

Uyanda Manana joins Conversation Lab in grassroots ownership deal



By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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In August last year, Uyanda Manana joined Conversation Lab from sister agency, BE, in a merger and grassroots ownership deal.

She joined the digital agency alongside four other black staffers as majority shareholders.



Uyanda Manana

“This is an exciting and tremendous opportunity for me as a black woman. I get to lead an incredibly talented team of people across Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg in shaping our industry into something more reflective of our multicultural society,” said Manana.

“Diversity and cultural transformation is not only about access to opportunity; it’s about acceptance too. It fosters an environment that gives people the security and room to express and accept their uniqueness. It opens up paths to creativity, making our work and processes that much richer and more human.”

One of Manana's priorities is to strengthen the agency's Johannesburg offering, with plans to open doors in Soweto. "Being in a township gives young black people real access and exposure to an industry that has been out of reach for too long, and gives us access to the kind of raw talent we're looking for," she added. "Importantly, it positions us in the heart of the communities we represent and talk to."

Here, she goes on to tell us more about the opportunity and what it means to her...

■ ***Congrats on your new appointment and shareholding. How do you feel about it?***

It's certainly been the highlight of a very challenging and, for many people, devastating year. Despite the very distressing start to 2021 for us as a country, I'm staying optimistic about what the future holds for us as a business, and looking forward to working with my team in continuing to build on our successes and learnings from last year.

■ ***How and when did this opportunity come about/take effect? And comment on the timing given the national lockdown/global crisis.***

Kevin Power (founder) met me in Johannesburg en route to London in early March last year – as SA's Covid lockdown was looming – and put the offer to me. I was over the moon with the offer, and humbled by the trust the founders and Exco had in me.

We then spent the next few months putting the plan and the structure together and defining our vision and mission as a new agency, which would champion real diversity and transformation.

I took over the MD role effective 1 August 2020 and it has been a whirlwind ever since. That my appointment was in Women's Month was just a coincidence but it was a welcome and motivational one. I believe that much more needs to be done in the area of diversity and inclusion, not just transformation, and I hope to be a driving force behind this and making

it core to the wider transformation agenda.

■ ***What does the role/shareholding entail?***

I have taken over the MD role in SA from Kevin Power who has been fulfilling this function from the UK where he has been based for four years now.

Pre-Covid Kevin was travelling back to SA every four to six weeks and spending two weeks with us in SA – between Durban, Johannesburg and Cape Town. He felt the time was right for me to take over the MD function in SA and for him to focus on our UK expansion. In spite of the pandemic, we had a great year business-wise with significant growth in the SA and UK markets – so the strategy appears to be working.

From a shareholding perspective, I not only have ownership but I'm right in the engine room with my team, running the business from the inside out.

■ ***Comment on the current state of the industry, how the industry has responded to the crisis and Conversation LAB in particular, and how you plan to navigate the agency through this.***

I was blown away by how quickly Conversation Lab mobilised to a work-from-home model – and most importantly how effectively. We have not missed a beat for our clients and, if anything, have delivered better results for all our clients in all sectors.

Clients let us into their homes and we did the same; a greater level of humanity prevailed, which I believe has resulted in better work and stronger bonds.

Everyone has pulled together and we're getting through this. The Conversation Lab culture is very open, warm and honest. We work with a very high degree of trust and accountability and our staff have responded brilliantly.

Touch wood, we had an exceptional year of growth but we are bracing for a turbulent 2021.

■ ***Tell us a bit about your experience and how this has equipped you for your new position.***

I have been fortunate enough to have worked extensively in three countries (the UK, UAE and SA) in leadership roles as well as both client- and agency-side.

I cut my teeth client-side with L'Oréal for two years in SA before leaving for London, where I landed a great role with Publicis London, where I stayed for eight years working on the L'Oréal and Garnier global accounts, as well as many others.

Interestingly, Kevin also spent four years with Publicis but we never actually met, which is surprising as although there were more than 600 people in the agency, us South Africans usually find each other!

I have also held senior roles at M&C Saatchi Abel, FCB and Jupiter, as well as head of sales at JC Decaux. I have worked across multiple sectors and TTL, although not to the depth and breadth of digital and technical sophistication that I now have at Conversation Lab.

I think the biggest challenge of the role is getting the most out of a very diverse bunch of people with very broad skill sets and bringing it all together to deliver best-in-class results.

I feel my very varied work and life experience, where I have weathered and overcome many a storm, has given me the skills, and the faith, I need to rise to this new challenge.

■ ***What's at the top of your to-do list?***

First and foremost, I needed to bed in the new structure and ensure the backing and support of my new team – I am so pleased and inspired by the way I have been accepted and supported by the management team and the agency.

Change is often a scary thing and many people would understandably have apprehensions and concerns with the very big changes that have taken place – yet almost everyone to a wo(man) has got behind the changes and made the most of them and that is clearly evident by how we are performing and how the market has embraced it.

Next up is ensuring we kick off this year with a solid performance and deliver the right level of support for our clients at a time of great uncertainty and angst.

Running parallel to all this is we want to be a force for change in the industry; there certainly needs to be more diversity, and far more empowerment of women.

Conversation Lab group has two other women MDs, Megan Power of Power Lab and Bridgette Donnelly of Media Lab and together we are going to work with other like-minded colleagues to bring the much-needed change to the old boys club!

■ ***What are you currently reading/watching/listening to?***

I'm currently reading (actually, listening to on Audible) *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg (COO at Facebook). I love how she puts an honest (and at times uncomfortable) mirror up to the gender bias and inequality that still exists in the workplace and many industries, but comes at it from a place of strength, not victimhood.

■ ***Tell us something about yourself not generally known?***

When I was about 19 years old, I featured on a German TV show called *Nur die Liebe zählt* (all you need is love) and that's all I'll say about that!

■ ***In a release sent to Bizcommunity, Kevin said the move was more about grassroots transformation than a "typical black empowerment deal" that often didn't change people's lives in a meaningful or timeous way... We are not just changing the ownership of the business; that's the easy part and only goes some way in creating real transformation. Critically we are changing our leadership, a far bolder move, and a step change in our intentions and ambitions for the eight-year-old agency." Would you like to elaborate on this, in telling us what real transformation looks like to you?***

Selling 51% of your business to a black-owned consortium or investment vehicle doesn't necessarily change much in reality for the people in that agency. With the change we have made, we are transforming both ownership and leadership. We believe it is the two together where the most important change happens – where now I have a say and can influence the culture of our business, the people and what we stand for. This is real and tangible change.

It is this practical change that inspires the next generation, that showcases what transformation can and should look like and what can be achieved through it.

Money simply exchanging hands is not what is needed for a real groundswell that will be felt by generations to come.

I want to work with women in our industry to lead the way for more of us to occupy a seat at the table. I want us to also work at including the unseen and unheard in our industry, such as the youth. I want to see youth represented and given meaningful opportunities, which they can grab with both hands.

■ ***What is your hope for the agency and the creative industry?***

My hope for our industry is that we open doors wide enough to allow for true inclusion, and I hope that when my daughter makes her way into the job market of tomorrow, she will not still be faced with the same challenges we find today. I hope by then she, and her generation, can confidently stand on the shoulders of the strong women that came before them. I want to be one of those women.

ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

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