

Meet Dr Barbara Jensen Vorster, the senior executive behind Gautrain's marketing success

 By [Robin Fredericks](#)

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Dr Barbara Jensen Vorster, senior executive manager for communication and marketing at Gautrain Management Agency, shares her insights on the unique branding and marketing strategies of Gautrain, as well as some of the memorable campaigns she has worked on. With over three decades of experience in communication and marketing, Dr Jensen Vorster also offers advice to aspiring branding professionals and shares her plans for the future, as she prepares to resign from her role.



Dr Barbara Jensen Vorster, senior executive manager for communications and marketing, Gautrain Management Agency

■ Tell us a bit about your career path, how did you end up here?

I have been involved in communication for the past thirty-six years, in a consulting, training, research and a practical capacity. My expertise is government communication, international relations, communication research and the implementation of stakeholder mobilisation and transformation campaigns.

■ Can you tell us about your role at Gautrain – what are some of the responsibilities?

I have been part of the Gautrain project since its inception in 2000. I have been an integral member of the strategic team that crafted the direction the Gautrain project took.

I was specifically responsible for communication and marketing. My team and I were responsible for the development of the Gautrain brand as well as the rollout of the brand on trains, buses and all stations. I also oversee continuous brand, reputation, stakeholder assessments, reputation management and stakeholder engagements to ensure that the brand is continuously growing and widens its customer base.

I was also responsible for media management through the difficult days of procurement, and the exciting days of construction and operations.

■ ***What have been the highlights of your career?***

I will never forget how on a cold grey British winter's day when I walked into a huge construction shed and saw the first Gautrain that came off the production lines. There, amongst everything grey, stood the most beautiful golden train you have seen on wheels. I was in tears. I even had the stoic British engineers in tears.

My other highlight was the first time a Gautrain travelled a few kilometres from the depot across the viaduct over Allandale road and back to the depot, the realisation that we have turned a dream into a reality. Then of course, to be on board the first commercial Gautrain, on a cold winter's morning from the Gautrain Sandton Station to OR Tambo International Airport Station.

■ ***How is Gautrain unique in branding and marketing among transport companies?***

The Gautrain is not just a train. As the first high-speed urban train on the continent, it represents pride and possibility. It has created a feeling of national pride and highlighted that South Africans can achieve the impossible when we put our minds to it. Transforming spaces, people and the economy through mobility is what we do. The Gautrain is a system that enriches the lives of everyday South Africans and is not just a mode of transport from point A to point B.

■ ***What are some of the memorable Gautrain campaigns you have worked on? What made them stand out?***

The media campaign to change people's negative perceptions about Africa's largest Public-Private Partnership into positive ones which saw us scoping numerous gold awards from Prisa Prism Awards, in both the Media Relations and Public Sector categories, as well as walking away with the prestigious International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Gold Quill Award and the African IABC Gold Quill Award.

The Gautrain project faced tremendous criticism in the beginning phases and significant negative media coverage. However, we managed to turn that around by sharing the vision and purpose with the people of Gauteng and South Africa and enabled them to take ownership of Gautrain. They were able to talk about "our Gautrain", and to be proud of this province and this country delivering a project of world class standards. As well as shaping public opinion by giving different stakeholders exactly the right amount and accurate information when they needed.

Other memorable campaigns include the Gautrain History book which was recognised for innovation and design by the IABC. The Gautrain's Phambili video received a special mention at the Paris Cine-Rail Train and Metro Awards. The Global AirRail Alliance Award for Service Excellence on the Gautrain Airport line.

■ ***What career advice would you give to young and aspiring branding professionals? What skills and qualities are crucial for success in branding or marketing? How can aspiring professionals develop them?***

My advice to anyone developing a brand is short and simple, be passionate about your product. Be authentic and don't lose yourself in the clutter out there. Stay true to yourself and your brand. Never compromise yourself and your brand.

■ ***What's next for you? And what will you miss about your current role at Gautrain***

The best of both worlds! Looking after elephants in Masai Mara and still being involved in Gautrain as a communication advisor, on special projects to the CEO.

ABOUT ROBIN FREDERICKS

Editor at Bizcommunity.

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