

A day in the lockdown life of M&C Saatchi Abel's Robert Grace

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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"A typical day for me, and this would vary from person to person, is really a juggle between family and work, as my wife Jo and I have a 2 and 4-year-old. Not an easy age for a lockdown! I've had a few near misses on video calls with children bursting through the door in varying states.

"It is hard at times, but I think one of the things we hopefully will take out of this is really experiencing each other's humanity; whether it's a partner or spouse whose head pops into the video call by mistake, or my naked 2-year-old covered in cookie dough bursting through the doors whilst talking to a client, it shows our common humanity and I think that's a good thing as we all go through this together." – Founding partner and head of strategy at M&C Saatchi Abel/Group, Robert Grace's account of work-life in the time of Covid-19.

"These are unprecedented times for any brand (and their agency), regardless of the category they operate in, and now more than ever, brands need to be absolutely clear on their response both now and post Covid-19. And this ultimately means being clear on one fundamental: understanding the role your brand plays in the lives of your consumers.

"As a Group, we planned well in advance for a lockdown scenario to ensure the nearly 350 people across our teams are able to work remotely, supported not just by the right tech and platforms, but also emotional support and inspiration."

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

As I mentioned we started planning well in advance of this potential scenario. And from the get-go, from the hygiene interventions we put in place at our campuses through to keeping our clients informed as to how we would be operating through this, we were very conscious to avoid 'hype or fear language' (read: no computer-generated images of a scary-looking virus or the word "unprecedented").

So throughout it, we've focused on being calm, clear and pragmatic in our response and communication. And whilst it is a very serious situation, we have also adopted an optimistic lens to the communication focusing on what we – very fortunately

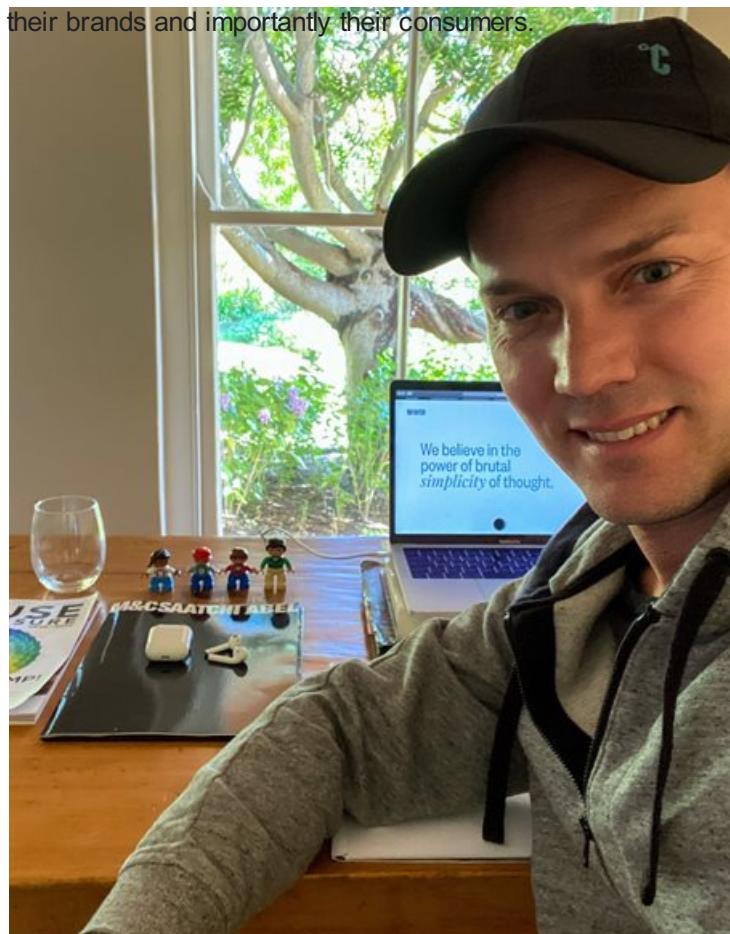
– are still able to do and the value we still bring to our clients, their brands and importantly their consumers.

New challenges and situations have presented themselves (and continue to), and our teams share these with the task team that I lead to plan and implement our response to Covid-19. We meet twice a week to ensure we are agile and quick in our response.

■ Comment on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the agency and creative industry or economy as a whole?

The industry is in for a rough ride. Often in a crisis brands cut back marketing spend – unfortunately succumbing to short-termism – something that isn't new, but will be more pronounced. Of course, the ability to get through this depends on one's client mix, the services you offer, but also your business model.

Businesses with existing cracks in them, tragically those cracks are going to turn into gaping holes. So, ultimately it's about coming back to the fundamentals of your business: absolute clarity on what value you bring, being an indispensable partner, building strong teams, robust cash flow.



Robert Grace, founding partner and head of strategy at M&C Saatchi Abel/Group

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

Whatever your approach to this situation, how you treat your people should be front and centre. Businesses who are putting their people first, that have spent the time and investment in building meaningful relationships with their people (and suppliers) will weather this far better, and most likely see greater commitment and even performance over this period. There's a great quote from Angela Ahrendts, the former CEO of Burberry who spearheaded the phenomenal turnaround of the brands, which rings true:

“ Before you build a connection with your customer, you build one with your employee first. ”

We've implemented a number of immediate responses for our teams to ensure they are supported over this time. One example is our group-wide emergency relief fund, which we've put in place to support any member of our team whose household finds themselves in a, particularly vulnerable situation.

The most important thing for us though is to keep connected to our teams. So, every week the Exco have a "live event" where the leadership engage directly with our people, and we've kept our usual engagements going – just on a digital platform – so we've kept our weekly Wednesday breakfast catch-ups and Friday drinks@Home.

■ Comment on the challenges and opportunities.

Whatever you do, don't stop. What do you do during the single biggest global conversation around a pandemic that is affecting everyone? I see two approaches:

Firstly, there are those brands that are going to be active over this period and should be.

- My view would be that these brands need to now move from the inspirational and sentimental platitudes that we've

seen (and were needed and I believe mostly welcomed by consumers) and now match this with action; what are you actually doing to help your consumers through this.

- And this can be done in many ways: be it through specific action like we saw Standard Bank leading the way on payment holidays, or adapting your business to contribute to the situation like LVMH repurposing fragrance production lines to make much-needed hand sanitizer, or simply offering an escape from the anxiety-like Yuppiechef doing free online cooking classes. These brands will be built lasting equity through these actions.
- Most importantly it has to be authentic and not seen as a marketing opportunity.



Innovating during the #Covid-19 pandemic

David Lansanah and Nicki Morley, Kantar 16 Apr 2020



And secondly for some brands, perhaps this is a time to pause or to “go into quarantine”. But that doesn’t mean to stop. Take this time to refine or develop new strategies and innovations so that when we’re through this, you’re ready to go to market with impact. That day will come.

- The challenge is that many organisations cut back at a time like this and often only focus on conversion driving communication efforts to meet short-term targets. And more and more, the data is revealing that this approach and strategy has limited runway on brand and business metrics.
- So the adage of “why waste a crises” rings true – but that certainly doesn’t mean being opportunistic.

■ 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/brands?

I’m part of a communicators network which is pulled together by the United Nations and we go to various gatherings (on pause for now) of researchers and scientists who are tackling [the climate crisis](#). And the work we do there is to stress the importance of creativity and demonstrate the power of communication to be included in their solutions. At a more recent session last year in Brazil one scientist came up to me after our session to say he got into science because “science = hope”, but that now he realises “science + creativity = hope”. And I believe that creativity, especially when it presents itself as a beautifully simple solution in this complex and challenging world, has never been more needed or more valuable.

“ Robert Grace is speaking at the UN’s [@14th_WFC2015](#) on how powerful communication can give the world’s forests a voice pic.twitter.com/mValqt61fP— M&C Saatchi Abel (@mcsaatchiabel) [September 8, 2015](#) ”

To achieve this though, you need to be absolutely clear on the clear role your brand plays in someone’s life.

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

I’m glad to see that the question uses the word ‘physical’ and not ‘social’ distancing. A key shift the WHO asked us to adopt. And they are totally right. At this time, it is more important than ever to be ‘social’ when people are feeling isolated, alone and in some cases, experiencing feelings of anxiety and depression.

What this means is that everything we have done, across agency and client, has been to ensure ongoing conversations and communication. What that has forced us to do, and happily so, is to look at how we digitise what we would usually do physically.

Microsoft Teams is the platform we use for all our internal and external communications and this has been amazing for us,

and our employees and clients have adopted it quickly. It is, quite simply, our virtual office space. Not just a meeting platform. People have even started creating great 'shared-interest' groups from a Wine Appreciation to a Cyclist Support Group.

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

As I mentioned before, some of our clients are active and have campaigns live because it's authentic and true to the role of their brand. Think about a brand like Mweb or Takealot that provides a really valuable and essential service. We're active and delivering work for them and many other clients. At the same time some of our clients have also, and rightly so, for the moment paused. And whilst going 'dark' for a short period of time has shown not to affect brand or business metrics, being absent for too long a period will cause damage. So, over this period we're working on adapting and fine-tuning strategies or focusing on innovation pipelines.

The key thing for us is to not waste this time and use it.



Never waste a good crisis!

Amanda Reekie, imagineNATION Alliance 20 Apr 2020



■ Has this global crisis changed your view of the future of advertising/marketing in any way? Any trends you've seen emerge as a result of the crisis?

Returning to a new normal. Many thought pieces and trend forecasters predict major and significant changes in consumer mindsets and behaviours. We've all seen the dramatic soundbites.

Of course, this period has forced new behaviours, most obviously in the technology space and use of technology in our lives.

You may even see greater demand in accountability from other spheres of government if their swift action and response over the next few weeks achieves its objective and demonstrates their ability to deliver.

I take a pragmatic view of what the world looks like post-Covid-19, one that is based on the principle that 'the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour'. I asked our Intelligence Unit in London to assess global social media conversations on previous pandemics which showed that three months after these major events the conversation dies out, even people professing to being 'bored' with the conversation and clearly moving on with life. Just one small but relevant data point.

We think there will probably be three consumer responses, perhaps in phases and also dependent on which segment of the market, but loosely for most economically active South Africans we see:

- *A period of release:* Having been constrained both physically and mentally, a desperate need to experience the things I missed or have learnt about and want to try whilst in isolation.
- *A period of reset:* Looking at how I pick up the pieces of my life across family, social circles and work and apply some learnings from this period to get back to the day-to-day tasks of life.
- *A period of renewal:* The more higher-order phase, but a period of time where I re-think where and on what I spend my time and money.

■ What is your key message to fellow industry folk?

Now, more than ever, we need to unleash the power of creativity.



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