

Incubator initiative uses B-BBEE budgets to train young creatives

The creative 'incubator' initiative, Sum of 21 Academy, of creative consultancy Etiket Brand Design, acts as a mini-agency to empower interns and learners and create real-life jobs.



CEO of Etiket Brand Design, Janhendrik Oosthuizen.

Accessing B-BBEE budgets

"The reality is that, even though marketing budgets are the first to go in tough economic times, B-BBEE budgets cannot be cut. If you do not spend according to B-BBEE targets, you simply do not reach the required levels, affecting your company negatively and corporate South Africa needs new and innovative solutions, as a conduit for their B-BBEE budgets," explains CEO, Janhendrik Oosthuizen.

"In return for channelling its B-BBEE spend through Sum of 21 in the form of Skills Development (SD), Enterprise and Supplier and Development (ESD) and Socio-Economic Development (SED), its clients receive 'creative hours' to execute proper marketing briefs and projects. We use these creative hours to produce marketing outputs and collateral required by our clients - without them having to touch their marketing budgets.

"Besides being an exciting business model, it is proving to be a formidable differentiating factor. Up to now, the progress in terms of B-BBEE spend has been very limited. While the B-BBEE spirit and codes are laudable, the way in which they are implemented falls short. For companies it has become a 'grudge spend', as they feel they cannot track return on investment because they traditionally get very little back on their spend.

"By investing their B-BBEE spend in our academy, companies not only act socially responsibly and fulfil their B-BBEE obligations, they also get significant marketing outputs in return. Clients clearly like the idea of having an alternative platform for their B-BBEE spend. At the same time, Sum of 21 realises its twofold objective, namely providing real-life jobs for the interns and learners and secondly securing a strong income stream – the lifeline that keeps the whole initiative going.

Alleviating skills shortages

"Under the guidance and direction of professional Etiket teams, Sum of 21 nurtures and empowers young creative souls through 12-month learnerships and internships to reimagine their futures, while bringing fresh ideas and perspectives into the South African advertising and creative landscape. It also allows Etiket to play a meaningful role in the transformation environment, as well as in alleviating the serious skills shortage in the creative industry.



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"Sum of 21 is not run as a normal internal learnership/internship programme but rather as a completely separate entity that creates and generates its own business and has its own clients, making it unique.

"Through hands-on mentorship and other training programmes by seasoned professionals, the skills the interns and learners, in all the disciplines, are finely honed to seamlessly advance them into career roles. The professionals, on the other hand, are consistently exposed to fresh, invigorating and relevant ideas and insights. We learn just as much from

them as what they learn from us, so the symbiotic relationship is mutually beneficial.”

Only accepts tertiary qualified applicants

Sum of 21 does not compete with existing learning institutions.

“Our interns and learners already have a tertiary qualification but not necessarily design thinking capability. This is what we wish to instil in them. We want to teach them to use their theoretical and design skills to become creative problems solvers.”

According to Oosthuizen, a further entrepreneurial-based learnership is envisaged to follow after and complements the initial 12-month learnership/internship, specifically aimed at people who consider creating their own businesses in the creative industry.

Carmen Gunkel adds, “Because we are looking for people who are not cut from the same cloth to ensure that we assemble a group with as a diverse range of skills as possible, the fruition of a lengthy and rigorous recruitment process.” Formerly a programme manager for the graphic design department of the Design School of Southern African, she was specifically sourced and employed by Etiket as academic and business head to formalise and structure its nurturing initiative. Assisting her is Sum of 21 creative director, Karen Steenkamp.

“It is about giving young creative/design/marketing graduates the opportunity to get a foot into a creative agency by going through a 12-month grooming process where, at the end of it, they are more employable than they were when they joined us.

“We started off with small groups of learners, seven of whom have already completed the programme and who are now formally employed by Etiket. We are very proud of these appointments.”

Further studies

Once a month, the learners also attend classes for 3-4 days, provided by an external service provider, so that, at the end of the 12-month training period, they are equipped with a Level 4 Marketing Communication qualification.

Since the initial small intake, a further 20 interns and unemployed learners (plus one employed learner) with skills and qualifications in multiple disciplines ranging from design, radio, PR, journalism to strategic communication and business administration have been recruited for training over the past year.

“To create a well-rounded, mini-agency or incubator that can service a wide range of clients and projects, without having to acquire the services of any additional people, the team is specifically divided into 10 interns and 10 learners. They typically make up the entire team of account executives, business developers, project and production assistants, designers, copywriters, developers and the like,” Gunkel explains.

Sum of 21 has been contracted to the relevant Setas (training governing bodies), which govern the academy’s learnerships and internships in terms of policies, procedures, structures and implementation plans, including budgets.

“Besides nurturing and growing interns with design/creative qualifications, we also consider young people who do not have the right qualifications or who fall just short of entering into the creative industry. We take these rough diamonds and nurture and polish them to a point where they have portfolios. Often they are the ones who surprise us daily with their creativity and strategic thinking, and both Karen and I are constantly over the moon with their innovative ideas.”

In terms of design skills, the learners’ training covers a phenomenal range: from traditional layout, design and illustrative skills in both traditional mediums and digital, to photography, video producing and editing skills. They are well versed in multimedia, 3D modelling, stand rendering and design, conceptual space design and building and animating characters. A few of them have also mastered front- and back-end programme development, including html, Java, etc.

“Most invigorating is the way the learners and interns pull off amazing projects by effortlessly integrating, sharing and working together,” says Steenkamp. “No matter what the challenge is or what we throw at them, they never complain or come with excuses why they could not deliver. They simply put shoulder to the wheel and work with tremendous enthusiasm in order to produce fantastic results.”

Briefs, projects

Steenkamp says briefs and projects from clients come directly to Sum of 21, not via Etiket. “Together, the integrated team then delivers the work and builds excellent relationships with the clients. The clients are often pleasantly surprised when they get far more back than what they had bargained for. The freshness and vigour displayed in the work of the learners and interns have been a recurring theme in clients’ feedback.

“We believe strongly in what our learners and interns bring to the table with them: not just a qualification, not just a specific set of skills, but a well-rounded look at life. This we nurture, develop and pour into the job spec so that the creative soul exponentially amplifies its weight and power by the time they leave,” she concludes.

Oosthuizen ends off, “We are surprised by the skills sets that lie within Sum of 21. They bring a young and dynamic energy into play. We could tap into their skills and have used concepts that they have produced in a number of pitches to clients. The interns and the learners are in fact giving the Etiket team members a good a run for their money.”

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