

Insaaf Khan, chief growth officer at VMLY&R

By  Emily Stander

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Insaaf Khan, chief growth officer at VMLY&R, strongly believes in the power of crafting a story.



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With the tenacity one needs for a fruitful career in adland, Khan has found great success in perpetuating the drive for change. Here, we find out more about her, her personal life, and perhaps what the future looks like for her...

■ ***As chief growth officer at VMLY&R, could you briefly describe what your role entails?***

I head up our new business and partnerships across our Cape Town and Johannesburg offices, crafting our proposition and working closely with our offices around the world, assembling teams to creatively solve business challenges and drive growth.

■ ***What's behind your mask - literally and figuratively speaking?***

I'm an eternal optimist, so my mask usually covers a big laugh or huge smile. I care about raising good humans, growing our young talent, and ensuring access to skills, mentorship, and opportunities.

■ ***Growing up, what did you want to be?***

I grew up in Cape Town, close to the mountain, and always wanted to be a smokejumper responding to wildfires on Table Mountain.

■ ***How did you end up on your career path?***

I have always been curious about the creative process, with an unwavering belief in the power of creativity and storytelling. Exploring first as a film student at Afda, I later graduated from UCT GSB, while working on film sets in the evenings and on weekends.

My advertising career began in Cape Town. I created a shortlist of all the agencies I wanted to work with, then I emailed, called, and near-stalked them for an opportunity to start from the ground and work my way up – and it worked. I had the opportunity to marry my film experience with my desire to better understand the strategic conceptual process, working as

an account executive on a purpose-driven campaign for the Shout SA “You’re the Voice” music video and creative platform. It was great! My first taste of adland was purposeful and inspired me to seek projects where I can add value in meaningful ways that drives impact.

■ ***What excites you most about your career?***

The opportunity to drive change – we can creatively solve challenges that shift the market, grow businesses, and connect with audiences in new and innovative ways through multiple media that are relevant and, importantly, add value.

I love that I work with talented individuals, smart and diverse thinkers, and innovators – it’s fun, challenging and very rewarding. And importantly, I get to be part of the journey of growing and empowering the next generation of leaders – that excites me.

■ ***What advice would you give to youth trying to enter the industry?***

Come, it is your time, take your space, believe in your power and your voice. Ever the optimist, I believe that the challenge can be solved, and my advice is to have the tenacity and belief to see it through. There may be tough days ahead, but you will learn from them. I have learnt so much from my hardest moments. Do it afraid.

■ ***Where are you based during lockdown?***

At home in Joburg, surrounded by three kids under seven years of age, a large Ridgeback and a partner who’s my best friend and biggest supporter.

■ ***When you’re not busy working, what do you do? How do you socialise these days?***

As a mom of three, it doesn’t feel like I’m not working – ever. I have a lot of fun with my kids. They are at a curious age where it’s a world of wonder and discovery. We live along a beautiful river so you will find us on the rocks, walking the spruit on the weekends with friends. And when I’m not with my kids, you’ll find me boxing at a gym close to home or listening to a podcast.

■ ***What’s one thing not many people know about you, but should?***

Almost every big leap in my career has been accompanied by internal fear and self-doubt that has driven me to not be afraid to fail and embrace a lifelong learning philosophy.

I was raised and continue to be supported by a village of incredible women who have significantly contributed to shaping the woman I am today. I often reflect on the shoulders that I stand on and I am humbled and grateful for my roots.

■ ***What’s your favourite meme/gif of all time?***

I’m definitely not the person who finds the gif. I will share a good one though – so it would have to be my most shared gif – “We did it, Joe” with Kamala Harris.



■ ***What are you watching/reading/listening to at the moment?***

Mostly Peekaboo books and Julia Donaldson.

I really enjoy documentaries about sportspeople. It's always fascinated me - what it takes to win. So you will find me watching *Senna* (about the legendary F1 driver) on repeat and other series like *The Last Dance*.

📺 **What's next for you?**

My next pitch. I put everything into each one

ABOUT EMILY STANDER

Freelancer specialising in games and entertainment | My first loves are writing, music and video games
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