

# Award-winning Senzo Xulu joins Conversation Lab

By  Danette Breitenbach

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Award-winning Senzo Xulu has joined Conversation Lab as executive creative director, responsible for the creative output of the agency across all staff hubs in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and London.



Supplied. Award-winning creative director Senzo Xulu has joined Conversation LAB as executive creative director

His journey has been award-winning right from the beginning. Starting from being the most awarded advertising student in the country (2010) to being shortlisted at Cannes with his PE agency (2012).

In between working as an art director, he completed his Masters and was then accepted to study at the Rhode Island School of Design (2017).

All while guiding the first Black female winners from the Eastern Cape to a student Loerie (2019), taking Nelson Mandela University into the top 10 Loeries rankings (2019-2020), and being able to create employment opportunities for the talent he lectured and mentored over the years.

■ ***After you graduated from Vega in 2010, despite being courted by big agencies, you chose to work at a smaller agency in the Eastern Cape when you started your career. Why?***

The truth is that my move to the Eastern Cape wasn't a career move as much as a personal move. It's just the place the Lord had laid in my heart to go to after graduating from Vega. Fittingly, there was an agency in PE looking for an art director at the time, so it all worked out.

■ ***Joining Conversation Lab, you say: "Joining a team that is so focused on, and excited about, the intersection of creative and tech is a massive drawcard for me." What is it about this intersection that is so important and what excites you about it?***

It isn't a secret how in the last 15 years or so, our industry has been shaped by the advent of tech and the digitisation of how we produce creative work.

But the tension between tech-driven creative versus creative-driven tech has been a bit of a tricky road to navigate - cue the well-publicised mergers of South Africa's biggest digital agencies with the traditional ATL ones.

So, from observing both the rise and maturation of that trend locally and abroad, I really became a fan of work that typifies how creativity and technology can intersect in a way that keeps the integrity of both sides.

That's why I'm looking forward to creating a culture here that masters the balance between the bleeding edge and the basic, but with creativity always at the core.

■ ***You also worked at the head of graphic design at Nelson Mandela University, and that led to some of the Eastern Cape's best young talent regularly scooping local and international awards. How do you view young talent in the country? What needs to be done to ensure a good stream of young talent coming through? Will we be in good hands in the next 10 to 20 years?***

You only need to spend 10 minutes on Black Twitter to see that young South Africans are some of the most naturally creative people on the planet.

By virtue of that, we've got a generation that is growing up that can instinctively interpret and translate what they see around them into a creative and relatable piece of content (memes, for example).

In my view, that means that higher education's job should be simply to help students understand how they can identify and repeatedly implement the ways in which their creativity can happen (the process), and then what to use it for (the purpose).

I think we need to be a lot more intentional about what we're teaching this next generation as well as who should be doing the teaching.

The industry will move forward because we're resilient and resourceful, but I don't think it's 100% sustainable. For example, what is an art director in isiZulu or isiPedi? Until we can address things like that, then we're still narrowing the relevance of what we do, and thus its scope of influence.

■ ***What excites you most about taking on this role? What do you want to achieve in this role?***

The fact that me joining the team aligns with the agency's shift to affirming its place in the industry. My aim is to justify that move.

■ ***What do you love most about your career, the industry, and what you do?***

Without a doubt, the most fulfilling part of my journey so far has been the opportunity to groom and create space for other young creatives.

Taking kids who when I met them didn't even know what an art director or copywriter was, to seeing them now working and winning at the country's top agencies is by far the reward I cherish the most.

When we nurture talent in a particular way, it isn't just that they will do better work – which is absolutely critical because we

live in a time where brands can either be darlings or divisive based on the quality of work that we produce as an industry.

But there is also the knock-on effect that creative opportunity has on their families and communities, beyond the stellar careers that they are building for themselves, which is a bigger picture that I am always working towards.

### ▣ ***What has been your most challenging moment/time in your career***

Several times over the years (including right at the beginning) I've had to be firm in my convictions about building my career the way I wanted to, which has meant turning down offers (even last week, lol), not working on certain brands and giving priority to the seemingly untalented.

### ▣ ***Who do you look up to or view as a mentor in your life?***

Professionally, but they both know so at least I'm not completely fangirling: Xolisa Dyeshana and Ahmed Tilly.

Fourteen years ago as a student I looked up to them, but over time - because I hustled to get their numbers - I've had the privilege to get to know them personally through their incredible guidance and support over WhatsApp and awards ceremony foyers.

I've always believed that there is a difference between creative excellence and creative leadership, and they are two of the people in our industry who embody both remarkably.

Also, shout out to my current MD, Uyanda Manana. She played a massive part in me joining Conversation Lab because she has a vision for the agency that is second to none, and I have huge respect and confidence in her solid industry track record and the kind of leadership that she models.

Personally, Jesus Christ is the centre of who I am and everything I do and the very reason why some random kid from a township in Inanda Durban, who went to work for an agency on the outskirts of the Eastern Cape, is being interviewed as the executive creative director of a soon-to-be significant name in the ad industry.

## ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.

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