

M&N Brands: Building an SA-owned ad network, for Africans, by Africans

By  Leigh Andrews

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Earlier this week, it was announced that M&N Brands has acquired Mela Events. Here, M&N Brands Group CEO Zibusiso Mkhwanazi and Mela Events' owners, Tiziana Tucci and Enelra Booth, let us in on the secret sauce of their success and what the Mela Events acquisition foretells of M&N Brands' pan-African future.



Mela Events owners, Enelra Booth (L) and Tiziana Tucci (R) with M&N Brands Group CEO, Zibusiso Mkhwanazi.

It's been a headline year for M&N Brands. Not only has Grant Sithole just been appointed as joint ECD at Avatar, ensuring its creative fire blazes strong into its sixth year – it has also just acquired gold Loerie-winning Mela Events.

Fittingly, the Mela Events Twitter cover image explains that *Mela* is the Sotho word for **growth** in the sense of:

“ Undergoing natural development by increasing in size and changing physically or progressing to maturity as applied to mielies, children and extraordinary ideas. ”

That makes sense as the acquisition increases M&N Brands' consolidated revenue to over R150m, while also opening up the eventing space for Mela Events. I'd call that a win-win situation.

Here, Mela Events owners, Tiziana Tucci and Enelra Booth, and M&N Brands Group CEO Zibusiso Mkhwanazi let us in on the benefit of the acquisition for their individual brands, other highlights of the year that's been and what they're most looking forward to from the year to come...

■ **What's the benefit of the acquisition for your brand?**

Tucci and Booth: We've been in business for 12 years. We've [won gold at the Loeries](#). We are looking for the next phase of growth and M&N Brands gives us that, from a skills base to a network base to a transformation base.

It opens up the eventing space for us, where we can start building on a complete experience from pre- to post-event, giving clients integrated solutions that have all the touchpoints: from digital to social to media.

Mkhwanazi: It simply brings us closer to our dream to ultimately build a South African-owned advertising network, for Africans, by Africans. It also increases the Group's consolidated revenue to over R150m – excluding investments where we own less than 50% – making this a significant milestone in terms of the financial muscle to be able to handle very large accounts and raise further capital.

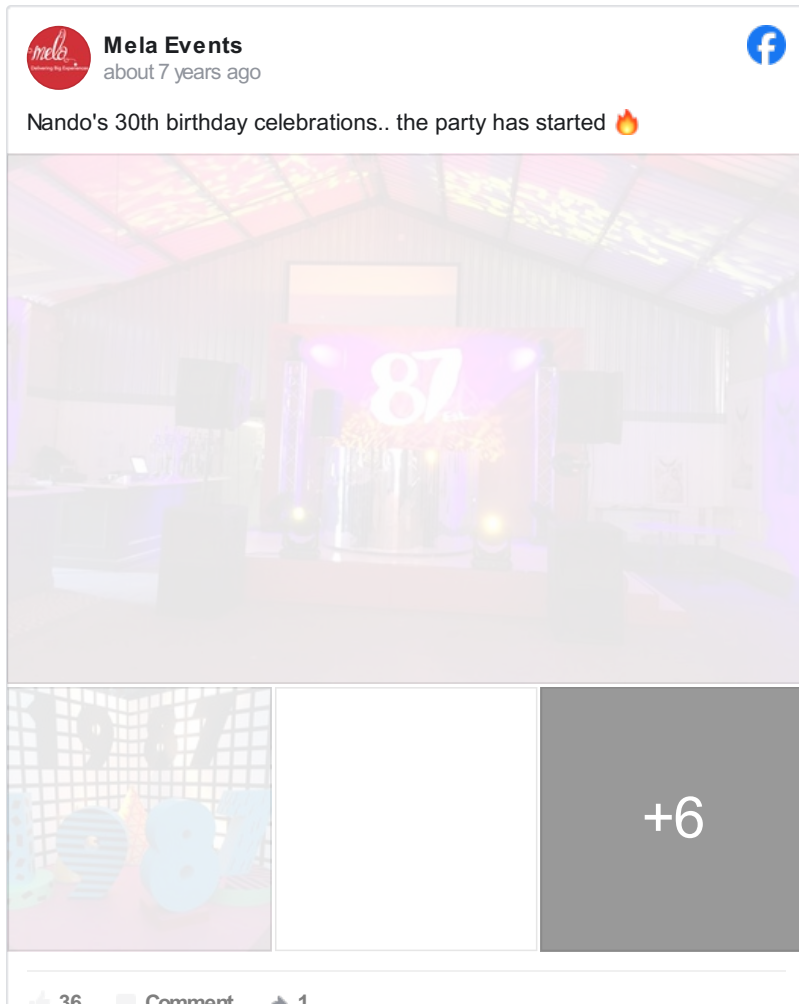
Mela Events was an attractive buy for us as they're established, award-winning, successful and great people.

“ We don't acquire to kill great culture. We seek to be value-adding partners. It is very important that agencies continue business as is, with the added benefits of shared resources, tapping into network skill sets, and, of course, scale. ”

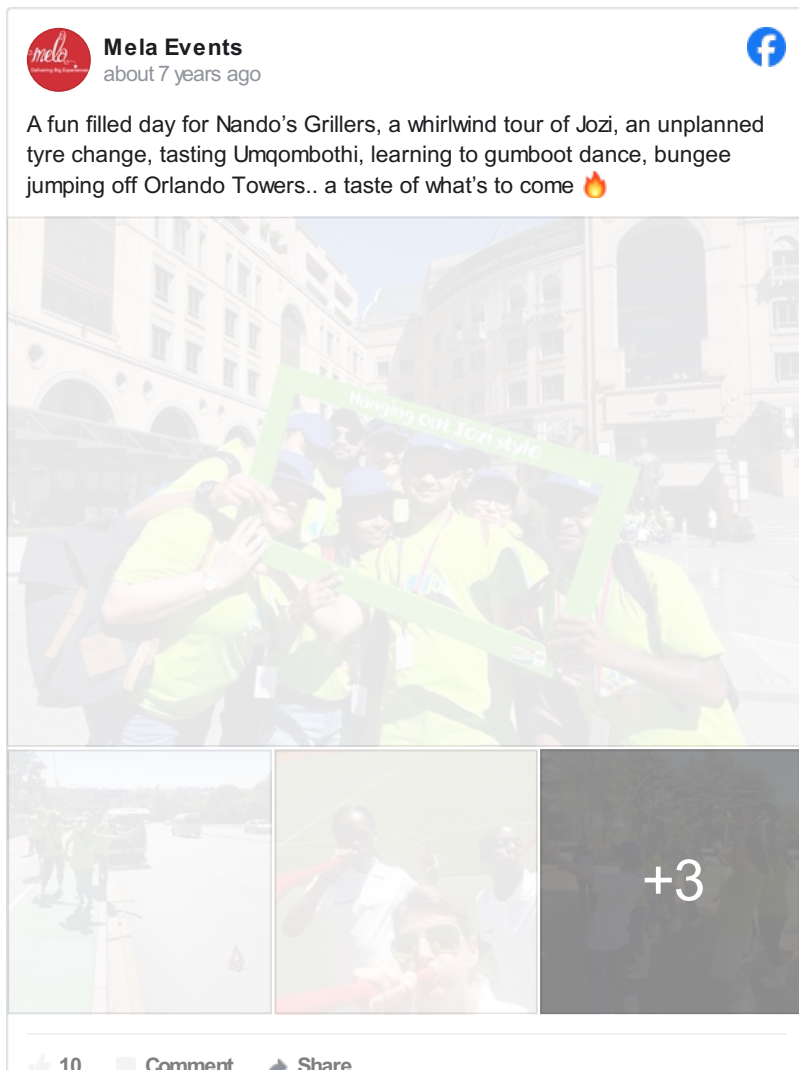
■ **List your other highlights of the year that's been.**

Tucci and Booth: We've been fortunate to work with some amazing clients this year, including Cisco Systems, Jaguar Land Rover, Standard Bank and Nando's, to name a few.

The Nando's 30th Birthday Celebrations in Cape Town was a definite highlight for us. Nando's embodies a brand with purpose, and we were able to showcase the amazing birth and growth of the Nando's brand to 700 'Nandocas', working with the founders to tell their story and celebrating their successes over three days of the conference, gala dinner and excursions. This was an event with a lot of heart!



Another highlight for us was the Nando's International Grillers competition – a real feel-good event where Nando's grillers from all over the world were flown in and given a true Jozi experience. The five-day event culminated in a 'Grill-Off' at Nando's Central Kitchen, where grillers were able to both learn and showcase their talents.



Standard Bank has also provided us with many opportunities and proud moments this year. Right up there was a Standard Bank Incentive Trip we hosted for 150 delegates over three days in Mauritius. A welcome dinner under the stars, a gala dinner in an abandoned sugar factory and series of excursions run concurrently across the island were just some of the highlights. In addition to this, we have delivered and produced amazing content for three leadership conferences, engaged with speakers, produced shows and created events that have left an indelible impression of those who have attended and participated in them.

Then Cisco Connect, managed on behalf of Cisco Systems, is a mass production that ranks as one of the key technology events of the year. We managed 1,000 delegates plus 40 sponsors and presenters over three days. We ran 68 sessions, put together a kick-ass keynote and a series of side events. We designed, built and produced 40 exhibition stands as a showcase for our keys sponsors.



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We delivered on all the delegate logistics, brand awareness and product training. As a paid-for event, Mela was responsible for managing and collecting all sponsorship as well as delegate fees to ensure that this break-even event hit target, and it did!

We assisted Cisco in marketing the event by providing them with the necessary tools including marketing collateral, briefing sessions and sponsorship documents as well as a fully-fledged website portal supporting the event.

Mkhwanazi: M&N Brands concluded an equity swap earlier this year between M&C Saatchi's SA agency network and Avatar (with each business remaining independent), Esihlahleni Women's Empowerment NPC and a soon-to-be-launched PR agency, Bozza.



Avatar and M&C Saatchi Abel mark SA agency landscape's first share swop

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What are you most looking forward to from 2018 from your own brand?

Tucci and Booth: We aim to continue building on the 'secret sauce' that has made Mela Events successful. With the support of M&N Brands and collaborative opportunities that exist within the network, we are now able to grow our service offering and make Mela magic happen.

In 2018 we look to continue working on some amazing events. We start off the year with a product launch for Jaguar Land Rover, as well as employee engagement events and conferences for both Standard Bank and Nando's. So 2018 looks set to be a cracker of a year!

Mkhwanazi: I'm hoping we will be able to close a few more acquisitions within and outside of South Africa while we are in a window of massive opportunity to create an Africa-wide network on the back of our existing clients and an innovative funding model.

"Our dream is to be the largest black owned advertising agency in Africa" - [@TheNduna](#)— AVATAR South Africa (@Avatar_ZA) [November 1, 2017](#)

This will make us a true pan-African brand, with the ability to service South African businesses on the rest of the continent. I am also looking forward to sharing notes and collaborating with the plethora of successful entrepreneurs that we are still talking to become part of the network and existing partners. So yes, 2018 is definitely going to be an interesting year.

What are your most looking forward to from the industry as a whole over the coming months?

Tucci and Booth: We're excited that advertisers and marketers have to be more creative to cut through an increasingly cluttered environment; and we believe that through M&N Brands and the network it's building, we're able to leverage skills to ramp up the impact of our events through many different channels.

This acquisition provides us with new opportunities and the ability to offer our clients a turnkey solution. We want to create events that generate substantial earned media for our clients.

Mkhwanazi: To continue driving the transformation message, our thinking is now about **transforming the industry as whole and not just individual businesses.**

"We truly believe that diverse minds collaborating to create perspective is the key to transforming SA and building Africa: a network of entrepreneurs shaping brands. M&N Brands hopes to offer SA and Africa's agency entrepreneurs a viable alternative to global buyouts: one that will build agencies, their people and the entrepreneurs that started them."

Lots to look forward to from 2018 – keep an eye on Biz for all the latest updates! Click [here](#) for more on Avatar, [here](#) for more on Mela Events, and be sure to follow [Avatar](#) and [Mela Events](#) on Twitter.

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