

Avatar: Challenging the agency norm

 By Leigh Andrews

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Ambitious entrepreneurs with a desire to make a lasting impact in the industry, who fight to get what they want - that's the basic blood force of challenger agency Avatar...

Avatar was established three years ago as the country's largest black-owned integrated agency, and has had an impressive growth trajectory since. For example, the integrated agency with digital at its core has not lost a single client, growing at over 100% over the past three consecutive years.

The team has also recently picked up new public and private sector accounts such as The Limpopo Tourism Agency, The Nelson Mandela Children's Fund and TV channel BET.

Veli Ngubane, Chief Creative Officer and co-founder of AVATAR, tells us how they're set to continue rocking the boat as a challenger brand.



Veli Ngubane and Zibusiso Mkhwanazi

■ 1. When and how did the agency get started?

Ngubane: We started in 2012 as a response to the needs of consumers and brands. With Zibusiso Mkhwanazi coming from an ICT background having run KrazyBoyz Digital, and me from a marketing background, having been a director at Ireland/Davenport, we combined our skills to form an integrated marketing agency with digital at its core.

■ 2. OK then, explain the agency name.

Ngubane: Avatar is an online representation of self. True to our founding principles of integration, we merge the physical world with online and represent brands in the digital space.

We met a client of Hindu faith a year into the business, who gave us a definition we liked. He said an Avatar in the Hindu religion is a deity born on the earth to bring peace and unity. We like that definition as we see the agency's role as one of unifying, adding to the diversity of the agency.

■ 3. What makes you a 'challenger' agency?

Ngubane: Our entrepreneurial culture is at the core of our challenger mentality. We understand we are not a market leader and have to work harder and smarter to get and keep our seat at the table. We know that we have to fight to get what we want. Our people are challengers, we look to hire ambitious, entrepreneurial people with a desire to make a lasting impact in the industry.

We start with the premise that we do not deserve to get clients. All our current clients have given us a chance and we need to constantly over-deliver and challenge the status quo to give them effective creative and client service.

■ **4. Interesting strategy. What's the basic work flow or creative process in the agency?**

Ngubane: We operate with an above-the-line agency model but work in an integrated form. As we have mentioned earlier, digital is at our core, not just an add-on. With this in mind, the creatives are expected to take a concept and apply it to a 360-degree model. That means the concept can be given the social media, content and design treatment.

We have the care of a small agency and the processes of a big agency. Our start-up entrepreneurial culture is at the centre of our existence. We pride ourselves on our diversity as a key ingredient of the value we give to clients. We have people from Manguzi to Sandton and everywhere in between.

■ **5. Tell us about key account wins this year that have made an impact on your portfolio...**

Ngubane: It all started when we won the Business Connexion, Ubank, Fox and National Geographic accounts in the first year of operation. This gave us immediate credibility because of the global nature of their products - having to execute our campaigns in over 27 African countries. So we demonstrated that we can brief on global pitches and execute global campaigns.

This led to us winning BET, SAA, Brand South Africa and most recently Limpopo Tourism. We find it a privilege to be part of the voice of the nation with winning three national brands and more especially being able to use our skills to attract investment and manage the country's perceptions.

■ **6. What new developments in the team have enhanced your overall skillset?**

Ngubane: We have grown and built a strong middle management layer with lots of skill and experience in both social media and content management. We've added Herman Degener as digital services director, Heinrich Van Den Worm as social and media director, Sanele Ngubane as creative director, Mary Alexander as head of the content team and will be appointing a new operations director soon.

■ **7. Wax lyrical on recent awards you've won.**

Ngubane: With the Brand South Africa account, we get to help change lives by using our marketing and content skills. Our staff complement has also grown to 50 in just years. These we regard as our greatest awards.

■ **8. Let's talk about the state of the local advertising awards industry...**

Ngubane: We've always performed well as a country in international awards when it comes to traditional media. It's been of a high international standard. But South Africa hasn't done well digitally. The next challenge is to use digital as above-the-line marketing. The other challenge is to find our own style of advertising. It is fine to have international standards but there has to be an African way of advertising. The big trend internationally has been storytelling and Africa has a great tradition of storytelling.

■ **9. What's next for your agency?**

Ngubane: We are looking to grow into the rest of Africa. BET, Fox, National Geographic, SAA, Business Connexion are growing in Africa and we want to grow with them. The strategy is to position ourselves as the ideal partner to grow beyond

our borders with our current clients and clients that see our success on the continent.

■ 10. What trends do you see as the biggest still to come in 2015?

Ngubane: Personalisation. More than ever before, consumers are looking at brands to speak to them. Digital, and especially social media, has brought people so close to the brands that companies can't survive if they don't personalise their message. Integration also continues to be a major growth factor in the industry as digital becomes critical in marketing.

To find out more, visit the [Avatar website](#) or follow them on [Twitter](#).

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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