



credible growth

by Cheryl van der Merwe

In the four years since BrandSmart opened its doors, the specialist brand building, advertising and marketing consultancy has been anything but conventional. When Dudu Thabede co-founded BrandSmart in 2002 she had an innovative growth strategy in mind.



Dudu Thabede, Managing Director

Firstly, I needed to consolidate the business equity – ultimately, to own the company – in order to ensure single-mindedness of direction.” This she achieved earlier this year when she bought the remaining 50% of the business’ shareholding. “Second,” she says, “I wanted to expand BrandSmart’s footprint in Africa, and I am pleased to say that we have already opened the BrandSmart Global Links office in Nigeria.”

Thabede believes that growth can only be achieved by building strong strategic partnerships, particularly when entering a new market. “Entering any new market is difficult,” she says. “The challenge is to find credible partners who know and understand

the market, and who can offer insights into the different perspectives each new market brings.”

On a recent trip to Malta for a conference, Thabede met a group of Nigerian entrepreneurs who shared her work ethic, and she recognised the opportunity this fortuitous meeting represented. “This new office in Nigeria is the result of two years’ investment in research, planning and strategy,” she explains. “I expect it to be at least another two years before we begin to realise this move’s true potential, but they will certainly be exciting years as we establish ourselves in this environment.”

Thabede points out that Nigeria is fast becoming a sought-after investment destination. “Major retail brands such as Shoprite, MTN, Game and Virgin have established themselves in this country,” she says. “They clearly see the same potential for this market’s growth. Of course there are challenges, such as infrastructure, culture and the general business environment, but I believe these challenges can be successfully overcome, and the insights we gain into this unique African country will place us at the forefront of the inevitable push into the rest of consumer Africa.”

BrandSmart is an agency that operates in what Thabede calls the ‘thinking space’. “We do not want to be a company that just prescribes thought issues and strategies to our clients,” she says. “We want to be a proactive part of their business, and partner with them in their objectives for success. We want to understand their business in totality, and assist them by interpreting their strategy from a brand-building perspective.”

For Thabede and her team, the next three years promise to be both exciting and challenging. “Having reached two of our five-year goals a year early, we are well on our way down the road to further successes,” she says. “However, one of the major challenges is to continue to stretch our targets, and to avoid becoming complacent. Over the past few years we have had enormous success developing brand strategies for both regional and international companies – we want to build on that success.”

Part of Thabede’s growth strategy lies in innovative leadership. “I believe that a vision shared is a vision realised,” she concludes. “You have to motivate your team by striking the right balance between understanding and embracing the company’s vision as a holistic driving force, and implementing the nuts and bolts on a daily basis.”

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