

#Covid-19 is a white swan - Ebony+Ivory proves this

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The term black swan has been popularised for describing unforeseen events and it has been wrongly used to describe the Covid-19 pandemic. There is another term, white swan, which is more apt for this pandemic. A white swan event is one that we could have seen coming. This is true of Covid-19 as many experts have, for decades, outlined the possibility of a global infection pandemic. In fact, as a species, we have lived through a number of real-life pandemics in our history.



Ebony+Ivory MD Paul Middleton

Surviving through these events is difficult even for the most agile businesses. Those businesses that are older in years are the ones that have worked through one or more white swan events. Ebony+Ivory is such an agency. As SA's longest-standing independent agency it is also probably its most agile and responsive marketing business. You simply can't live through a multitude of massive economic and societal challenges without being very nimble, responsive and good at what you do.

In its response to Covid-19, Ebony+Ivory gives a hint at the qualities that build the robustness required for survival. We all face the same challenges but it is really the response that separates the winners from the losers. As Mike Tyson once famously said: "Everybody has a plan until you are punched in the face." Robust businesses, like Ebony+Ivory, have the processes and culture attributes to defend against this viral assault – as well as any other white swan event. They are businesses that constantly learn and evolve through rigorous self-scrutiny and market scanning.

While lasting for a long time is not necessarily of significant use, the qualities that build the robustness for longevity are very desirable, useful and productive.

Ebony+Ivory is clear in its operational philosophy. "Having long recognised that traditional agency models are rapidly becoming defunct, the business operates a lean structure, regularly building project-specific-teams of experts for client needs. It has successfully adapted its operating model to an era where multidisciplinary skills, agility and simpler structures are called for, enabling it to execute, curate and collaborate on demand," says MD Paul Middleton.

One of the key lessons from times of crisis is that a protectionist response increases negative feedback. People lose focus, become negative, insular and even suspicious in their thinking. We see this daily in social media at present with the so-called 'Covid-19 thought police', the growth in self-elected experts and the spread of conjecture masquerading as 'news'.

Information flows are critical to survival. Open discussion and the sharing of ideas. Equally, self-scrutiny, the ability to recognise and deal with weaknesses, the ability to address concerns and seek out the best solutions are all key to long-term survival.

Notably, it is these self-same attributes and qualities that benefit clients as relationships are underscored on honesty, commitment and competence.

Middleton goes further explaining: "Right now, we see a sharp contraction in commercial activity. But this will not last. Already the discussion is moving to re-igniting growth and rebuilding what has been temporarily dormant. Brands need to maintain relevance through continuous communication. They say it takes three weeks to change a habit and it is during these three weeks of 'lockdown' that brands must position themselves as part of the solution. This goes far beyond simple product marketing. It's about brand purpose. And brand purpose cannot be switched off."

In closing, he adds: "We need marketers, media and agencies to show leadership. We need to take bold steps to position ourselves and our brands as active participants in the emotional and transactional fabric of the economy. Brands must be transformational."

About Ebony + Ivory

Advertising agency Ebony+Ivory is probably SA's most agile, effective and robust. Established in 1969, the agency has a proud history of offering a holistic and multi-disciplinary approach towards advertising communications.

About Paul Middleton

Paul Middleton is a media and advertising man with a passion for developing and giving back to South African effective creativity; applying his 40 years of experience in marketing and advertising. He is known for bringing perspective, balance, integrity and wisdom to the table at an industry, client and agency level.

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