

O'Brian on the entrepreneur-driven business of advertising transformation

 By Leigh Andrews

23 Oct 2017

O'Brian is a true SA advertising rarity - a 100% black-owned through-the-line agency with a 20-year track record. Cofounder Mxolisi Evan Tyawa lets us in on the agency's highlights, as well as his views on economic transformation in advertising over the last 20 years - or rather, lack thereof - and how to make this a reality going forward.

Since forming in 1997, O'Brian has employed 56 people, incubated 8 businesses, trained 10 young people through internship opportunities, and seen a significant handful of its former employees go on to open their own businesses.

That's a powerful contribution towards job creation and the broader economic transformation in the advertising industry specifically.

Yet despite this legacy of success, agencies of this ilk are still referred to as fledglings or 'emerging'. Clearly they've already emerged.



Cofounder Mxolisi Evan Tyawa.



Partnering with a black-owned agency could change your mind about BEE

Johanna McDowell 27 Sep 2017



That's why Tyawa is marking their two-decade milestone both with a series of celebratory events where current and past staff members, clients and media are welcome, and by sharing the O'Brian story in the context of black people's standing in the multi-million rand local advertising industry.

“ To the next 20 years....here we come!!!! pic.twitter.com/miOrCPEBvG— O'Brian Digital (@ObrianSA) [August 23, 2017](#) ”

It's not necessarily what you're expecting, so step away from your inbox and settle in for the tale...

■ **Let's start at the very beginning. Let us in on how, where, when, why and how the agency started and how it has sustained itself since then.**

The agency was started in 1997 as a joint-venture partnership between Danish national Brian Nielsen or Brian the Dane – an unusual name for a Dane – and myself. We were alert to the massive possibilities ushered in by a new democracy and spurred on by a passion for advertising. It was a case of enterprise in a time of political and economic transformation, and we literally started the agency from the dining room of Nielsen's rented house, using garden furniture bought from the market that used to be held on Sundays along the road on William Nicol.

At the time, O'Brian was an extension of an existing company with a similar name based in Copenhagen, Denmark, which took its name from founder Brian Nielsen. When I took on new partners and continued the business, we were cognisant of the equity that the brand had garnered in the market and concluded to keep the name.

It's the logic in our magic that makes us stand out from the rest. Our single defining difference is our emphasis on sound strategic thought, based on the pursuit of shared clarity and understanding of the client business problem, challenge

or opportunity.

Too many times, clients are subjected to solutions that revolve around the services an agency offers and I believe that the one thing that gives us a competitive edge in our new business wins and sustained client relationships alike is our focus on the client's business, not ours. We are always 'service offering' neutral in our approach to problem solving, ensuring that we focus on the client's need and seek out the best possible solution rather than limiting ourselves and our clients to what we have within own walls.

Ours has never been and still is not an awards mission, but rather a transformation one. So as a business we have not really looked to enter awards, or have these as our measure of success and or impact. What remains a priority is whether our solutions deliver value and growth to our clients.

■ ***That seems to be a winning strategy as 20 years is definitely something to celebrate! What's your overall agency highlight, work-wise?***

The fact that we continue to deliver sustained brand solutions and communication work that has remained true, relevant and still delivers brand value to this day, is for me, the central highlight of this year's celebration.

Our continued ability to attract and do business with both the public and private sectors, has not been a small feat for an independent, black-owned agency in South Africa.



A selection of work done by O'Brian.

There are also several highlights with regards to work we've produced. In both sectors, this includes the long-standing brand development partnership with Soul City; The Department of Public Works; the EPWP Presidential Project; the Destination Marketing KZN brand campaign, "Izulu is another name for heaven," which is still one of the most memorable campaigns in that sector; and the "Gauteng. It starts here" brand campaign for the Gauteng City Region. We've also done significant work in the financial services sector like the ABSA Micro Loans go-to-market campaign, as well as the more recent new brand development, public relations and advertising work we did for the top-five auditing and accounting firm in the country, SizweNtsalubaGobodo.

The Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality has made an impact in the sense that it has allowed us to expand one of our exciting and new developments, O'Brian Digital, and work collaboratively for one client. We started O'Brian digital a year

ago in association with a dynamic young group of digital strategists and creatives under the banner of The Bluevine Group. It now stands as an independent group company.

■ **Impressive. What's next for your agency and what industry trends do you see the biggest to come in 2018?**

We're focused on group re-consolidation and re-igniting our expansion into other regions, something we'd started just as the economic recession set in and had to put on hold.



Team O'Brian in celebratory mode.

Expanding that scope, the industry is definitely starting to catch up to what we've been doing all along – being able to find strategic and holistic solutions to a business problem, challenge or opportunity.

Creativity is inherent to the advertising industry, but more and more agencies are realising that as much focus needs to be put on being strategic.

■ **You can't talk SA creative industry trends without touching on the need for transformation....**

Yes. Black people's success, or lack thereof in the ad industry, is inextricably linked to the industry's transformation. Albeit we're starting to see the effects of the industry's slow pace in transformation with the closing down of such prominent businesses, such as The Jupiter drawing Room – Johannesburg; this has mainly been driven by clients' insistence.



The Jupiter Drawing Room (Johannesburg) closes, forms Black Powder

27 Sep 2017



The ad business and the industry as a whole was and still is very much a personality or entrepreneur-driven business and 'transformation' in itself gives one a sense of a total overhaul or fundamental structural change.

“ I'm still not convinced that a permanent structural change will be achieved by merely offering black people ownership via shareholding in white, established companies. My view is that the only effective and sustainable way for black people to achieve success in this industry is through having black people start new enterprises. ”

Real and true success will be realised only when black people manage, control and operate independent entities and not

by negotiating shareholding in existing white firms. In that sense, the industry has achieved some success, but there's still quite a way to go.

Hear hear. Keep up with the latest from O'Brian by visiting [their website](#) for specific case studies of how they've excelled or through their [Twitter feed](#).

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

- #Loeries2020: Behavioural economics as creativity, but not as we know it... - 24 Nov 2020
- #D12020: Ignite your inner activist - representation through illustration - 27 Feb 2020
- #D12020: How Sho Madjozi brought traditional Tsonga *xibelani* into 2020 - 27 Feb 2020
- #D12020: Silver jubilee shines with Department of Audacious Projects launch - 26 Feb 2020
- #BehindtheSelfie with... Qingqile 'WingWing' Mdlulwa, COO at The Whole Idea - 26 Feb 2020

View my profile and articles...

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>