

Mandy Leontakianakis guides Havas into 2018

 By Jessica Tennant

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Havas recently appointed Mandy Leontakianakis as chief strategy officer to lead from Havas Johannesburg and across the group in Southern Africa, including Havas Boondoggle in Cape Town.

Lynn Madeley, CEO of Havas Southern Africa, says, “We are delighted to have Mandy on board. Strategy is an integral part of our business especially today where brands and businesses are nervous about the future. We wanted someone who embraces data, digital and creative; someone who would help our clients navigate their way through a challenging and changing world. Mandy has the experience and the smarts that we need to help our clients be successful today, so they can be successful tomorrow.”

“Havas is a great agency with a vision I am excited by,” adds Leontakianakis. “The industry faces many challenges around defining agency relevance, and I believe there is great openness and dynamism at Havas, an agency who questions themselves rigorously and holds themselves to a contemporary standard for client-centricity.”



Mandy Leontakianakis

Here, she explains her transition from copywriting to strategy and her learnings along the way...

■ **Comment on your new role, what it entails.**

I head up strategy within our group and contribute to the strategic direction of our clients' brands and the agency itself.

■ **What do you bring to the agency and how do you plan to grow it?**

In interviewing, it was clear to me that there would be a fit from an ideals perspective with Havas. The agency is not afraid of asking itself tough questions; neither am I. We connected over a shared belief that there is a pressing need to evolve in order to retain the integrity and the purpose of a communications agency in its purest form. I bring that same ideal, a commitment to stripping away what's unnecessary or noisy, a commitment to arriving at ownables for us and for our clients that amount to something useful. More than just agreeing on what's wrong with the traditional agency model, we agree on the potential to turn things around, and we believe that the industry is ready for it.

■ **What's at the top of your to-do list?**

We are highly motivated to find break-through techniques for the delivery of textured local insights that disrupt archetypes and set our clients work apart from the proliferate clichés.

■ **What do you love most about your career?**

I love the exposure to multiple verticals, the need to be contemporary in my general socio-economic and cultural knowledge, and the opportunity to strip away clutter and arrive at truths.

I thrive on the frequent exposure to brilliant people, being challenged to refine my work and feeling connected to the movement of the continent through the growth of its businesses.

■ **Comment on your transition from copywriting to strategy. Why strategy?**

I studied a BA with a double major in English language and literature. Copywriting was an obvious entry into the world of

work, though I became really concerned with the reasons why I put forward campaign ideas. My emphasis on the rationale grew until I was prompted into a strategy by my boss at the time. I will always be grateful for that particular steer and his belief in me.

■ **What has been your most noteworthy learning in the space?**

No matter how much we evolve from a channel and sophistication perspective, human truths remain the points of connection between brands and people. Losing sight of that means becoming a peddler of the channel.

“ *What was true from a methodology perspective in the crafting of brand narratives 20 years ago, is true today: empathy will never lose relevance.* ”

The number of channel and intervention options open to us today holds both dizzying potential and risk: from a clutter and intrusion perspective, it has never been more important to imagine the moment-by-moment experience of the person we aim to talk to. This extends to the actual development of product and services. Trust between a client and an agency should extend to push-back around superfluous messages and off-centre 'innovations'. There is so much we don't need to say, and so many products and services ideas destined to fail because they're orientated in KPIs rather than customer need.

A ruthlessness around product and message benefit could also help eliminate some of the nonsense-fatigue many of us experience both working in the industry and consuming advertising. There is such potential in the radical act of telling the truth as often as possible and seeking to connect in genuinely helpful and appropriate moments in the user's experience.

■ **What industry trends do you predict for 2018?**

Without citizenship behaviour that is thoughtful and sensitive, I predict an erosion of brand love and profitability for any complacent business entity. And I can't say I am anything other than relieved that as social consciousness evolves, so do the demands we place on our commercial enterprises to contribute in meaningful ways.

I wouldn't call this a trend though as the CSI requirement is not new, but there is an increasing depth in the idea of the integrated corporate report. CSI has transcended a tick box and is increasingly woven into the fabric of an organisation's identity as sustainable social impact investment.

We have social media as a great leveller to thank for the dispersion and momentum gains for social awareness.

“ *Agencies are also having to get real: the bloated structure and culture of the 80s and 90s, trading on impressions rather than delivery doesn't wash anymore.* ”

Brands, including agency brands, that survive on the continent will be those who incorporate the leading edges of social awareness into their insights and creative work. There is a call to integrity and purpose across the board.

■ **What are you currently reading/watching/listening to for work?**

I don't read or listen to things for work specifically – I believe I need to cultivate my own sense of inspiration and humanity. I'm reading Ram Das' *Be Love Now*, recently read the Steve Jobs' autobiography and also *The Buried Giant* by Kazuo Ishiguro. I am also fairly obsessed with film and music.

■ **Tell us something about yourself not generally known.**

My Instagram feed is made up almost exclusively of traditional American and Japanese tattoo artists.





More about Mandy Leontakianakis

Leontakianakis began her career in advertising in 2002 as a copywriter and moved onto strategy in 2008. Over the years, she has worked with agency brands such as Mortimer Harvey, Joe Public, Aqua Online, Idea Engineers and TBWA to mention a few. Outside of agencies, she has also worked with research giants Millward Brown and Consumer Psychology Lab.

She brings with her a wealth of experience across a number of some of South Africa's biggest brands in FMCG, financial services and the automotive sector.

Leontakianakis is an alumnus of the University of Cape Town and has associations with Oxford University in the UK and Deerfield Academy in the USA.

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