



Alistair King

# KING OF THE HILL

Words Eugene Yiga

It's fair to say that Alistair King was always destined for a life in a creative field. From a young age, he was happiest inside his head, imagining pictures and making up stories. He almost studied genetics at Wits University but, on the day of registration, had a change of heart. He opted for an arts degree instead.



“My interest in advertising followed when I spent a day with a great copywriter named John Smeddle,” he recalls. “He was an adult doing everything I loved as a child. There were no ad schools in those days, so a mate and I started a club at Wits called Adfactor, specifically so we could learn more about advertising directly from the agencies themselves.”

The club steered a lot of Wits University students into advertising. One could say that it also steered King to create, in partnership with James Barty, King James Group, an 18-year-old agency now made up of seven specialist companies and divisions that work in tandem.

Growth wasn't always spectacular. Indeed, for the first ten years, King describes it as being steady and unremarkable. Because growth wasn't the goal, they were happy to focus on the clients

they had and do strong brand work that serious marketers would notice. And notice they did.

“I think there are two main factors that have contributed to our success,” King says. “First, my partnership with James has been successful. We don't tread on each other's toes and we seldom disagree about what we stand for as a company. That's rare in an industry in which business and creative are often at odds with each other. I also think our early commitment to building a connected group of multi-discipline agencies has led to us having the model of integration that is working so well for us today.”

Of course, owning a company is not for the faint hearted. But King has learned that rolling with the punches and managing your own emotional state are essential career survival skills. He's also learned to stick with business principles that are simple and timeless: put substance before hype, be a workhorse and not a show pony, and pick your clients as carefully as they pick you.

“Every time I've felt like we were underperforming, I'd ignore the drama around me and just try to turn the brief that's right in front of us into something remarkable,” he says. “Great work changes everyone's mood and the effect is immediate and long-lasting. Great work always makes problems go away.”

### BEYOND MAD MEN

Producing great work in the 21st century isn't easy. Gone is the romantic 'Mad Men' era of advertising. Yes, King still believes that the industry is a massive amount of fun (minus the martini lunches and three-piece suits), but it's also a serious business and much more complex.

“The 'Mad Men' era was all about selling,” he says. “Now brands have to think about reputation, social conscience, and a myriad of other factors that determine whether that sale happens or not.”

But even though much has changed, the rules today are the same as they've always been. Ad blockers might be more obvious online or with the aid of PVR, but they've always come pre-installed in every consumer's mind.

“The case for creative innovation has never been stronger,” King says. “If you create wallpaper, it will be blocked one way or another. Create something powerful, interesting, and worth sharing and nobody wants to ignore it.”

Still, it's hard to produce great work at a time when clients are squeezing costs while also demanding that agencies participate in both profit and loss. Furthermore, the measurement criteria for many of these new models are not always transparent, making them open to abuse.

“We have so many different clients that we have to be flexible with our model of remuneration,” King says. “We'll consider any model if it's fair [but] squeezing your agency beyond what is fair is not the foundation of a good relationship. In our experience, the good clients are always reasonable and they understand that if they aren't prepared to pay for talent, they're unlikely to get it.”

### THE TRUE VALUE OF AWARDS

Proving that King James is worth paying for is something that should be easier after its performance at last year's Loeries, the

# “... BE A WORKHORSE AND NOT A SHOW PONY...”

most prestigious creative industry and brand communication awards for Africa and the Middle East. Not only did it win Top Creative Agency but King himself won the award for Top Chief Creative Officer. Sanlam, one of the agency's big new clients, also ranked as Top Brand for 2015.

“That is one of my proudest career moments,” King says. “To take Sanlam from relative Loeries obscurity to the number one spot in our first year is more than I could have hoped for. We also did well on Santam, Bell's, Johnnie Walker, and SABC, so it was an all-round good effort from our team. But I'm not about to start hunting awards for awards' sake as it can only compromise my agency and change our priorities. We'll always push our clients to make innovative work because we believe that's what it takes for brands to be seen. If that work goes on to win awards, then we'll enjoy and celebrate that too.”

As someone who's been in the business long enough to know that sometimes agencies do great work and that sometimes they don't – not always for reasons within their control – King has come to know whether or not creative work will be effective long before awards come around. Great advertising gets noticed and talked about. It also attracts hungry, competitive talent that in turn attracts clients with great ambitions for their brands. Incidentally, both of these elements are crucial for making advertising a fun career.

“The best creatives I've ever met have an extraordinary work ethic, coupled with a certain degree of insecurity,” King says. “They don't stop working until they have something remarkable on the page in front of them.”

Because creativity is a choice, King believes that only hard work will bring it out. Even the people with innate talent need to practise to develop their intuition and skills. It's the reason he seeks out everything that enriches him and avoids whatever saps his energy. It's also the reason he believes that humour is the greatest achievement of humankind.

“Once you choose to spend your life being measured by the originality of your ideas, you are pushed into a particular lifestyle where you seek out the unconventional,” he says. “Because your imagination is your livelihood you actively have to feed it.”

## THE ADVERTISING EVOLUTION

So, what's next? While there's no doubt that the digital era has changed the industry forever, King believes that debating who the future belongs to is a pointless exercise. The fighting talk of the digital agencies a few years ago has all but faded out now that most

of them have been absorbed into traditional agency networks. Instead, what has emerged is a different breed of agency.

“We are witnessing a significant evolution in advertising that will also change how brands reach and speak to their consumers,” he says. “There's a lot being said about integrated marketing, but there is no question that the agency of the present (never mind the future) needs to be medium-neutral. Have a great idea and explode it into whichever media make it stronger. That's the new game.”

As global networks continue their aggressive acquisition drive in Africa, locally owned agencies will have to stand their ground and claim their stake in the continent. But King James has chosen to keep independent for the simple reason that they'd prefer to follow their own instincts and not second-guess those of someone else.

“Our company is an expression of James and me and the many great people and partners we've gathered along the way,” King says. “That's infinitely more satisfying to us than representing another's culture... We didn't regard King James as a business that needed to be built, made successful, and sold; we just saw it as how we wanted to spend the rest of our lives.”

King also considers it great not to have to pursue someone else's agenda, whatever that might be. And while he doesn't begrudge anyone who chooses a different path, he makes the case that independent agencies sometimes appeal to clients because, when the owners are in the company, they know exactly who they are partnering with.

“Rivalry over billings is not our game and size is no indication of the quality of an agency,” he says. “We're happy to let big players zoom past us. We're happy to stay in our lane, operating on our own terms and to our own timeframes. We'd rather a client pick us for the work we do than for the systems we have in place.”

For the last 13 years, the Cape Town-based agency has had an offshoot in Johannesburg called King James II. They're on the cusp of great things and, with much growth expected, will invest in equipping that agency with all the skills and talent it needs to be a fresh and formidable force.

“We're in a purple patch right now and we intend to make the most of it,” King says. “Momentum is hard to achieve and now that we have it we will do everything we can to maintain it. We've made a few acquisitions to bolster our offering and that will play out in the short-term. Expansion into Africa remains an appealing idea to us. We'll remain independent, though. Other than that, we'll keep on keeping on.” ●