

Don't eat Niknaks this winter - build your business savvy

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Course for artists builds much-needed bridge between creative professionals and business

Winter and summer provide two very different settings for artists working in Cape Town. Full of optimism and often spoiled for choice in terms of opportunities during the warmer months, creative professionals still seem caught unaware when winter rolls around, and work is scarce.

"Winter is when many artists play video games and eat Niknaks," says Elaine Rumboll, an artist turned businesswoman who is no stranger to the trend.

Instead, Rumboll says artists should be using the enforced down time to "up their game" by acquiring new skills and knowledge, and expanding their network. Building what she calls "a community of practice and support" in the creative industries is a process that she facilitates every year during the 13-week-long Business Acumen for Artists programme at the University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business (UCT GSB), which she has convened for the past nine years.

Rumboll - an award-winning poet and blues singer - obtained an MBA from Wits University as a way of reskilling herself, and went on to design the first Business Acumen for Artists course in 2007 in order to build a much-needed bridge between creative professionals and business.

"Creatives are not taught the importance of the commercial aspect of what they are doing in schools and universities. It is a systemic problem, not just in South Africa but worldwide," she says.

The course's content sprang directly from the skills that artists in Cape Town's creative suburb, Observatory said they lacked most - among them financial management and fluency in the language of business.

The course has developed in line with the changing needs of the market. Today, a cutting-edge social media and marketing component gives artists the tools to engage with their audiences online. Ari Kruger and Julia Anastasopoulos, who created the South African YouTube sensation Suzelle DIY after attending the course in 2014, have demonstrated how to utilise skills like these to gain national acclaim.

The Do-It-Yourself web series which features Suzelle, a "boeremeisie", or farm girl, who provides hilarious and often ingenious tips on getting chores done around the house, has gained a loyal following via its YouTube channel and social media pages, which include more than 52,000 Facebook fans. It recently partnered with South Africa's largest online retailer, Takealot.com, where viewers can access "Suzelle's Wish List", a (pink) selection of tools and other items that appear in the bite-sized one to two minute-long episodes. It's a well-placed digital partnership that would be the envy of entrepreneurs in any industry. Both artists claim that they couldn't have done it without the Business Acumen for Artists programme.

"Marketing and advertising has never been easier for the people who know how to use the web," says Dave Duarte, a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader and social media and marketing guru who teaches these skills through a combination of formal processes and discussions or practical exercises during the course. "Whether it's word of mouth, or simply being at the right outlet at the right time, savvy creative entrepreneurs are using information to guide their marketing decisions."

Other lecturers include renowned South African ceramicist Lisa Firer, who guides the class through an exercise using a "vision board" to help distil their creative objectives. Identifying ones goals and individually exploring what drives you to

create is a vital part of the learning process.

"If you understand the 'Why', then the 'How' comes easier," Rumboll says, who has designed a series of exercises that help artists identify psychological barriers to their own success.

Along with encouraging an entrepreneurial mind-set, establishing a network of peers is the second broad area covered by the course. This is not only a by-product of having a diverse range of participants, from jewellers to poets, but strong networks are also built through a structured six-month mentorship at the end of the course. Collaborations, in-kind projects - and solid friendships - arise every year, says Rumboll.

Well-known South Africa filmmaker Simon Taylor of Periphery Films found this aspect of the course invaluable. "I went into the programme feeling like I was on an island. I felt really lonely as a creative entrepreneur, so to connect with people feeling the same way was amazing. It was almost like a support group and the experience was on the level of mind and heart adjustment, it was not just about learning new things."

Learning to develop fluency in the language of business and to sharpen basic business skills is the third of the three focus areas. Finally, participants are required to conceptualise and concretise a business idea. "They spend the 13 weeks prodding it from different angles, and by the end of it we want participants to have a product or service that they can actually ship," explains Rumboll. Participants pitch their business idea to a panel of judges, who evaluate its feasibility.

The course, which is the only one of its kind in the country, offers creative professionals the necessary support to hone invaluable practical skills. Artists are the lifeblood of innovation, says Rumboll. With their development, South Africa will increasingly feel the economic benefits of this transition from "artist" to "creative entrepreneur".

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