

Smart business in a tough economy: How 5 small words led the M&C Saatchi Group through the unexpected global pandemic

 By Jacques Burger, issued by [M&C Saatchi Abel](#)

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"We love a good problem." Five small words that underpin the M&C Saatchi Group's Smart Thinking proposition and drove its approach to work and strategy throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Burger shares his insight into why these five small words are so powerful.



Jacques Burger, founding partner and group executive at M&C Saatchi Group South Africa

We have always had a strong orientation around how to grow our client's top line and market share. What has set us apart within the industry is that we first see ourselves as a business and marketing solutions company that happens to do advertising, and not the other way round. What this means is that the starting point for each conversation that we have with our clients is defining their specific problem statement. It is this approach that has helped us land, and retain, some of our country's most beloved brands. These include longstanding partnerships – some over 10 years – with Nando's, Standard Bank and the Takealot Group, and some exciting more recent client acquisitions across the group like the Pepsico portfolio, including Lays, Liqui Fruit, and Weet-Bix.

When the pandemic hit, we had to take a step back as a group and look at a different world needing new ways of problem solving at scale. It also meant applying this shift of focus inward to ensure that the six companies at the heart of the M&C Saatchi Group could successfully operate as one tightly integrated team to continue to deliver connected creative solutions in the wake of the drop in advertising spend.

Often in this industry you will find groups will have a 'village' of companies that happen to share the same campus, but work as separate entities. What we have done is break down the walls to find ways to partner together in cohesive and collaborative ways – often right down to an operational level – to orientate the group around what will be most useful to the client. Putting together the right teams with the right complement of specialties from across the group, and rallying behind these teams, means that we can offer clients a full spectrum of services to truly add the most value. This type of solution orientation is dictated by whether the client needs a media buying solution or a PR solution for example, to package the group offering in the most effective way. The group's partner model of owner-run companies include [Razor PR](#), [Levergy](#), [Black & White](#), [Connect](#), and [M&C Saatchi Abel](#).

This partner model means that senior people across the group actively guide the thinking to creatively find better ways to solve client problems with smart solutions to build long-term smart partnerships. Essentially it is less about structure and hierarchy, and more about being focused on the client's world and giving them what they need. All the players, including the partners, are on the field.

Maintaining cohesion

When ambitions are aligned, it is easy to align behaviour. Our smart proposition means that each company within the group subscribes to the same *brutal simplicity of thought* philosophy that permeates the DNA of its current leaders, partners and creative. The core of the business has always been to create beautifully simple solutions in an increasingly complex world. This underpins everything the group creates and extends across all six companies as a natural and easy cohesion.

Creativity is the key to new and better ways of solving problems. We love a good problem because it gives us the opportunity to use smart thinking to deliver a group proposition instead of a company proposition. And for our clients, who

need us to seamlessly connect all the dots in the most powerful way, letting go of structures that might hold us back from landing a solution is smart thinking that hits the target.

Creativity lies at the heart of any smart thinking

My definition of creativity has always been 'original thinking that adds value'. The second part of that statement important because the world is full of creative thinking – the walls of an art gallery are the perfect example of this. Where the difference comes in with smart thinking is whether our creative output is adding value and shifting the needle for our clients. Is it making people think or feel differently about your brand? Is it shifting behaviour?

We do love a good problem. It is what drives us every day to shift the conversation we are having with our clients. But more than that, we love a smart solve. The way we reach that smart solve demonstrates the power of *brutally simple thinking*, why it matters in the world today, and how it is shaping our pursuit to be the most desired creative company on the African continent.

Having worked with his partners to establish a successful partner-led group model comprising a mix of agencies all contributing their smarts at the top of their industries, Burger offers the following six smart tips to establishing a smart proposition within a tough business landscape:

1. **Build the right teams** – invest in people more knowledgeable than yourselves because the people with the best people win.
2. **Diversify the broader group offering** – ensure you have strong capabilities across a range of disciplines that speak to the client's specific objectives to deliver real value.
3. **Leverage the power of enduring partnerships** – partnerships lay the foundation for not only creating campaigns that resonate, but they nurture a strategy that boosts a partner brand's bottom line, increases market share and builds brand equity.
4. **Make sure your ambitions are aligned** – the key to solving problems with creativity that wins the hearts of consumers starts with marrying the right teams with the right brands. That connection between the agency and the client creates a conduit for the work, which is why it's paramount to ensure each brand and the partners who service that brand are the perfect match.
5. **Build your foundations on trust** – when trust is the cornerstone of a partnership, client and agency can push each other in the pursuit of better solutions, better ideas and better creativity that tackles challenges head on.
6. **Have long-term strategic vision** – with the incessant buzz of content, platforms and trends, it's even more crucial to land on a sound, insights-driven and creatively-executed strategy. This provides a compass to navigate increasingly competitive waters and discerning consumers.

ABOUT JACQUES BURGER

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