

Graeme Stiles, director at Algorithm Agency

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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Graeme Stiles' interest in performance marketing has led him to start an agency that specialises in SEO, paid media and data. "Everything we do has its foundation in data and this rolls out into our SEO and paid media campaigns. Our focus is not so much on creative executions but rather on hard metrics and a strong return on investment for our clients," explains Stiles.

Admitting that Algorithm will never be a jack of all trades, he says the greatest challenge has been staying true to these specialist areas. "It's been very tempting to branch out into other areas, and we're often asked by clients if we can assist them with other service lines. The revenue is always tempting for a small agency and it has sometimes been hard to pass this up, however we feel strongly about our positioning and being excellent at what we do rather than being good at a lot of things."



■ When and why did you start Algorithm?

[Algorithm](#) started a year ago in February 2016. After several years of working in one of the bigger digital agencies in South Africa, I wanted to start something that specialised in performance marketing. A year later, we're going from strength to strength, and we're excited to bring a specialist performance marketing approach to the market in SA.

■ What does your average workday look like?

Being in the startup phase and our hands-on approach to clients' campaigns means my day-to-day role is varied. Typically, my day is made up of strategic direction across our client portfolio and ensuring that we have the best processes and strategy in place to drive results. I also spend a fair amount of time on client service and communication, as well as new business development. We have seen first-hand the risks of having too many layers between the client and the specialist working on the campaign. In light of this, we've decided to remove the client service layer and to make sure the client has direct access to those responsible for delivering results. A big part of what I do daily is ensuring this all comes together.

■ What is the size of your team?

We currently have a team of seven covering the disciplines of SEO, paid media (search and display), conversion optimisation and performance copywriting.

■ Why performance marketing?

Performance marketing for me embodies the core principles and foundations on which digital advertising and marketing is built. For many years one of the main selling points for digital has been its measurability. The problem, though, is that this principle often seems to get lost along the way and in recent years seems to have slipped into the background slightly.

As the digital industry in South Africa matures and bigger budgets have been unlocked, the focus has shifted slightly towards improved creative. Don't get me wrong, this is good, but in my mind the focus needs to be on results first. Did anyone see your campaign, and better yet, how many leads or how much revenue did the campaign drive versus what you spent on it?

These are the questions we like to work with and its why we specialise in performance marketing. For us its about using data to drive strategic decisions and focusing on client return on investment above all else.

■ What has been your most noteworthy learning of the space?

One of the things I enjoy most about this space is the constant change and adaptation required to stay competitive. In the performance marketing space things change on a day to day basis so learning and staying up to date needs to be a big part of your workflow.

At Algorithm things really came together once we were able to build out a step by step process incorporating up-to-date best practice in a framework that allowed us to scale. This has been the biggest learning curve and something that is now paying off in our day-to-day delivery.

■ What do you love most about marketing as a career?

As mentioned above the constant change is something I enjoy. I love the fact that you can never stand still and that you constantly need to be learning and ensuring that your theory is up to date. Adding to this I enjoy the test and experimental nature of performance marketing. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and the magic happens when you take the theory you've learnt and apply it in different and unique ways.

■ What trends do you predict for your industry in 2017?

These may not play out in 2017, but in the short term I expect to see a shift in client budget from the big generalist agencies to specialist agencies, especially in the performance marketing space. As clients become more educated about what they want from their digital marketing efforts and with the economic climate getting tougher, return on investment and campaign results that directly impact the bottom line will become more important.

Further to this, as Google and other platforms move more into a pay to play model, the ecosystem will become more competitive and you'll need true subject matter experts to get the best results. This I believe will spin out into an approach that looks at performance marketing as a whole rather than siloed channels, i.e. we will no longer see the focus being on individual tactics, for example just SEO, or just Google AdWords but rather on performance marketing as a channel or funnel with all the various tactics combining to drive revenue and return for clients.

A big part of pulling this big picture approach together will be data and reporting. The more actionable insights and data we can intelligently gather and analyse to provide clients with the information to make business decisions, the better.

■ What are your goals for the year?

Algorithm's goals for the year are to continue growing and to establish ourselves as a top of mind specialist agency. Our initial growth has been great and we aim to continue this while continuing to provide best in class performance marketing services for our clients.

Further to this we want to kick off our internal [training programme](#) in earnest. The idea here is to provide a platform to teach and offer practical experience in the field of performance marketing, a skill set we've found in scarce supply in South Africa and one that offers good career opportunities.

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

At the moment, there are a number of client proposals that are in the works, as well as some items around APIs and report integrations that I'm experimenting with.

■ What inspires you?

Growing Algorithm and ensuring we're successful is currently a massive motivation, and seeing things panning out this far has been a big inspiration and a strong driving factor to keep things going and improving.

■ What are you currently reading/listening to for work?

I am currently busy with [The Personal MBA by Josh Kaufman](#) and have recently finished [Zero to One by Blake Masters](#) and [Peter Thiel](#) and [The E-Myth Revisited by Michael Gerber](#), both of which were relevant to Algorithm and provided some useful context and guidance in getting things off the ground.

Tell us something about yourself not generally known.

I am a big fan of heavy metal and was a drummer in a local heavy metal band for a number of years!

ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

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