

Atmosphere's Nicola Nel reflects on 21 years of PR

By  Danette Breitenbach

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In the lead-up to World PR Day on 16 July, we celebrate the PR industry. Not too long ago, Atmosphere Communications' founder and CEO, Nicola Nel, was awarded the 2023 PROI Founders Award by PROI Worldwide.



Atmosphere Communications' founder and CEO, Nicola Nel, reflects on the past 21 years

Nel started Atmosphere 21 years ago after returning to South Africa from the UK. The agency's first client was the country's first digital bank 20twenty, but after the successful launch, its main shareholder went into curatorship.

Nel says that suddenly there was no client and no business. Fast forward to two decades later and the agency has 35 clients and 54 consultants.

More recently it acquired by the global professional services company, Accenture. Nel calls it "a new dawn for the Atmosphere team".



Nicola Nel, Atmosphere founder, receives 2023 PROI Founders Award

9 Jun 2023



 **What were some of the challenges you faced when you started Atmosphere?**

The market was saturated with big players with solid reputations, so we had to be cheeky to get on to pitch lists.

We were unknown, but hungry and I decided that we'd differentiate ourselves by delivering business results in a creative way and not only column centimetres for which our competitors were known for.

We chose challenger brands, did innovative work on small budgets and used these as case studies to knock on the doors of bigger clients.

Today we are known as strategic advisors who set clear deliverables, review these regularly and deliver and exceed on our promises.

■ ***Over the years Atmosphere delivered some great work for clients, and on the way it has won numerous awards. What are two of your favourite campaigns and why?***

After all these years, the 2010 [Not the World Cup](#) campaign for low-cost airline carrier kulula still makes me smile.

After King James Advertising placed an advert with flight specials in the daily newspapers, the Fifa lawyers sent us a legal letter for trademark infringement, we weren't even allowed to use the words: World Cup.

We offered free kulula flights to the president of Fifa, Sepp Blatter as an 'apology' from kulula. The free flights were 'conveniently' taken up by a very cute Boston Terrier, also called Sepp.

He flew all over South Africa in his little green & gold World Cup sweater, irritating the bosses of Fifa even more.

We got miles of media coverage, including *CNN* and *BBC*, and we, together with King James, helped kulula fill their planes with passengers.



The second campaign is more recent.

Remember the dark days of Covid, around May 2020, when we were all locked up at home and clapped at sunset for the nurses and doctors working around the clock?

During these times, we created a campaign for Capitec Bank whereby we challenged five local artists to compose a song of hope using crowdsourced lyrics from the public.

It quickly became the nation's biggest hit.

The song entrenched a sense of solidarity, trended on Twitter for three days consecutively, and became South Africa's favourite anthem as fans took to their socials and shared their best vocals and dance moves.

[*Song of Hope*](#) generated 28 million impressions across leading print and broadcast media outlets over a 20-week period. The song went on to take the number one position on the Radiomonitor Top 100 SA Chart.

■ **What are some of the highlights of the past 21 years?**

Wow, there have been many. Our long-standing, trusted relationships with Sanlam (16 years) and Capitec Bank (15 years) as well as our current great mix of local blue chips and diamond multinational clients are some of my personal highlights.

Also, we were one of the first PR agencies to appoint a creative director, one of the first agencies to start a social media offering and one of the first to win a gold Loerie Award for a creative PR campaign for a hair styling brand.

We have won both creative and business awards - Prims, Sabres, Loeries, etc, both locally and internationally.

We know how to do integrated comms really, really well. But more importantly – we have a core team of *Atmospherians* who have been with us for more than a decade.

We are also proud that our internship programme has sent superstars into the PR world, some of which have become true competitors - and remained friends.

We have over the years built great talent for ourselves and for the industry, and some are now our clients.



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■ **Having started Atmosphere 21 years ago, what changes have you seen in the industry over these years?**

The pace of innovation has changed dramatically over the last six years from clients who want press coverage and AVE (my pet peeve, equating the value of a media article to an equivalent advertising spend!) to forward-looking corporate and brand clients who understand the power of integrated campaigns based on insights and data.

■ **What are some trends currently driving the industry?**

Data analysis and software tools have enabled us to make quick strategic decisions for clients. We use a variety of tools to scan the environment and to advise brands and corporates on how to make communication decisions for impact. Immediacy is the PR currency of the future.

AI-driven tools will impact every level of agency life from analysing online conversations to content creation to design to putting business presentations together.

My favourite AI directories are [Futurepedia](#) and [Future Tools](#).

The result is more measurable results for PR campaigns and a seat at the table with the C-suite.

Accenture Song has a strong focus on digital transformation, and this will help us to be more relevant in this fast-changing world.



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Bizcommunity appreciates the hard work and dedication of PR professionals. Therefore on World PR Day we would like to showcase you and /your agency. Bizcommunity will be publishing World PR Day stories up to Wednesday 19 July. Share your favourite moment, photos, campaigns, etc. as per the above with us and we will publish them in an article(s). Send to marketingnews@bizcommunity.com with the subject line: #WPRD2023

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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