

Itumeleng Matlare, brand manager at Tiger Brands

 By Jessica Tennant

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As part of our ongoing #BehindtheBrandManager series, we interviewed the Marketing Achievement Awards' Rising Star finalists - said to be the best and the brightest under the age of 35 who have consistently demonstrated excellent performance and who have the potential to become outstanding leaders in their profession.



Itumeleng Matlare

Itumeleng Matlare manages the All Gold and Mrs Balls brands. Her responsibilities range from engaging with advertising agencies and suppliers to demand planning with her team to ensure that the logistics and distribution of products are on

track across the country.

Here, she tells us why she believes being a brand manager at Tiger Brands is like being the CEO of your own business...

■ ***Itumeleng, tell us more about your role and what it entails exactly?***

I always say being a brand manager at Tiger Brands is like being the CEO of your own business. My tasks range from engaging with the internal team on procurement, new product development and logistics, all the way to managing advertising agencies that are hired to provide creative content for my campaigns and activating these across multiple platforms. I'm always busy, but it is so much fun!

■ ***Growing up, what did you want to be?***

Growing up I was always the creative kid. I studied art and design in high school. I've always loved writing. Back when I was younger, I thought I'd be a lawyer like my grandfather but there was an element of creativity that was missing for me. So, after my first degree at UCT, I went to work at TBWA Hunt Lascaris in the strategy department and found my calling. Branding! If you ask me what I'd like to be now, my answer would be a "branding guru".

■ ***Tell us about your career: what you studied and why, and how you ended up where you are today?***

Initially I went to UCT to study law. I quickly changed my tune and decided to complete a BA in English Language, Politics and French. Honestly, I wasn't sure of my career path at that stage. After my first degree, I worked at TBWA Hunt Lascaris and found that I loved being in a creative, fast-paced environment. I went to an open day at Vega and loved what I saw. I enrolled to do my Honours in Brand Management and Brand Leadership, which was a lot harder than I thought it would be, but I made it. I was lucky enough to get an internship at Tiger Brands, working on the rice business. From there, it was all about hard work and dedication.

■ ***What do you enjoy most about brand management and working in the FMCG space specifically?***

As South Africans, there's nothing like the relationship we have with food, and our brands have been a part of every meal, every moment and every celebration for as long as we can all remember. Most of our culinary brands are over 100 years old. That's over 100 years of giving South Africans products that are made with the best ingredients, carefully sourced for their quality and delicious flavour.

At Tiger Brands, we believe in nourishing and nurturing more lives every day. This forms part of our promise to our consumers who we are passionate about. We want to make sure they get the best ingredients and best products; made by the brands they love.

The best part of it is how much it allows me to grow because of the responsibility I have, not only to the business or to the brand but to our consumers, because they are the reason we do what we do.

■ ***Tell us more about your experience and work with brands?***

As mentioned, I am extremely passionate about what I do and it's that passion and drive I put into the campaigns that I have worked on, like Tastic's Rise Against Hunger campaign in 2019.

The ambition for the partnership with Rise Against Hunger was to support the United Nations in their mission to end world hunger by 2030, as part of their sustainable development goals. This was a campaign that was particularly close to my heart as my mother works in early childhood development, so I knew first-hand the importance of sustainable nutrition for children. As brands working in food, we at Tiger Brands believe that it is important for us to play an active role in uplifting the communities in which the brand lives.

■ ***You were recently shortlisted as a finalist for the MAA's Rising Star of the Year Award. Firstly, congrats, and secondly, tell us what this recognition meant to you?***

Thank you so much. This came as a surprise for me. I think as marketers we sometimes spend so much time looking down and focusing on the next campaign or the next launch that we at times forget to look up and appreciate all the work that we do and what we have achieved. The recognition is always great because it grounds you and reminds you that hard work actually does pay off!

■ ***A significant part of your role is to manage the growth and development of a junior individual who reports to you, ensuring that this person advances in knowledge, experience and position in your team. Tell us more about this aspect of your job?***

I form part of a bigger team where I have someone who reports to me. My job is to make sure that she learns, grows and gets promoted. Being able to lead and influence people is a big part of brand management. The corporate world is tricky at the best of times, so having the opportunity to help nurture young talent is one of the greatest achievements. The rest of my team are like family. We are very close and make sure we are constantly helping each other better our reporting, presentations skills, campaigns, insights and overall output.

■ ***What career advice would you give to aspiring young marketing and branding professionals?***

Hard work is never overlooked. Read every day. Don't ever think that because you are the most junior person in the room, that you have no value to add. You were given the opportunity for a reason, show them what you're worth.

■ ***How has the pandemic and subsequent national lockdowns affected your work and Tiger Brands or All Gold and Mrs Balls specifically?***

In my current role, I was appointed the lead on the Tiger Brands Culinary Division's Add a Twist campaign, which was born during the lockdown in 2020. The trend we picked up as a team during the lockdown period was that deal seeking, consumption reductions and product stretching were a significant trend. In response to this, we created the Add a Twist platform to deliver value to consumers throughout the recessionary period.

Understanding consumers and what is important to them in their everyday lives is probably the best part of my job. I'm passionate about people and I believe in using our brands to help make their lives better.

■ ***Tell us about your latest or most successful campaigns or ads to date, and the rationale behind them?***

The current campaign I have on Mrs Balls has been such fun and so exciting to execute. Mrs Balls is known as the most iconic chutney in the world, but people often forget about it, and unless they're making stews, it stays in the fridge and never gets used.

My latest campaign shows the versatility of Mrs Balls and variety of usage in different types of meals. I think my favourites are the Mrs Balls Chutney & Vanilla Bean Ice-Cream, and of course Mrs Balls Sweet Chilli Sauce in my pasta! All the meals you like can be turned into ones you love, just by adding Mrs Balls.

■ Anything you'd like to add?

The work I do is grounded in my values and I make it a point of working on brands whose values align with my own personal values of integrity, reliability, compassion, honesty and dependability.

The abovementioned values are important to me. They were instilled in me by my parents and ground me in many ways. I come from a close-knit family. To give you context, there isn't a single day that I don't speak to my mother in person or on the phone. I always tell her that she is my biggest fan. She and my dad are extremely supportive of everything I do right from the time I was six years old and played my first piano concert all the way to my freelance writing for magazines and blogs.

I am incredibly grateful to have had such great role models in my life. On my first day of work at Tiger Brands, both my parents gave me advice. My mother said, "You aren't important until they can't start a meeting without you. Work towards that," as I walked out of the door, rushing to make sure I made it on time. After a bewildering first day, I returned home to my family at the dinner table. My father looked at me, squinting slightly at the sight of my high heels in my right hand and my bare feet wriggling on the cool tiles. He could tell that I had had a rough day, so he walked up to me and said, "Remember, the road to success is always under construction. Don't be too hard on yourself, it was your first day and I'm sure you did well."

Looking back now, I understand the advice my parents gave me and it is advice I now give others regardless of their chosen career. You must consistently put in the work, but hard work does pay off.

ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

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