

Toyota SA appoints award-winning journo Ray Leathern as corporate communications manager

 By Imran Salie

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Toyota South Africa Motors (TSAM) announced in mid-March changes to its public relations team. These changes include a new communications team structure, a new productions communications team, and the appointment of award-winning journalist Ray Leathern as corporate communications manager. Leathern previously spent two years as editor of *Car Magazine* and this is his first time in a corporate communications role.



As corporate communications manager, Leathern aims to uphold the reputation of TSAM | image supplied

The newcomer to TSAM has 17 years of experience, which includes time spent as the motoring group editor for Highbury/RamsayMedia as well as digital editor at *Media24 TopCar*, making him a valuable media practitioner.

At TSAM, he is part of a team that includes Thabo Smouse (Lexus product communications manager), Lebogang Morobe, and senior manager: corporate and Lexus product communications Nomphele 'Lelo' Ndzimela who leads the team.

Bizcommunity caught up with Leathern to find out his goals in his new role, how he plans to adapt to the communications needs of the company, and how he plans to work with other departments at TSAM...

■ Congratulations on your appointment. How are you feeling about it?

Thank you so much. I'm extremely excited about the opportunity. When Toyota South Africa Motors (TSAM) gets in touch, you move heaven and earth to make it happen. In this instance, I moved from Cape Town to Johannesburg – with only a few weeks' notice – but it has been worthwhile to join the TSAM marketing communications team.

■ ***What drew you to your new role as corporate communications manager at TSAM?***

If you had told me a year ago I would be a corporate communications manager for Toyota, I wouldn't have believed you. However, with 17 years' experience in editorial, including editing SA's oldest motoring title, *Car Magazine*, I was looking for the next challenge.

From an editorship role, aside from creating your own media outlet perhaps, the next step in career development is to move to a manufacturer. And you don't get better, in my opinion, than the market leader in SA for the last 43 years.

■ ***What are your goals for the communications team at TSAM?***

My goals initially are to uphold the stellar reputation of TSAM both locally and within the broader Toyota Motor Company (TMC) fold. TSAM's communications remit is as dynamic as it is diverse.

On any given day you can be working on sponsorship material like the Kaizer Chiefs, Springboks or Cheetahs, the Absa Cape Epic victory by Team Toyota Specialized, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, sustainable development goals (SDGs) or the new-energy vehicle (NEV) portfolio.

TSAM's involvement in all spheres of life, besides motor vehicles, is simply incredible, and each communication needs to be tailored correctly to its intended audience.

■ ***How do you plan to adapt to the communications needs of the company as they evolve over time?***

Coming from an editorial background, I appreciate that I have a lot to learn about corporate communications. In many ways, the two are worlds apart, but I believe I also have a unique insight as a result.

Toyota is a family brand, and that's always what I felt when I interacted with it over the years. It's personable, interactive, and two-way communication. Like any effective conversation, you want to feel seen, heard, understood, and safe even. That's what Toyota was for me, and that's how I hope to work from within.

■ ***In your opinion, what are some of the biggest challenges facing corporate communications today?***

I don't see challenges so much as opportunities for growth. Like any aspect of business, I believe corporate communications must continue to evolve in a multimedia society.

Technology has given us so many ways to connect positively with people: TV, online, press releases, internal and external bulletins, social media, direct messaging, the list goes on. Because of this, brands have to be open and accountable. All stakeholders have a voice and an audience, and you have to respect clear two-way communication.

In our *Toyota Connect* and *Lexus Life* digital magazines, we explore a rich tapestry of editorial content around our brands. Each one is an opportunity to connect and share stories.

▣ **Can you share any insight or strategies you've used in the past to successfully manage a team?**

The number one way to manage a team successfully, I believe, is open and honest communication and empowering that team to be leaders. I first learned about the concept from Robin Sharma, author of *The Monk who Sold his Ferrari*, when he spoke about "leading without a title".



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If you can equip every member of your team with the skills and ability to take responsibility and to lead, no matter their station, then your organisation will outperform the competition.

▣ **How do you plan to work with other departments within TSAM to ensure effective communication across the company?**

The management structures within TSAM must be some of the best in the country. I'm just a button press away from anyone in our technical department, sales, parts, financial services, product planning, manufacturing, you name it. Because of that, you can always verify the answer you need.

▣ **Take us through a day in the life of Ray Leathern.**

The thing about corporate comms is no two days are ever the same. What I can control is my morning and evening routine. I generally like to start the day with mindfulness time in the morning. No phone, laptop or email, this is purely time to take in the new day. Then it's into the Sandton office for work.



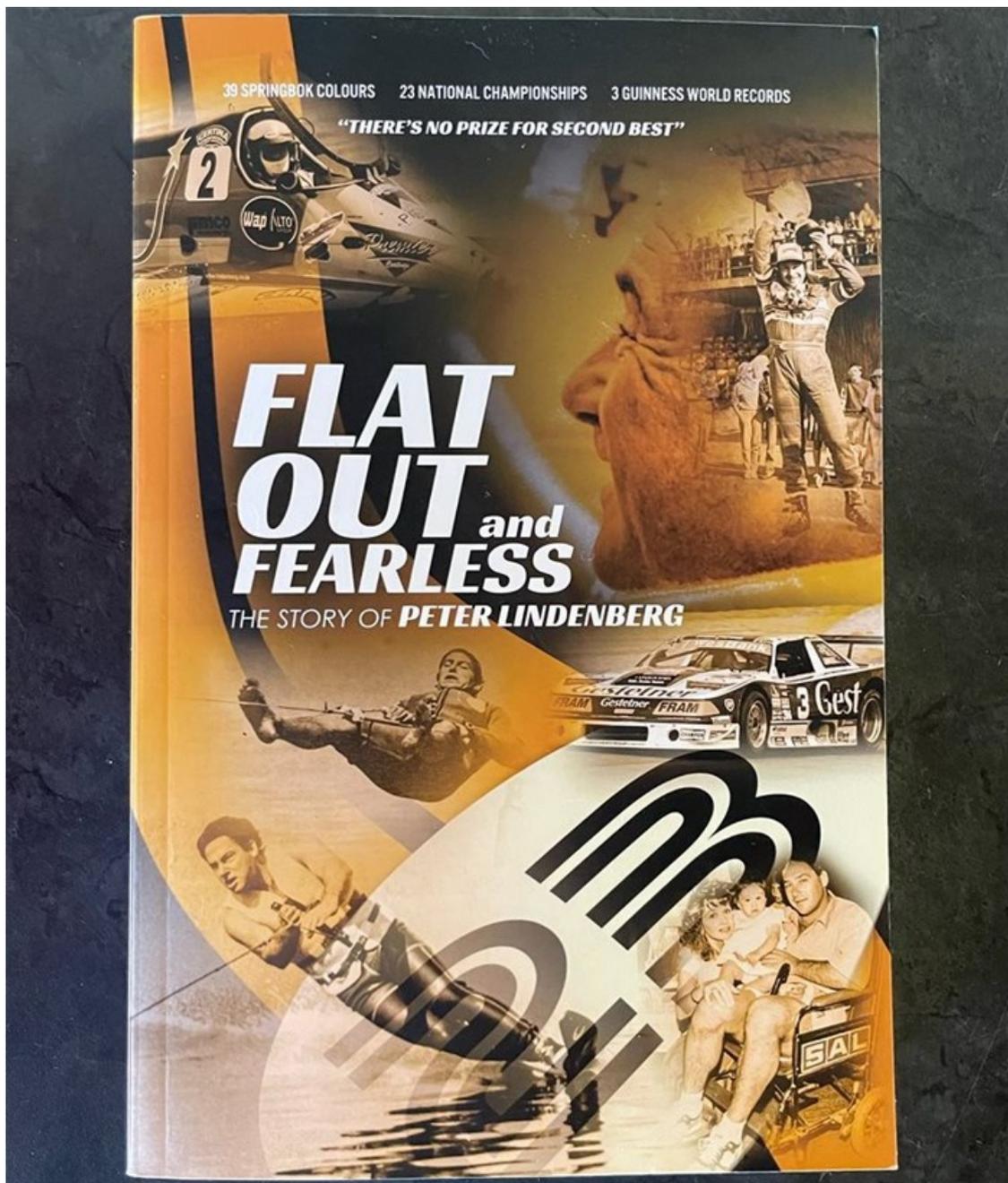
Learthern has traded the waves of Muizenberg and track days at Killarney for the rarefied air of Gauteng | image supplied

Besides my PR role, I also busy myself with *Toyota Connect* and *Lexus Life* digital magazines, which bring me a lot of

creative satisfaction. The marketing communications team sits together for lunch every day and work talk is discouraged. Then, when work is over, I strive to exercise for at least an hour every day, whether it be running, gym or some other activity. I'm an avid surfer in Cape Town, and that helped me see the tremendous potential in having a healthy body and a healthy mind.

■ **Can you share any interesting or memorable experiences you've had in your career as a journalist or editor?**

Working in media is always memorable and full of great experiences, even if the pay isn't. It was through my work in editorial that I got to ghost-write the autobiography of SA motorsport icon, Peter Lindenberg, *Flat-out and Fearless*.



Flat-out and Fearless, the autobiography of SA motorsport icon Peter Lindenberg, ghost-written by Ray Leathern | image supplied

This was a tremendous honour for me and was memorable because it was both thoroughly enjoyable and challenging. I never knew I had it in me, frankly. To transcribe tens of hours of interviews with Peter and then craft it into a story. You don't one day build a house. The act of building is slow and steady, a single brick at a time, and over time that work translates into a house. It taught me a lot.

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