

Promise turns 10

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Promise was born in 2005 out of the desire of the founding partners, James Moffatt (CEO) and Marc Watson (ECD), to create an independent agency they could call their own.

It was not to be an easy start.

With no founding clients or start-up capital, Marc and James remortgaged the house, set up office at their dining room table in Parkhurst and hit the road, cold calling. James was to bring in the business and service it, as well as handle the financials. Marc was to meet clients' marketing objectives with hardworking creative solutions.

Income from the first brief (to brand a series of coffee mugs) didn't even recover fuel costs to service the job, let alone time. But it was the first payment they received for rendering their services and it was the moment they defined their independence for the first time.

James reminisces on the journey: "After about six months, when Marc and I needed a little more work space, we moved from the dining table to another room in the house. At this time we engaged our first employee, Mona Derksen. My first employee concern was whether she would forget to close the gate as that would be the end of our dachshunds! Mona was a trooper.

"I then managed to get us in to pitch on a golf retailer that competes with The Pro Shop. They had seven stores nationwide and became a long-term client. It was our first retainer - R22,000/month.

"It was soon after that, that my old client Mercedes-Benz (who was with my previous employer, Leo Burnett), called us up and awarded us the Smart car account. It was a game changer - I will never forget the moment. We were driving on the M1 past the city and screamed with elation in the car when we received the news! The problem is we were working from home and they wanted to promptly meet us at our offices. It was then time to quickly find office space.

"I secured space in a building Marc and I had always wanted to work from, less than a kilometre from home. We soon had eight employees supporting us. We would take on any opportunity we could and worked with a number of start-ups and entrepreneurs who had tiny project-based budgets to launch their products and brands. We engaged with a take-away at a taxi rank (that was in dire need of rebranding) and taste-tested recipes, personally installed exhibition stands, agonised over the quality of jobs coming off the press late at night, worked weekends and put countless hours into projects, sometimes unpaid. This was tremendously satisfying work, as we had a direct hand in the success of some challenging projects. As a result, our reputation led to more opportunities and strong organic growth with happy clients.

"Later, I secured a meeting with Famous Brands through an old colleague and we were awarded one brand: House of Coffees. The client really enjoyed Marc's accessibility and high level of effective input into their business. Soon our portfolio with Famous Brands had expanded to include Steers (BTL), FishAways (TTL) and Brazilian (BTL).

"Then in 2010, at five years of age, I managed to get a one-on-one meeting with the marketing executive at Edcon,



Marc Watson & James Moffatt

responsible for the CNA brand. We pitched and won the business. CNA is still with us today and we have further grown our portfolio with Edcon, now managing their cellular activities through all stores including Edgars, Jet and CNA. The team won two Gold Loeries on CNA last year, a noteworthy achievement in the retail segment.

"In 2011, we took the decision to invest in creating a digital division that would compete with the best and Promise Digital was born. Building a digital agency from scratch was a really tough challenge - from an emotional, financial and time perspective. Promise Digital had to meet our high standards from the get-go and we were really frustrated at times. The talent pool emerging from the tertiary funnel and previous digital employers wasn't keeping up with demand from the exploding digital scene. We also found most of the talent residing in the Cape, yet most of the business was up in Johannesburg.

"We made a few hiring mistakes but were hell-bent on getting both front and back-end development in-house, as well as securing the best possible talent for our Social Media division. It took us two years to get Promise Digital to a place we were really happy with.

"Around this time I managed to secure our place in a pitch for the Renault digital business, as their incumbent agency did not have digital capabilities. I've learnt that business development requires tenacity, a thick skin and patience. The opportunities I brought into Promise were often through-an-ex-client's-friend-of-a-friend-who-knew-someone-at-so-and-so-who-heard-there-was-an-opportunity. Anyway, we were thrown into the Renault pitch as a wildcard. We were also late - the brief had been out for two weeks. After a pitch process against some big names in the digital business, we won the account. After two years of providing effective digital solutions, we pitched on the entire Renault account against some top five agencies and won the integrated business. This was the model we had been focusing on - to provide our clients with seamless, integrated solutions.

"Shortly before this time we began working with SAB-Miller, who have become an exceptional client to work with. Breweries demand high standards of their agencies, but also a high standard for themselves - the calibre of their marketing teams is outstanding. We are where we are today because of clients like SAB-Miller.

"We then pitched on Africa's largest cement and aggregate producer, AfriSam, and were successful with the pitch. This was a major coup for the agency and Promise continues to enjoy a fantastic relationship with the AfriSam team.

"By 2011 we had moved twice within the same office complex to accommodate our growing team of about 30 staffers. The cost of expansion is such that we only considered moving when we were crammed like sardines into the place, with queues for the kettle and loo.

"There was an amazing atmosphere in that office. It was a busy buzz of collaboration, commerce and laughter (plus the odd tear). But 300 square metres was no longer viable for us and we moved into 1,000 square metres in 2014. The new premises have given us room for personal space, six meeting rooms and a great bar, in which our fall-down Friday parties have become quite legendary!

"Promise has evolved over the years into a harmonious, but busy environment. We invest a great deal in culture work. And we derive tremendous pleasure from seeing our people rise and grow.

"Occasionally you will see a person join the agency, who does not live by the values of excellence we espouse. People who don't live these values don't stay for long. Fortunately, they are few and far between. We have a quote emblazoned on a wall in the studio, it states simply: 'Come with remarkable or don't come at all.' I've also put a guiding principle in place - simply, you're not allowed to complain unless you provide at least two solutions.

"The people that really shine at Promise work by these values and enjoy great career growth and the respect of the team.

"Like every agency, we've had some frustrating client experiences and made some bad choices. But we have learnt how to attract quality and love working with our current clients. We believe that agencies should be fairly selective, as much as is

possible, in terms of whom they choose to work with.

"Marc and I are extremely proud of our team and the headway we have all made, especially considering the strained economy of the past six years. We've also built an agency culture that is uniquely void of politics; we have a tremendous sense of togetherness at Promise," James concludes.

Today, Promise is an agency approaching a staff count of 60. They are a fully integrated TTL agency, which has diversified into solution categories that have kept them invaluable relevant to their clients.

James and Marc's advice to aspiring advertising entrepreneurs is simple. First, prepare yourself for a hard road. Then, do great work consistently, attract brilliant talent and seek great clients. Everything will fall into place.

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