlanga knows from experience the importance of genuine agency-client relationships and communication.

“My personal thing is that I don't want to go via client service. I want to have a relationship with the strategy team; I want a relationship with the creative team because then there's a true and proper understanding of the intention behind the brief.”

He also speaks to the value of true engagement, during which the brief is debated. “What I've heard from a lot of agencies is that the client doesn't speak to you between you receiving the brief and presenting. That doesn't work; that's not a partnership.”

Dlanga, who was senior communications manager of creative excellence and digital at Coca-Cola South Africa for six years, gives the example of the brand's iconic "Share a Coke with Bobby" commercial.

"When the idea was presented to me by the agency, I thought it was fantastic. However, audience research showed that black people didn't respond well to ads with animals in them – there was empirical evidence demonstrating that these always underperformed."



## Creating a "magic middle", not a "them and us" of brand vs performance

Johanna McDowell 29 Apr 2024



Despite this, he supported the agency's idea, collaborating with them and bringing his marketing team on their side. "There was trust and collaboration between the agency, myself as the client, my marketing director and the director of the ad. Collaboration is so important to do great, successful work."

## Get to know people as people

When establishing an international fashion brand like H&M in a local market, says H&M South Africa CEO and country manager Caroline Nelson, finding the right partners to collaborate with is crucial – be they designers, agencies or creative teams.

"We pick local creative partners who we'd want to work with, who we'd hire as part of our teams, with whom you get things done. It creates a much better working environment, and the end product, what you get in terms of creativity, is so much better when the people you're working with understand you and the journey you're on."

Understanding that journey means that selecting designers is about more than just finding talented people who fall in line with H&M's style.

"First up we look at who is having an impact, who's making a name for themselves. That's important for us – giving the next step to people who have some sort of platform already. That's the beauty of being a big international brand.

"Once we've made a shortlist of designers, it's important for us to get to know them as people. Are they a good fit in terms of their values and how we work together? Once you find the perfect fit, the journey becomes so much easier – and so much fun."

## Trust your team

Agency coach, Craig Rodney, emphasises the importance of communication in client-agency relationships, adding that clients need to trust agencies to deliver on the brief they provide.

"For example, if you're a challenger brand that appoints a particular agency because you want to be disruptive in the market, you have to be prepared for them to come back with disruptive work. On the other hand, if the brief is to be safe, don't get upset if it's boring."

Rodney says many a creative will attest to clients hiring people who they think will do amazing work, then restricting them. "With some clients, it's not necessarily restricting, but rather tightening the idea, making it better. Other clients, however, constrain the idea and kill it."

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Another element of trusting the agency is trusting their rates, says Rodney.

“If you want great work, pay for it. Brands can sometimes be their own worst enemies. If you don’t pay your own agency a premium to create amazing work, then that agency can’t hire great people.

"The moment you put pressure on an agency’s rates, you’re forcing them to hire cheap people, who rarely do amazing work.

"Cheap work gets criticised, leads to dozens of reverts and eventually gets abandoned, and then the agency gets fired. For an agency to be able to deliver on a brief, pay them for that brief.”

## Building a collaborative culture

Collaboration is bandied about as a buzzword in creative industries but the essence of thriving partnerships in the creative and marketing industries lies in genuine engagement, open communication, and a foundation of trust.

Successful collaborations are rooted in understanding the intention behind each project and valuing the human relationships that propel these initiatives forward.

Ultimately, when agencies and clients commit to a partnership grounded in trust, communication, and mutual respect, they pave the way for not only meeting but exceeding each campaign's strategic goals. The result is exceptional outcomes that truly stand out.

## ABOUT MONGEZI MTATI

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