

# Leith Smith: Lessons from SA's first VR radio campaign

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In a first for radio across the globe, Jacaranda FM and Tracker created a safe, virtual reality (VR) experience for families and individuals to explore our beautiful country. The virtual experience took shape in the form of an [online game](#) where players engaged in a virtual treasure hunt to track down some of South Africa's most precious artifacts, whilst learning about our country.



*Mzansi Quest*: The first virtual game exploring South Africa is here

Jacaranda FM 23 Jun 2021



Jacaranda FM marketing manager Leith Smith shares his insights and lessons from creating a brand experience in VR.

**Why did you create *Mzansi Quest* and why do you believe it's radio's greatest innovation yet?**

Connecting with listeners through all the various levels of lockdown has been the greatest challenge faced as the marketing team. Pre-Covid-19, Jacaranda FM created many mass-participation events such as Off the Beat 'n Track, Spring Walk and Jacaranda Day. Our events drew in crowds as big as 15,000, and suddenly this wasn't an option anymore.

Our data saw a big spike in people consuming information through their mobile devices and the new work-from-home reality meant that just about everything we consumed was digital.

Streaming numbers continued to rise with a 48% increase in unique connections year-on-year after, and according to [Engineering News](#) the gaming industry saw unprecedented growth during Covid-19. All of this data combined with attendance figures from our newly adapted streaming events like The Good Morning Angels Benefit Concert, gave us the confidence to try something new.

All we had to do was figure out how to engage online, but in a new way, that didn't add to the existing online fatigue experienced by many.



Leith Smith

Famous event brands such as Tomorrowland and Burning Man Project created a space where annual attendees could experience an event in VR, but it had never been done in the radio sector or tailored to represent real world places in Mzansi.

**Was the campaign successful?**

We smashed all of the targets set, even PR when we launched this campaign during one of the most Covid-saturated news cycles to date.

We're quite excited because we now have actual campaign data to build our next VR brand experience from, and as with anything in life, a bucket load of lessons.

Can you share one of the lessons with us?

Just because you haven't done it before – doesn't mean you can't make a success of it. *Mzansi Quest* was brought to its knees in the first hour of launch. We simply didn't expect the huge virtual turnout, so don't underestimate yourself when times are uncertain. It's when we are most innovative.

Trust your partners and give people grace where it is needed. Our partners Mann Made asked for a bit of time to fix an issue completely, as opposed to putting a band-aid on it and risking the virtual user experience for our listeners. We trusted them to guide the troubleshooting process and guess what – the experts were right!

I can't emphasise enough how a good team (read enthusiastic and skilled), clear instructions and empathy with pain points can drive the success of a campaign.

What is your most important consideration for creating a radio campaign in VR?

Our listeners. We always start by asking: What will our listeners want? And then use research to underpin all our work. Brand experience is a massive consideration. From listening to Martin Bester and Liesl Laurie talk about *Mzansi Quest* on air, to being able to chat with Liesl Laurie in *Mzansi Quest*, to liking a *Breakfast with Martin Bester* Facebook post about *Mzansi Quest* – our listeners should experience our amazing talent at every touch point – because that's where the radio brand connection lies.

We're also lucky enough to have a first-party data service as part of our client offering. Being able to use this service and the data to create truly resonant campaigns, allows us to put our best foot forward always.



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What were some of the challenges you faced when creating *Mzansi Quest*?

The timing! We had just over a month to complete a fully functional, interactive VR experience for our listeners. Another challenge was the unknown. We had no benchmarks or a clear picture of success and, as marketers, we're always trying to achieve better results and refine our output.

I touched on this a bit previously. We designed *Mzansi Quest* to be a reprieve from the Covid-19 fatigue, but found it challenging to form part of the national conversation that was so saturated with hard news and the serious issues relating to the vaccine roll-out.

You mentioned that *Mzansi Quest* has allowed people to connect during this pandemic – how have people connected and what was the feedback?

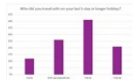
Some listeners connected with family and friends from different homes, provinces and even overseas. Because the sound worked in VR as it does in real life (becoming louder and softer as you get close or move away), people could engage and have conversations that felt real, but online.

We had wonderful feedback! Players were surprised at the educational element of the game and communicated that they learnt so much about their own provinces. Players also loved that the Tracker Care Bots were real people who could guide them intuitively and make the experience even more real.

Can you share some campaign highlights?

Creating this campaign was a success in it's own for the radio sector. We demonstrated that radio as a medium, has and will always be relevant, maybe even more so during times of human hardship.

Over 10,000 people joined *Mzansi Quest* over the week it was live, and close to half of the audience collected all the treasures.



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A small but major thing for us was that we had zero cyber bullying incidents thanks to the Tracker Care Bots and good firewalls. As we become more digitally entrenched, protecting our listeners and especially our young audience is paramount so it's a definite highlight.

Do you think VR is going to become a big component of how brands engage with their audience in the future?

Engagement is important but the by-product of great engagement is connection and great brand experiences drive connection. I think VR does what online can't always do alone. VR allows us to connect beyond the expected engagement because it gives the listener an identity and sense of self within the VR landscape – bringing the experience closer to reality, and I think that will entice other brands to start playing in this space too.

I think that we have only just started exploring what is possible in virtual reality. I see so many opportunities for brand collaborations and believe we may even transact through blockchain currencies in VR worlds one day.

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Jacaranda FM broadcasts at 94.2FM from Midrand, Gauteng and is one of the most popular radio stations with a substantial footprint across Mzansi. The station has the only bilingual commercial license in the country; broadcasting regionally in English and Afrikaans across Gauteng, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and the North West Province.

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