

Rachel Irvine shares the highs and lows as Irvine Partners celebrates its 10th birthday

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At a time when many PR agencies have retrenched, or worse, closed, Cape Town-based Irvine Partners is celebrating its 10th birthday. In its ten years, the company has expanded from Cape Town to Johannesburg, Lagos, Nairobi and most recently London.



Rachel Irvine, CEO of Irvine Partners

How has the agency done it? Rachel Irvine, agency founder and CEO, credits hard work, resilience, and commitment from her team and her clients.

I chat to Rachel Irvine about the highs and lows of running a PR agency, and she shares some important lessons that will benefit other startups in these challenging times.

■ ***Congratulations on the 10-year anniversary of Irvine Partners. How do you feel about reaching such a milestone?***

Hitting the 10-year mark in the middle of a global pandemic has made the milestone so much more humbling and poignant. Clearly we can't have the big party we thought we'd be having with the teams from all of our offices in one place, but given that we are safe, healthy and our business is growing, we honestly couldn't ask for a better birthday gift than that in 2020.

■ ***Tell us about how Irvine Partners came about?***

I moved back to South Africa after long stints in London and Moscow and tried my hand at working for one or two established PR agencies in Cape Town and Johannesburg but nothing felt like a fit for the kind of agency I knew I wanted in my head.

“ The media landscape was shifting and social media was starting to proliferate. ”

I just knew in my gut the PR game was due for an overhaul so I made the decision to move the agency I wanted out of my head and into reality, which led to Irvine Partners opening its doors a decade ago .

■ **When you started out in 2010, what was your aim?**

Honestly? At the beginning, the goal was to earn enough money to pay everyone's bills while making a mark for the agency by doing PR our way and building relationships with clients. That aim quickly shifted into wanting to be an all-in long-term partner to our clients - something that still drives the way we do business today.

■ **Briefly tell us how the agency evolved into where it is now.**

Our growth in the early years was typical - starting in Cape Town but wanting to do business in Johannesburg and going national fairly quickly. But the evolution of who we are today really started when our eyes moved beyond South Africa's borders, and we understood that we could serve clients better if we were their partners in multiple geographies.

“ We make a conscious decision that when we expand into new territories, we have wholly-owned offices rather than affiliates or joint ventures. ”

Today we have additional offices in Kenya, London, Nigeria and very recently a satellite office in Berlin.



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■ **What are some of the big highlights over the last decade?**

I know the right answer to this question is probably to name-drop big clients we've landed or massive campaigns we've successfully pulled off, but honestly the real highlights for me have been watching people in the agency grow. There is very little more satisfying for me than watching someone shoot the lights out professionally knowing I had a hand in guiding them or even simply acting as their soundboard.

Hayley van der Woude joining as managing director and as an equity partner a little over two years ago is a massive highlight for me.

“ For any founder to realise their vision of scaling a business, a running mate who shares that vision and has the ability to execute is absolutely mission critical. ”

Thanks to Hayley's input and effort, we continue to grow and build a culture of both excellence and enjoyment.

Lastly, launching our London office during Covid will stand out as a highlight for all of us at Irvine Partners. It was a beacon of hope during some very dark days during the early stages of the pandemic. The fact that we are still growing this office and adding new roles continues to inspire us as to the size of the opportunity.

■ **2020 has been one helluva roller coaster ride. We've seen agencies retrench staff, and even close their doors. What kept you going? Was there at any point where you thought, this is it for Irvine Partners?**

There were nine days in March when we lost a client a day - mostly tourism and real estate clients, and I was utterly terrified. I wrote to everyone on the team letting them know I would not be taking a salary and that the business needed everyone else to take a 20% salary cut so that we could save all jobs until the crazy was over.



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Fortunately, before the month was out we had signed new clients and were able to pay full salaries. Everyone on the team doubled down in terms of effort and worked like Trojans. To date, we have been able to pay full salaries every month, have not retrenched anyone and have actually grown our team in South Africa and London. We are grateful beyond measure to be so fortunate, so have paid it forward to support Covid-19 relief efforts across feeding schemes and PPE donations to frontline medical staff.

■ **There are offices in Cape Town and Johannesburg, Lagos, Nairobi and London. Are there any plans to expand into other markets?**

We recently added a satellite office in Berlin to better serve clients in the medical cannabis space but there are no immediate plans for another office. That said, we are watching markets like Rwanda and Ethiopia and should the timing be right we'd consider market entry there.

■ **What are some core elements that makes an agency successful?**

We take our commitment to partner with clients really seriously.

“ We understand what a privilege it is to be able to take a client to market in respect of their communications strategy and work hard to earn that privilege every day. ”

Good agencies understand they're taking someone's hard-earned money and ensure the service they deliver is worthy of that spend. Good coffee and an always fully stocked bar also play an integral role in successful agencies.

■ **This year we've seen small agencies start up. What advice do you have for someone starting up?**

Run lean. Don't spend money you don't have. A fancy office is not a sign of success. Money in the bank is far more important. Always do your own heavy lifting, especially if you're the boss. Don't take on disrespectful clients. It will end badly and the money will not be worth the stress caused.

■ Can you share any big plans for Irvine Partners in 2021?

Our biggest plan is going to be attempting to get everyone from all six of our offices together in one place in February to actually celebrate this 10-year milestone of ours! We'd like to raise a glass together to celebrate surviving a whole damn pandemic and to cheer our onward journey. Aside from that, we feel like we're only just getting started.

“ Major focus areas for next year will be further growing our offering around digital marketing, video production and media buying. ”

We've always been an integrated full-service agency, but we're expanding teams and resources to make sure we have the capacity to take on any client.

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