

Digital marketing innovation - SA has what it takes

 By [Stephen Sandmann](#)

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The concept of innovation drives me. I love taking calculated risks. I enjoy doing the associated R&D. Most of all I like to watch it unfold as a campaign.

A friend and ex-colleague of mine, Rob Stokes (digital marketing pioneer, founder and non-executive chair at Quirk/Mirum Africa and Red & Yellow School) and I discussed this topic. Rob had this to share, “with artificially intelligent machines poised to take most jobs, the ability to think creatively will become the most important skill of the future as it is uniquely human.”

I believe South African digital marketers produce innovative digital marketing all the time but often and unintendedly fail to get the global recognition they may deserve.

Is it all about winning awards? I believe not. I think digital marketers should just love what they do and in the process to push boundaries. Winning awards is a bonus.



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Innovation requires nurturing and working with like-minded people

I have and continue to work with SA's top digital marketers. To all those starting their careers in digital marketing – make sure you always work hard, no idea is silly, ask questions, learn from constructive criticism, and don't give up on the hope of landing that job opportunity to work with SA's best.

The war of innovation

A factor to sometimes consider in the 'war for innovation' is that locally we are often technologically hindered from creating innovative campaigns because the tech takes a while to be rolled out in SA, compared to the US and Europe (e.g. Google Home). However, this doesn't stop us from trying to squeeze everything we have out of the available technology. We must push ourselves every day and not use, “well, we're in SA and we can't do cool stuff like in the US or Europe.”

“OK Google, who won a Grand Prix Lion at Cannes?”

Burger King's recent OK Google (Google Home) campaign just won a Grand Prix Lion at Cannes. It is fantastic to see that digital-lead campaigns, powered by Google tech are getting recognised on a global level.

South African's pioneered “OK Google” digital marketing

I'm a search marketer by trade and I've always been intrigued by Google's various technologies. I have first-hand experience with this type of digital marketing. I spearheaded an innovative OK Google campaign way back in 2015 for McDonald's South Africa together with leading digital marketers at Mirum (formally Quirk), who made it possible. At the time, we pushed the very edge of what could be done with Google's “OK Google” voice technology, long before Google Home devices existed. We were arguably the first in the world to launch an “OK Google” voice-activated campaign, merely a few days before Nestle UK launched their “OK Google” Kit Kat campaign.

I've been wanting to create a Google Home campaign ever since Google Home was launched in the US. Unfortunately, Google Home is not fully supported by Google in SA yet, which I understand. These things take time to roll out globally.

Search marketing with a youthful touch

How does one break through competitors' advertising clutter in a youthful way? I've been fortunate enough to help drive another innovation in Search Marketing once more – to harness emojis for a leading telco's [youth marketing campaign](#). By combining and harnessing two local digital trends in a cutting-edge way. Google Search and the use of emojis by the youth segment are more popular than ever.

First, I noticed that Google had just reintroduced the availability of emojis in their organic search results (not ads). I asked myself, “how can this be taken advantage of in a useful way?”

Second, I developed an idea in the form of a competition entry mechanic. Website URLs on marketing material don't engage consumers like they used to. I believe consumers have become somewhat blind to them. URLs aren't the strong call-to-action messages they used to be – consumers are just too used to seeing them, almost everywhere these days.

Third, the idea was finalised. People can simply tap a series of emojis into their cellphones' Google Search bar, just like they would do in a WhatsApp message to a friend.

A competition entry page would then present itself in the Google Search results. This is being promoted online and offline. The data doesn't lie, people are embracing this never-been-done-before marketing message.

The pressure is on – we need to innovate to stay relevant

I'm optimistic about the South African digital marketing industry. The increasing growth of local digital marketing output and its growing prominence will collectively guarantee that digital marketers need to innovate to stay relevant.

ABOUT STEPHEN SANDMANN

I have a keen interest in innovative, digital marketing-lead advertising and search marketing (SEO and paid search), which I've developed through my award-winning agency and corporate career at Ogilvy, Quirk (now Mrum), Vodacom and now a specialist digital marketing consultant at Sandmann Digital.

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