

# Lessons on idea-led ideas with King James Group



By Leigh Andrews

21 May 2019

In the final session of Red & Yellow School's #digitalagencyshowcase, King James Group co-founder Alistair King shared his 'secret sauce' on the thinking that keeps them top of the Loeries and IAB Bookmarks' digital agency rankings in South Africa.

“ Insights from [@ALSparkles](#) [@KJGroupSA](#)

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Rob Stokes, chairman of Red & Yellow School, said of the 'graveyard shift' session that if attendees were feeling either sleepy or dead, they were about to miss out.

King James Group has turned presenting at the final session of the showcase into an art.



#DigitalAgencyShowcase: The power of timing in creative ideas

Leigh Andrews 26 Oct 2018



Stokes shared that King wrote his first ads on a typewriter and spanned the full breadth of advertising in the three decades since then, having added a further accolade in being inducted into the Creative Circle's Hall of Fame last year.

## Channel promiscuous, medium agnostic, creativity obsessed

Yet despite being thought of as a true industry legend by most attendees, King started his session with what he called a bombshell – he sees himself as neither a digital thought leader nor an expert, and not so much medium agnostic as channel promiscuous. First and foremost, he's creative and obsesses about creativity more than where that creativity plays out.

King shared that his personal creative story started in 1986. He was about to start studying towards an 'exciting new career path' in genetics, but had doubts about whether he actually saw himself as a scientist, so decided to make a final choice at the Wits registration desk.

“ He looked at the queue under the BSc banner, and realised this was not his tribe, nor were the BCom people, but on seeing the BA people, he knew he'd found his tribe. A girl with striking blue eyes turned around and smiled at him, he joined that queue and his entire life changed, there and then. ”

King says that memory speaks of his willingness to change his life on the course of a whim, more often than he'd care to admit.

Take a time leap to 2009 and King faced another pivotal moment, where King James was building a nice reputation for itself through work on brands like Allan Gray and Kulula, clearly making good ads as they had won their first Grand Prix and Cannes Lions and developing into a really interesting agency, with an advertising portion, a PR company, web section, eventing company and social media division.

## The WTFWT moment

Then he saw this piece of work and everything changed...

King says Gatorade Replay, by TBWA\Chiat\Day, was and is the greatest piece of advertising he's seen in his life.

He questioned whether it was an ad or an event, as it involved content and PR, and the order of events stunned him so that he decided there and then that he no longer wanted to be in advertising. He'd found a new tribe – something 'way over there', which he didn't understand but he admired for the calibre of work, filled with emotion and complexity, scale and ambition.

“It was a fundamental decision, made there and then, that we as an agency had to change.”

This led King to question the structural and attitudinal rewiring they'd need to do at the King James Group to make their rebirth possible. It kept him awake at night, obsessing over the question of how to make King James a neutral agency that didn't miss an opportunity.

To get to the crux of what would be required, King decided to apply his scientific mind to the work that made him take note, the greatest work in the world. He wanted to know:

- How was it briefed?
- Who was it briefed to?

- How was the idea had?
- How was it sold?

Simple questions, but if he could work out their secret sauce, King felt he'd know everything. And so, he focused on changing the agency to answer those questions.

Fittingly, he spoke to John Hunt, global creative director of TBWA, about the Gatorade *Replay* work and learned that the idea hadn't been a frontrunner by any means, nor did the client jump at it. Instead, it was presented potentially as: "If we had a content channel, we would put content on the channel. This is an example of the content we'd put on the channel, about the game the teams played." That was the full extent of the idea.

Another favourite was Budweiser's *Whassup* ad, from before 'viral' was even a buzzword:

It's a beer ad that broke all the rules.

## **We have different rules for digital than we have for advertising**

Then there's Dove *Evolution*, which King says, "effectively launched one of the most successful platforms in digital marketing, ever – the internet." It was also one of the first brands to not speak of how the product performs, but of the brand's values.

## Find the opportunities in every brief

King says if you're alert and awake and paying attention, you'll find opportunities in every single brief. For example...

TNT's 90-second spot, *Push to Add Drama*:

Or the three-minute animated music video clip for *Dumb Ways to Die*:

Then there's the multiple-award winning 'what is it' of State Street's *Fearless Girl*:

King calls it, “One of the most famous pieces of work on the planet in the last five years. But it’s a statue. What did the client ask for – a statue? Something architectural?”

And of course, there’s Cadbury’s *Gorilla*, which the chairman said would be made ‘over his dead body’...

All this great work inspired King to focus on the ground zero of the idea. What’s the core and where does it start? What’s its DNA?

This is also why King calls it arrogance to talk about ‘advertising being dead’. It’s far from it, as the biggest ideas around the world are still ads.

Advertising – or at least, ideas – are still the big boss, and where they play out and how we express them is the battlefield we’re engaged in, as creativity is a messy and inelegant process.

“ *I know some of these things aren't new. But it's so good to be reminded by a legend in the industry.*

[#DigitalAgencyShowcase @RedAndYellowEd pic.twitter.com/7z9H4biHWb](#)— Sass Mouth (@Lakshmi8916) [May 16, 2019](#) ”

## The creative solution

King says if you can train your brain to look at every job as an opportunity, you’ll increase your work rate ten-fold.

Because you’re denying yourself the opportunity to do something amazing on a piece of work that no-one expects it from if you keep falling over yourself for an award-winning client.

“ To become famous, find a client that's not award-winning and then make them award-winning, because people ask how they became award-winning – it must be that agency. Anyone could continue the legacy of great work on a brand that's winning awards, but surely the very foundation of reputation is to do it on something that no-one's ever done before ”

King says this is why 'to brief or not to brief' was a huge theme five years ago. Doing so can be seen to be squeezing the potential of what the creative may come back with.

“ I've always said great ideas are like drunk friends. They pitch up when you least expect them, and often at highly inconvenient times. ”

King says this is because we set deadlines. We want a good idea by X date, but that's not how ideas work and the odds of delivering an epic idea on cue and to a deadline is very remote.

### **If only ideas came at a set time and place...**

That's why King is interested in liberating the ideas by finding a system that fed ideas into it constantly, rather than waiting for the client to make a request.



King James Group drinks in their global win

Leigh Andrews 21 Apr 2017



To illustrate this, he did an internal exercise on 12 pieces of work King James had done and looked at the circumstances in which the team created the work.

There's the print ad that became social media that became PR that became earned media, or the billboards that became digital films that became social media that became PR that became earned media. These prove that when you have a good idea, everyone wants in.

Every brief wants earned media, but the great idea should be the goal, with the earned media the result.

There's also the proactive ideas that became digital films that became social media that became earned media or annual briefs, and the repurposed idea that answers three separate briefs, which became live radio and digital display ads.

King says the point is that sometimes ideas sit for years waiting for the right client, the right channel and the right set of circumstances to present themselves.

He says to reduce, reuse and recycle where you can, and remember you are nothing without ambition, as he feels lack of confidence – your own and your clients' – is the biggest threat to digital.

“ Great finish to the day from [@ALsparkles](#) from [@KJGroupSA](#) 30 years of experience and the ultimate seasoned Pro! [#inspiration](#) [#DigitalAgencyShowcase](#) [@RedAndYellowEd](#) [@jab\\_sa](#) [pic.twitter.com/2LWjTro5l0](#)— Julia Raphaely (@julia\_raphaely) [May 16, 2019](#) ”

King concluded that virtually everything that's completely original has no precedent, which involves a tremendous leap of faith on the client's side.

Remember that building your own reputation is a life journey and that great creative work is the most extraordinarily motivating thing. That's why King still writes scripts and puts ads on the table – not to compete with his team but because he believes an agency should bring its best ideas all the time, no matter who they are from.

If you're truly going to make a name for yourself from advertising you need to be in it for the long game, so gather the skills and develop the maturity you need, to navigate in your mind the confidence back your ideas.



## #BehindtheSelfie with... Alistair King

Leigh Andrews 14 Jan 2015



*Lessons to look back on for years to come. The Red & Yellow School's Digital Agency Showcase turned the spotlight on the six top-ranked digital agencies from the [IAB SA's Bookmark Awards](#). [Click here](#) for more of my #DigitalAgencyShowcase coverage, and follow [Red & Yellow School](#) and [King James Group](#) on Twitter for the latest updates.*

## 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.

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