

# A day in the lockdown life of Ebony+Ivory MD Paul Middleton

 By Jessica Tennant

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Founder and MD of Ebony+Ivory, Paul Middleton's account of work-life in the time of Covid-19, part of a series of articles looking into how agencies and agency folk are responding to the crisis and viewing it through a creative lens...

There's no difference in pre- or post-lockdown between two and four in the morning. This is when I start each workday and respond to the items that need the clearest thinking, strategies, legal, HR, finance, etc. Lockdown routine rises with the sunrise but before that I try to fit in a 20-30 minute gym break that is followed by a rather absurd 2.4km run up and down the driveway (three times per week). The round the clock E+I team catches up daily at 9am sharp as approximately 15 of us rally around our cameras to discuss every project and prioritise deadlines on the Traffic Zoom (without a single Johannesburg traffic hitch complaint). Eyes find hope in seeing colleagues, even if only from our virtual spaces. Then it's all systems keep going. The zooming is non-stop until 10pm most days (weekends included). There is a similarity in each day's pace and demand, as my days include calls and connections with between 10 to 20 a day, from clients to media and creative to client service, through to strategy, PR, admin and finance. Perhaps the difference is that now we're all connecting – for real – and have to concentrate on listening at warp speed. – Founder and MD at Ebony+Ivory, Paul Middleton's account of work-life in the time of Covid-19.



Paul Middleton, founder and MD of Ebony+Ivory

■ **What was your initial response to the crisis/lockdown and has your experience of lockdown been different to what you expected?**

We moved the agency from being in office to 100% virtual and activated one week before the official lockdown in South Africa. It was obvious that it needed to happen and we wanted to protect our staff.

In answering whether my lockdown experience has been what was expected? No, as we have been working towards a flexible agency for years. The model is an obvious one and one that we have been defining and crafting over time.

■ ***Comment on the impact of the pandemic on the agency and creative industry or economy as a whole.***

We are tuned into the current reality being an opportunity for becoming stronger. It is futureproofing E+I and fast-tracking us to where things were leading the agency. We are picking up new clients, things are moving fast, and while there have been a few bumps and a slowdown is a reality, we have seen things pick up already as clients get to grips with moving their client mix.

■ ***How is the agency responding to the crisis and current lockdown?***

We have found that connections between our team, clients and partners have been drawn even closer together. Compassion, care and encouragement has been the order of each day. We have learnt to listen twice as hard and especially on Zoom calls, talk twice as little! What's been needed was absolutely clear lines of responsibility in executing each brief. We will be stronger after this for sure.

■ ***Comment on the challenges and opportunities.***

Communication has needed to be a lot tighter and clearer. I am worried about budgets and sustainability. We have picked up some new business and if it had not arrived, I would have been more worried. I remain cautious as nobody can ever see into the future but I remain quietly confident that we can see this through as a country, industry and agency.

■ ***Speaking of opportunities, the world has really turned to creativity during this time. Why do you think this is the case and what does this mean for the industry, agencies and their clients or brands?***

Pressure causes new reactions and the big question from clients is we don't know... In our industry context, there is much that we know and there is a resilience that is built into our creative strength. The apocalypse of agencies is not yet here ... but only if we are authentic business partners who work 24/7 with our clients on their paths.

■ ***How has the lockdown affected your staff? What temporary HR policies have you put in place regarding remote working, health & safety, etc.?***

E+I's management confirmed in the first week of lockdown that we would all take a 20% cut in April to protect our staff's salaries. Based on April income and May turnover, we will determine how things will proceed on this front. We have to be agile and respond to the situation as it is. The team morale has been outstanding to date. Other HR policies such as leave remain unchanged. And we foresee a stronger move to more contract- and project-based work in the future.

■ ***How are you navigating 'physical distancing' while keeping your team close-knit and aligned and your clients happy?***

We don't stop ... weekends, public holidays ... it has been seamless and intensive across our channels. The focus and grit from E+I's people has been amazing.

■ ***What are you busy working on? Any initiatives/campaigns relating to the coronavirus?***

The most exciting dynamic campaign work that is currently underway is in partnership with Brand South Africa and other key clients, including the IDC and Wits University, but every client's focus and resolve inspires us to deliver to our best. Every brief we are entrusted with is another opportunity to make a difference.

■ ***Has this global crisis changed your view of the future of advertising/marketing in any way?***

No, I have always been on the 'agile, new model, let's change, let's find a new better way' tangent and as a result, this just enables the team to implement changes faster.

■ ***Any trends you've seen emerge as a result of the crisis?***

Quicker thinking, more productivity from those who are ready and able. The stronger will get stronger.

■ ***Your key message to fellow industry folk?***

Network, be active, get up earlier than you used to everyday, dig deeper, try harder, be open and transparent, give more of yourself and your companies and look to do good. We all have to become larger than ourselves.

## ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

Jess is Senior Editor: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com. She is also a contributing writer. [marketingnews@bizcommunity.com](mailto:marketingnews@bizcommunity.com)

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