

Danilo Acquisto heads up local YouTube multi-channel network

By [Jessica Tennant](#)

27 Sep 2017

Following the recent launch of Special Effects Media SA, I interviewed CEO Danilo Acquisto who was appointed by the network's global partners to head up the new South African studio, effective 1 August 2017.

Special Effects Media is a global YouTube multi-channel network (MCN) that's been localised to serve the South African market of creators, brands and companies on YouTube. It's a slightly nuanced version of a traditional MCN as it takes a 360-degree approach, analysing channels and providing legal and contractual, as well as creative strategy support, and building community, physically pitching to local brands and agencies, as well as offering a working space for creators.

As the only commercial MCN in South Africa, Special Effects Media is taking a huge risk investing in the local digital video space. "No other company has taken the risk to provide analytical, production, financial and studio support in one," says Acquisto. "The industry is looking for a parent figure to know what is acceptable and what is unacceptable when it comes to growing the landscape."

He knows this well, as he tried to start a MCN of his own about three years ago. Although it didn't pan out, it did demonstrate his interest and initiative to the global partners. Here, he tells us a bit about this journey, how these relationships were formed and what is now Special Effects Media SA...



Danilo Acquisto

"The South African market was desperate for an MCN to support local creators and no one had the guts to take the challenge on because it would require a lot of financial resources and as with all digital projects, a great risk. I wanted to take it on. We had found a local investor but he wanted quick returns for his investment. With that venture, for him to see a return, it would take a lot of risk and take a bit of time – so we never had the opportunity to take off in the way that I had hoped. YouTube themselves also required one-million watch hours of content on the network before they would allow the certification as a Google partner as an MCN. It was a vicious cycle. Fast forward two years and one of my great friends, Claire Winstanley and I were having a coffee catch-up and talking about the YouTube scene. I offered my help to her and spoke her through my vision in SA. As fate would have it, that afternoon she had a meeting with the network she had signed with in Hungary called Special Effects Media and through that conversation the MD asked her if she knew anyone locally who was keen to start an office in SA. She introduced us, we Skyped, looked at the numbers, met in London for an initial meeting and then set everything into motion. And so Special Effects Media South Africa was started and I am honored to be one of the owners of an agency that is going to change the game..."

■ **Congratulations on the new appointment. What does your role entail?**

Thank you so much! I am feeling very honoured to have been provided the opportunity to flex my intellectual muscle. My role as CEO is to look after the vision of Special Effects Media South Africa, to ensure that my team is performing optimally and to ensure that at all stages we as a company are growing and adding value.

■ **How has your background in TV/radio equipped you with the skill set to take on this new challenge?**

I managed to get on to TV while I was doing my law degree at UCT. So I think entrepreneurship was always part of my

life. Working on TV, spotting a digital gap in the market, networking and thinking on my feet during the seven years I have been on live TV have given me a solid foundation to adapt to all sorts of changes and to do a lot of market research. I have met so many young people through my work on Hectic Nine-9 a few years ago and I realised how many of them desperately needed a platform to showcase their talent but YouTube wasn't well supported enough to help them make a success of themselves.



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■ **What are you most excited about? And tying in with our [#InnovationMonth](#) theme, why does innovation excite you?**

I started this business with our Hungarian partners because I really wanted to see the YouTubers supported. I have a lot of production experience and by investing in YouTube I have a strong understanding of what it takes to grow and sustain an audience on the platform. These creators are incredibly passionate people with loads of brilliant ideas and if I can see them thrive, I would have achieved my purpose. I am also excited to sit with brands to help them understand the metadata of their channels to achieve maximum traction with their content.

Innovation excites me. The digital industry in SA is growing. We are following the route of the European markets and it's expanding monthly. Brands are starting to notice that they can get much more ROI by investing in targeted campaigns with measurable results than with shotgun traditional campaigns. The best way to achieve this result is in digital where everything can be measured and targeted. That's exciting.

■ **Comment on the current and future state of the industry.**

In 2018 we're going to see content creators producing much more content and distributing it on platforms that are free and able to generate revenue. Broadcasters are no longer holding much control over content. Look at what Netflix and Hulu are doing for the market. On-demand content is the future and we need to produce more of it!

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

For now my priority is to sign on the YouTubers who are taking their careers seriously - the creators who are producing regular content. Once I have a stable base, I will be running a few roadshows to talk to brands about YouTube and to do some workshops. Then the studio will open and creators will start to produce better content with more metadata support, achieving higher audience growth and hopefully that will drive viewership and thereby brand interest.

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

At the moment I am diving into loads of articles on digital exclusion. With every industry moving more and more towards digital, we are either going to see a more productive and competitive economy; or, if South Africans are being excluded from technology, an alienated population left behind from job opportunities - which increases poverty. My job as CEO is to ensure that I invest in digital so as to provide opportunities for digital inclusion and to challenge service providers to invest in education. We need more of our population consuming content and engaging with the internet. By producing better quality and diverse content we can provide content for the masses and thereby including them...

■ **What do you love most about digital video and YouTube in particular?**

I absolutely love how free you are on YouTube. You don't need to approach a big broadcaster and wait years to see your creative expression on air. With YouTube you also have so much control over your product and you can always improve on your metadata and how your content is received. You learn something new every single day. And then there is the added excitement that you can make money from your channels. That is the part that I think is exciting. There are endless possibilities for building a career out of creating content.

■ **Tell us something about yourself not generally known.**

I don't think people understand that I was diagnosed and medicated for ADD for most of my young life. I always thought there was something wrong with me and that I needed to be fixed in order to fit in. I wasn't the normal child. Little did anyone know that in my adult years I would be using that ADD to start businesses, work on TV and radio, work in ministry and work with the homeless. I found ways to use my ability to focus on multiple things at the same time to my advantage. I am always learning and am not the failure I told myself I was as a kid - I was simply misunderstood.

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