

Online connectivity, the network and stakeholder engagement tool of the future

As part of its #LockdownLessons series, Bizcommunity is reaching out to its Press Office clients and South Africa's top industry players to share their experience of the current Covid-19 crisis, how their organisations are navigating these unusual times, where the challenges and opportunities lie, and their industry outlook for the near future.

Solly Moeng, Founder & Convenor of The Africa Brand Summit, shares his views.



Solly Moeng

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■ **What was your initial response to the crisis/lockdown and has your experience of it been different to what you expected?**

Solly Moeng: At first, I understood the reasons for the lockdown and embraced them without questioning them. It was also good that government spoke in one voice and that its briefings were both consistent and regular. They also seemed transparent. However, I gradually developed a level of scepticism when lockdown rules began to seem not to have been sufficiently thought through and, in some cases, appearing to be informed more by the likes and dislikes of certain ministers instead of the scientifically informed rationale to push back against Covid-19. The lockdown has seriously impacted on our annual event, the Africa Brand Summit, as it too, like many other big events, had to be cancelled; well, pushed to go entirely digital in our case.

■ **Comment on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on your organisation or economy as a whole.**

Moeng: At first, we postponed the 2020 Africa Brand Summit from the beginning of June to the beginning of October. Then we decided to host it as a hybrid event – with a small group of people gathering locally and others streaming in digitally from other parts of South Africa, the rest of Africa and the world. More recently, following a webinar hosted by SA Tourism and the Minister of Tourism, it became clear that restrictions on large gatherings, as well as domestic and international travel, are unlikely to be lifted before December 2020. This pushed us to ditch the ‘hybrid’ plans and go for a completely digital, yet technologically enhanced event, to optimise connectivity, partner brand visibility and heighten the overall experiential quality for all participants. It is a new world; we’re embracing it fully. The challenge for events such as ours, in these changing times, is to monetise them. This can only be done by providing great returns for brand visibility and reach to the

right audiences.

■ How is your organisation responding to the crisis?

Moeng: We're looking at a number of awesome, technologically enhanced digital platforms that will help us deliver an unforgettable experience for our partner brands and delegates from across the world.

■ Comment on the challenges and opportunities.

Moeng: The initial challenges were triggered by announcements from our sponsors that they needed to pull back a bit – fortunately not ‘pull-out’ – while they monitored the evolving situation. We had to come up with ways to keep them with us by working with them to find mutually beneficial arrangements to ensure that the event continues in a changed form and that they can still justify associating with it in the new economy. 2020 will go down as a truly unique and extraordinary year in the history of mankind. As a brand, we'd rather remember it by the things we quickly learned to do differently in order to survive than by the way we had to stay hidden, invisible to the world, while we waited for the dusts to settle.

■ How has the lockdown affected your staff? / What temporary HR policies have you put in place regarding remote working, health & safety, etc.?

Moeng: We all pulled back and worked from our respective homes. We remained in touch through various online and telephone platforms: Zoom meetings, WhatsApp, telephone, etc. We also encouraged one another to remain safe by following all precautions to avoid contracting the coronavirus.

■ How are you navigating ‘physical distancing’ while keeping your team close-knit and aligned?

Moeng: We're physically distancing while we remain socially connected through various digital platforms. There is no need for us to come together in person until we can safely do so, as the restrictions get lifted over time.

■ How have you had to change the way you operate?

Moeng: By relying entirely on various digital platforms to communicate and share work related information, as well as by using virtual meeting platforms where needed.

■ Any trends you've seen emerge as a result of the crisis?

Moeng: Digital, digital, digital. Online connectivity is the new network and stakeholder engagement tool of the future.

■ Your key message to those in the sector?

Moeng: Be patient. Do not despair. Attend as many free webinars as possible on how to use digital products and run your business online, where you can. The digital space will be increasingly crowded, no doubt, but there is a lot to be discovered and many opportunities waiting to be explored by those who will have the calmness to sit back and quietly allow themselves to learn new things with open minds.

■ What do you predict the next six months will be like?

Moeng: They will be tough for many as they struggle to let go of the past and transition into the new economy, the new way of doing things. Some old skills will become obsolete and new technologies will come in and provide us with tools to do things differently. People must have their eyes on smart safety measures to help them avoid contracting the coronavirus while they also learn new skills. Those who sit at home and do nothing will be left behind when the new economy begins to pick-up speed.

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