

The amazing story behind Joe Public, Africa's number one ad agency

 By [Brendan Seery](#)

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When Pepe Marais was saved by a surfer two decades ago, no one could have guessed they'd start a business together.



Pepe Marais, of Joe Public United. Picture: Michel Bega.

Forget about solar. Forget about wind power. If it's renewable energy you want to talk about, chat to Pepe Marais and walk through the advertising agency he co-founded, Joe Public United, and you'll feel a surge of creative electricity around you.

Across the three floors of the building in Bryanston, the 300 or so staffers are Duracell bunny-like in the way they go about their business.

Against a wall is a filing system with some of the names of the clients: Nedbank, Chicken Licken, Mahindra... not surprising that Joe Public is one of the fastest-growing, and hottest "shops" in the marketing communication business.

In the latest Loeries advertising awards rankings, Joe Public United was ranked number one in Africa, the Middle East and South Africa. Marais was ranked top chief creative officer and executive creative director, with Xolisa Dyeshana as number two.



#Loeries2018: Joe Public on running for the creative future

Leigh Andrews 3 Aug 2018



Chicken Licken was the country's number two brand in terms of creativity.

There's a theme on the walls and, Marais hopes, in the hearts and minds of the people: let's grow this thing (it's much more than a business, he believes) and make it even better.

It's a long way for Marais – his given name is actually Andre Pepler – from the house in Stellenbosch where he watched as his drunken and abusive father cock his 9mm Tanfoglio semiautomatic pistol and threaten to shoot his mother.

"Papa, please don't. I'll be a good boy..."

On another occasion, he watched in horror as his father chased a black man through the streets of Somerset West, racially abusing him and loosing off shots from the pistol. The man escaped.

Most of his life, he acknowledges in his recently published book, *Growing Greatness*, he has been haunted by the fear of becoming like his father... not so much the violent side but the failure which condemns your family to "living on the wrong side of the tracks", being forced to survive, on occasion, on food hand-outs.



"Just start now and be creative" - Pepe Marais on Growing Greatness

Leigh Andrews 24 Aug 2018



Also, for a man in the most outgoing of businesses and as a former musician who used to play gigs at the Roxy Rhythm Bar in Melville in the '90s, he realised years ago that he suffers from "social phobia". When he would get up in front of people, he would choke up, sweat.

"Even today, I still get nervous when I am speaking to groups."

He's frank about the tipping points in his life and when I ask him "how much of it was just dumb luck?", he leans back in his chair and says: "Actually, most of it!"

But then again, he says luck, or circumstances, or whatever you call it has to be used, worked on, grown.

In the book, he speaks about being a 27-year-old designer in Cape Town – all cool, long-haired, bells on his shoes (really) ... look-at-me posing, in reality – and deciding to knock off work early with a mate because "Pep, dude, surf's cooking!"

Surfers disparagingly refer to paddle skiers, such as Marais, as "boatmen", and on that day it was a surfer who would save the life of the "idiot boatman" and allow him to go on to advertising greatness.

In the pounding waves of an early winter storm in Table Bay, Pepe was flung on to the breakwater repeatedly, eventually losing consciousness as he got clobbered by the concrete protective structures.

A surfer found him, slowly drowning underwater, and dragged him to safety.

Three years later, in a "drinking hole" in Cape Town, he met a "surfer dude" to discuss starting the agency that would become Joe Public.

Marais was gobsmacked to sit across a table from the dude, Gareth Leck, and hear Gareth's tale of how he had pulled some "idiot boatman" out from under the waves a few years before.

Marais wrote: "A boatman and a surfer would be partners in the stormy ocean called advertising. It was the last little push we would need to take to jump into the ice-cold abyss."

(It's a relationship that has lasted 20 years, with Leck's business and strategy yin neatly complementing Marais' creative yang.)



Joe Public founders named 2018 Medium Business Entrepreneur of the Year

Jessica Tennant 14 Sep 2018



Straining the nautical motif further, the business proved anything but plain sailing. They struggled, they put their houses on the line, they sold out to an international group (big mistake, says Marais... you lose your soul that way), and Pepe partied so hard he "hit the bed head first" in the early hours of the morning. He put on weight; his marriage was in danger.

By whatever else he has, he says, he has discipline.

He followed his wife on a consciousness workshop and began coming to terms with his own personal issues... and applied those learnings to life and to the business.

"I am an optimistic person. I think the pendulum will swing in this country. We have so much going for us."

He makes an interesting observation: "I don't think I have ever seen people being as honest with each other as they have over the past year."



[Behind the Selfie] with... Pepe Marais

Leigh Andrews 4 Feb 2015



Sure, there's been hurt and anger because of that, "but we are talking and, once you're talking, you can get past anything..."

He has committed himself to not only growing the agency but growing young people through helping uplift schools in disadvantaged areas.

"I first started by saying, 'How am I going to get the money for this?' And then my business coach said 'Why does it have to be your money?'

"That was a moment, for me. Instantly, almost, we have commitments coming in from everywhere."

Brands are starting to believe they have a "greater purpose" than just making money, he says.

The clients he works with fill him with hope... and energy.

“ So blessed. [#Fifty pic.twitter.com/onHzdjTD95](https://pic.twitter.com/onHzdjTD95)— Pepe Marais (@pepemarais) [November 5, 2018](#) ”

On Monday, Marais turned 50. On that milestone birthday, many people look back with regrets. He is only looking forward... with anticipation. Not to growing old, but to growing great.

ABOUT BRENDAN SEERY

Brendan Seery has been in the news business for most of his life, covering coups, wars, famines - and some funny stories - across Africa. Brendan Seery's *Orchids and Onions* column ran each week in the *Saturday Star* in Johannesburg and the *Weekend Argus* in Cape Town.

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