

60 layers of smart

 By Herman Manson: @marklives 2 Jul 2010

Brilliant ideas come from conversation. A great conversation can lead to collaboration. That pretty much sums up the core strategic proposition behind Cape Town's newest ad agency, 60 Layers of Cake.

Turn agency structures on their heads

The guys behind it, MD Ben Wren and operations director Michael van den Heerik, both left senior positions at The Jupiter Drawing Room to launch an agency they hope will help turn traditional agency structures on their heads. Wren and van den Heerik are financing the agency themselves, which [officially launched](#) in March 2010, and which forms part of the 60 Layers of Cake network headquartered in Amsterdam. The international office will own a minority shareholding in the new agency.



Ben Wren and Michael van den Heerik

British-born Wren has a long history in advertising, having started his career at Grey Direct in London in 1993. He moved to several agencies, including Weiden+Kennedy, before he started his own London-based agency in 2002. He left once his wife fell ill and, after she recuperated, they spent time travelling in South Africa before deciding to settle here. While in Europe, Wren handled the Nike, Microsoft and Häagen-Dazs accounts, and locally handled Old Mutual for Ogilvy before he moved to The Jupiter Drawing Room.

Dutch-born Van den Heerik fell in love with a South African while in Bangkok and they decided to settle in the country afterwards. Previously, Van den Heerik worked for a number of European agencies before a stint in New York and later Bangkok. He joined The Jupiter Drawing Room, where he served as group production director from the end of 2005.

Trigger for the departure

While still at The Jupiter Drawing Room, Van der Heerik had approached the executive creative director of 60 Layers in Amsterdam, Rodger Beekman, about the possibility of Beekman and his partners helping transform Jupiter structurally. Negotiations were abandoned at a late stage, which seems to have been the trigger for the departure of Wren and Van den Heerik.

Beekman then asked them to set up shop in Cape Town, with the Amsterdam office providing creative backup. Amsterdam had identified the continent as a global growth point and Cape Town is its first African partnership.

The duo took office space on the loft of Cornerstone House in Loop Street in Cape Town's CBD. At an angle you get a peek of Table Mountain but then it's not really about the view (how many CT agency execs just fell out of their chairs?). It's open space, which means that, no, there is no glass cubicle for the MD on the side with the floor-to-roof windows looking out over the city, and, yes, seating arrangements seem quite demographic. No account handlers clustered in the right corner or the digital guys squeezed in next to the loo.

SA 5-10 years behind

This is not only part of the philosophy and collaborative culture of the agency but also because it's not structured in any traditional agency way. Wren argues that structurally South African agencies are about 5-10 years behind their counterparts in Europe or the US.

Agencies still have sections dedicated to above-the-line (ATL), below-the-line (BTL), digital etc. All these constitute cost centres to the client and compete internally for a piece of the pie, sometimes to the detriment of the core strategic idea. It spreads money across cost centres (which serves the agency well but maybe not the client) and unit divisions are sometimes, well, divisive. ATL often come up with the strategic concept and then hand it down to other divisions to adopt. Employees tend to have specialist skills instead of being multi-skilled.

It's a model the 60 Layers team definitely want to leave behind.

In any case, the agency business model has not evolved in 50 years, argues Wren, who adds that traditional models are broken and that only client pressure will ultimately change the way agencies operate. They are, says Wren, in a word, inefficient, and it is partly what drove him and Van der Heerik to go on their own.

Indictment

One of Wrens' pet peeves seems to be that account handlers continue to be amongst the highest paid employees at ad agencies. He views this as an indictment against a supposedly creative industry.

Wren thinks agencies need to be media neutral, rather than ATL, BTL, experiential or digital. It needs multi-skilled staffers smaller and more effective teams to come up with concepts not bound down by media. Coming up with strategic solutions takes collaboration between agency staff, client and people outside the agency environment such as writers, app designer or artists - and this is also the form strategy meetings take at 60 Layers.

Clients can sit in and contribute to strategy meetings from the get go, and join in deliberations as often as they wish, making them party to the process of creative development. Ideas should not be determined by the internal structure of an agency, says Van der Heerik. Instead, an agency needs to be optimised for solutions and the 60 Layers team believe its collaborative communication model achieves this.

Flexible units facilitate fluidity

Integrated work is no longer cost-efficient to client, says Wren, and great ideas should not rely on big budgets or mass media. His staff works in flexible units in their open plan office, which helps facilitate fluidity amongst client teams.

Clients that have bought into the 60 Layers philosophy includes manroland AG, a large printing systems manufacturer; gourmet ice cream manufacturer Sinnfull; olive and wine estate Morgenster; and *Glamour* magazine. Wren says more account wins will be announced in the near future.

60 Layers recently added its' first South African creative director to the Cape Town office with the appointment of Theo Erasmus, formerly of Membrane. Wren says the duo spent a lot of time interviewing for the position and eventually found common ground with Erasmus. "Theo is a rare talent; he is a strategist, creative director, journalist, editor and collaborator rolled into one person," explains Wren.

A Jozi office is in the works and will be launched in partnership with a new client (Wren didn't reveal details of who this was who will share the space).

Fire up the imagination

Will 60 Layers fire up the imagination of South African marketers? For the brave and the bold, those tired of business as usual, the answer would be yes. Strategically, 60 Layers is one of the most exciting new ventures in advertising this country has seen in years. With its model, communication has truly gone two-way - the client can only win.

For more:

- Bizcommunity Press Office: [60 Layers of Cake](#)

- 60 Layers South African site: www.60layersofcake.co.za
- 60 Layers International site: www.60layersofcake.com
- Twitter: [@60Capetown](https://twitter.com/@60Capetown), [@60Johannesburg](https://twitter.com/@60Johannesburg), [@60layersofcake](https://twitter.com/@60layersofcake), [@Mvdheerik](https://twitter.com/@Mvdheerik), [@60BWren](https://twitter.com/@60BWren), [@theoerasmus](https://twitter.com/@theoerasmus)

ABOUT HERMAN MANSON: @MARKLIVES

The inaugural Vodacom Social Media Journalist of the Year in 2011, Herman Manson (@marklives) is a business journalist and media commentator who edits industry news site www.marklives.com. His writing has appeared in newspapers and magazines locally and abroad, including Bizcommunity.com. He also co-founded *Brand* magazine. View my profile and articles...

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