

A day in the lockdown life of Joe Public United co-founder and Group CCO Pepe Marais

 By Jessica Tennant

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Co-founder and Group CCO of Joe Public United, Pepe Marais's account of work-life in the time of Covid-19, part of a series of articles looking into how agencies and agency folk are responding to the crisis and viewing it through a creative lens.

"My 4am call time has moved out by an hour, due to the fact that the lockdown has fast become 'AlwaysOn', hence there aren't many boundaries and I am getting to bed after 9pm at night.

"Either way, my similar routine applies:

"Rise at 5am, study until 6am, gym until 7am, meditate and plan my day, first Microsoft Office meeting at 8am. Multiple video conferences and daily reviews – we are somehow busier in lockdown than at any time before. I count this as a blessing. Usually, I finish off around 7pm, but I have been breaking at 5:30pm for my daily bat and ball session with our 11-year-old. Our record is 534. Then a short gym session. Dinner. Reading. Sleep. Repeat." – Co-founder and Group CCO of Joe Public United, Pepe Marais's account of work-life in the time of Covid-19.



Pepe Marais, co-founder and Group CCO of Joe Public United

■ ***What was your initial response to the crisis or lockdown and has your experience of it been different to what you expected?***

We had anticipated the lockdown and moved all our people offsite, barring a small skeleton crew, and we were fully operational one week before the actual lockdown was announced. It's been a surreal experience, like *The World at War*, but what I never expected is the incredible way in which we have become more productive than ever before. But then, I shouldn't be surprised, given our amazing team of people at Joe. We've somehow remained very connected as a bunch of people throughout this very challenging time.

■ ***Comment on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the agency and creative industry and/or economy as a whole.***

I think it is too early to tell, since there is talk that the worst is yet to come. However, we have definitely felt a decline in revenue. It is a very delicate balance because our first and foremost concern is the safety of all our people. However, at the same time, it is important to keep our ship afloat, because the economic sustainability of our people is of equal concern to us. I think there is real pressure on our film industry, given that we have had to halt all our television productions, barring a few very innovative projects that we are currently busy with. But we are doing whatever we can to keep the opportunities flowing. Many of our clients are remaining active at this stage as we are all collectively figuring out what the correct tonality is for brands amidst the changing marketing landscape and the world at large.

■ ***How is the agency responding to the crisis and current lockdown?***

We are empathetic to the situation of our mass market. Let's face it, we have the privilege of being able to operate from the comfort of our homes. That said, we do see this as an opportunity to innovate and find new ways of doing business. The playing field is changing by the day, the goalposts are shifting by the hour, but we are using every minute of uncertainty to find opportunities for creativity and innovation.

We have also proactively begun to approach our clients with fee reductions.

“ It is our view that although we need to keep the revenues flowing in order to keep the business steady, it is not a year for making profit. ”

If all companies can reduce their profits as much as possible and manage their cash flows to the best of their abilities, we can collectively get through this.



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■ ***Comment on the challenges and opportunities.***

Challenges:

- Creating relevance for our brands in the eyes of their consumers.
- Remaining connected.
- Trying not to interrupt each other during Microsoft Teams meetings.

Opportunities:

- New ways of working.
- New pipelines for revenue.
- Being reminded that without our people, we are nothing. We know this for a fact, but in the old world, we easily forget this truth.

■ ***Speaking of opportunities, the world has really turned to creativity during this time. Why do you think this is the case and what does this mean for the industry, agencies and their clients or brands?***

It is said that even when the Atheist faces death, he or she will call out to God. It seems like it would take a life-or-death situation for people to rediscover the joy of creativity because it's so much easier to just do 'easier'. I can only hope that we don't fall back into the 'same old, same old' when we eventually return to the new normality.

■ **How has the lockdown affected your staff? What temporary HR policies have you put in place regarding remote working, health & safety, etc.?**

The main aspect we have focused on is keeping our people safe and enabling them to operate fully, and in doing so, giving them comfort by adding value throughout the uncertainty of what we are going through. Our CEO, Gareth Leck has also done an exceptional job in making weekly videos to keep people updated and in remaining fully transparent regarding the financial pressures. We all know what brands like Edcon are going through, and we are doing everything in our power to support them.

■ **How are you navigating 'physical distancing' while keeping your team close-knit and aligned and your clients happy?**

Microsoft Teams. I mean, you have to ask yourself, "How did Bill Gates see this coming?"

■ **Has this global crisis changed your view of the future of advertising/marketing in any way?**

I would like to believe that the Covid-19 crisis will play a role in a shift in consciousness, and hopefully, there will be more of an appetite for campaigns that are more purpose-led than market-share-obsessed.

“ I really believe the time is now for brands to step up and begin to play bigger and more ethical roles in the world. ”

■ **Any trends you've seen emerge as a result of the crisis?**

The way we work will forever change. We have been living in a digital age for more than a decade, but we have remained very traditional in our ways of working. These past few weeks have taught us to work more nimbly, to find braver solutions. I am silently excited, with respect to those South Africans who are critically affected by the virus.

■ **Your key message to fellow industry folk?**

Just as diversity is at the heart of creativity, so too is uncertainty. Now is the time for creativity. That's on the functional side.

On the emotional side, I have grown in depth of appreciation for each and every one of our people. We are so much stronger together, and this could permeate through the walls of our company, into our industry and our country. Interesting that we should realise this when we are apart.

ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

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