

Building relationships

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[Advantage, December 2002] Africa is a continent that attracts the adventurous and the entrepreneur. For the adventurous, it conjures up excitement, and an opportunity to see a world largely unspoilt by modern development. Vast and beautiful vistas with wild animals and primitive societies found nowhere else in the world.

For the entrepreneur Africa offers an opportunity to succeed in an environment unencumbered by old society restrictions that today stifle initiative. This is the story of an entrepreneur. Born and educated in England, Marie Yossava, in her early twenties caught the wanderlust bug. She wanted to see the world before settling down. Landing in Johannesburg in the early 1990s, she fell in love with South Africa and decided that this was the country where she wanted to plant her roots.

Prior to the start of her world travels she worked for a political organisation in England. Looking back to that period she believes the experience she gained there laid the foundation for her future career. "Working in politics you have to be meticulous, sure of your facts, and build relationships with the media," she recalls. On her arrival in Johannesburg she joined a laser technology company as an assistant. While there she studied public relations at Damelin Night School. After graduating, the company appointed her as the internal PRO. "I stayed with the company for two years, but realised that the position lacked scope with only one product to communicate," she said. "An advertising agency asked me to join them as their PRO, but after I had been there for a month, I discovered that my forte did not lie with internal communications, but with the media. I resigned and joined a motor company. By 1995, I knew the media ropes in Johannesburg and started to think about starting my own business. It was fortuitous that at that time a tax lawyer who was a Board Member of the laser technology company, impressed with my performance, suggested I do exactly that, and that he would back me," she said. "I took the opportunity, and launched 'Grapevine Communications'. My first accounts were the tax lawyer's private practice, the motor company, and 'Pecanwood' Golf Course and Residential Estate. This was my lucky break. I was involved from the beginning in the launch of the estate. Designed by Jack Nicklaus, the project caught the imagination of top people in Gauteng. The idea of a golf course and residential estate bordered by the Hartbeespoort Dam appealed strongly, and it was an immediate success." "The project allowed me to interface with a cross-section of media. The media publicity built my credentials. Impressed by the coverage I generated, I received calls from companies who wanted me to handle their PR business," she affirmed.

Yossava is quite clear as to what business she is in. "My company is not the perceived standard public relations operation. We steer away from desktop publishing, newsletters, cocktail parties, or events. I have positioned the company as a media liaison facility. Our strength is our media network. We provide the media with news that will be of interest to their audience. When company news adds value to the audience of a medium, it gets published. If it doesn't, it goes straight into the wastepaper basket," she asserts. Yossava says her relationships with the media are strong because she has taken the trouble to talk to editors, and establish exactly what are their objectives. "When you know what they want to achieve, you are then in a position to provide them with content that is of value. We make it a rule never to send the same story to the media we have selected. We re-write to fit the editorial style of the medium. If we cannot do that, we contact the editor and ask if the story has news value. If it is in the affirmative, we give him the facts, and leave the interpretation to him," she adds. Grapevine Communications has a staff of five, all journalists. "I decided that because our job is to get news into the media, our success would improve if the news was written by journalists," she said. "We work as a team. Although we each have our own accounts, we discuss projects and bounce ideas off each other. This ensures that the team is aware of the status of each project. Using the same system we also keep up to date with the media. Each member is tasked with checking a selection of media daily, to report on whether any have published news about our clients," she asserts. Yossava says that to be a good communicator you must be a people person and have a passion for the business. "Our motto is simple. The customer comes first. Learn about their business. Work hard. Keep in constant contact with the media, And, when the occasion arises, play hard. Integrity and fun are important in business," she stresses. Yossava believes in playing it straight with her clients. If the event has no news value, she tells them up front that it won't get published. "Companies

believe everything they do is of interest to the world at large. Unfortunately, this is not true and you have to be honest and say No!" "I believe our success is the result of being pro-active. We make a point of getting to know our clients' business and the industry in which they operate. Because we monitor the media daily, we keep in touch with industry developments. This puts us in the position of being able to talk to our clients as partners, work together, and generate news that will interest the market," she says. Yossava believes in growing her staff. "The only way you can achieve this is to trust them, give them the freedom to be creative, and to reward them when they have gone that extra mile and done well. I have wonderful people working with me, and my success is largely to the hard work and passion they bring to the business," she maintains. Grapevine Communications has done exceptionally well since it opened its doors in 1996. The company's client roster is large and ranges across a mix of industries: Broadcasting, Appliances, Finance, Media, Household Products, Fast Moving Consumer brands, Property, and Design. The company was recently appointed to handle the media communications for National Brands, marketers of a wide range of household name consumer brands. Commenting on the appointment, Maria Beffon, marketing director said. "Not only did we find that Grapevine Communications has excellent media connections, the company's approach to communication was fresh, insightful and well suited to our target markets. The enthusiasm of the team, and their passion swung the vote in their favour."

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