

#BehindtheSelfie with... Alistair King

In the first iteration of our new weekly feature, we find out what's really going on behind the selfie, with Alistair King, Group Chief Creative Officer of King James Group...



King demonstrating the look he gives you when he doesn't like the ads you are showing him. Gulp...

1. Where do you live, work and play?

King: I live in Camps Bay and work in a beautiful old 1870s manor house in Woodstock, Cape Town, which has a 250-year old *Ficus* tree out front. We bought it a few years back and it turned out to be the best business decision ever. I think we're one the last agencies with a free bar open every evening, so obviously that's where I play the most. But I spend as many weekends as possible in Greyton, which has become a very important retreat for me.

2. What's your claim to fame?

King: I won the Zimbabwe Schools Putt-Putt Championship in 1979, and got Full Chess Colours in grade 7. So, I basically peaked at 14.

3. Describe your career so far...

King: From the day I left university, having my own agency was my end goal, so everything I did in my career was to ultimately get to that point. I started KJ when I felt I was creatively strong enough and mature enough to hold my own with senior marketers - that turned out to be 30, which was five years ahead of my personal schedule. The stars aligned when I had the motivation and when I met James. We took the leap knowing that the worst case scenario was we'd have to go back and find a job - it didn't seem like much of a gamble. In hindsight, I feel fortunate to have started KJ so young as I still feel that I have a lot of energy and a lot of good creative years ahead of me. I have no other career aspirations beyond making King James Group the best agency group it can be.

4. Tell us a few of your favourite things.

King: Well, I became a father for the first time this time last year, so she tops my list right now. Her name is Indie, named after our (my wife and I) other favourite things - Indie music, Indie film, and the spirit of independent mindedness in general. I'm really into the music of Alt-J and [Portugal.The man](#) at the moment and I'll re-read my favourite book, [A Fraction of the Whole](#) by Steve Toltz, at least once a year. I aspire to write half as well as he does. [Cinema Paradiso](#) is my favourite

film ever. And my closest buddy is my 90kg Great Dane, Garp, who comes to work with me every second day. If I was on death row, my last meal would be good old roast chicken, chips, rice and gravy, followed by a wee dram of Cragganmore Single Malt Whisky and jelly babies - see answer to question 15.

5. What do you love about your industry?

King: I try not to get too immersed in the broader industry, but I absolutely love my job. All I ever wanted was to spend my life in my own imagination and this business has allowed me to do that in spectacular fashion. What we get to create is extraordinary. And we get to do that with the most remarkable talent across the creative spectrum - that's a privilege, in my opinion. I'm not sure there are many industries that exercise the mind to the same degree.

6. What are a few pain points your industry can improve on?

King: I have no blanket criticisms to make of the South African ad industry. There are some great agencies and some very weak ones, of course. But in my experience, the majority all work damn hard for their clients, often way harder than they are credited or remunerated for. So many people sacrifice their personal lives, time and time again just to put the best ideas possible in front of a client, and they never think about what that client is worth or what income is being derived. Producing great ideas becomes everything, and I'm not sure there are many industries that do that. It's very personal to most creative people. If I have one complaint, it would be that agencies aren't producing their best work on their main clients. I'd like to see more big brands battling it out with great advertising. I've always felt the best way to make that happen is for us to create great work on our clients and hope that our competitors will respond with an even better one. I think we managed that on Allan Gray in particular. Genuine brand rivalry, and not award shows, is the best way to improve what we do as an industry.

7. Describe your average workday (if such a thing exists)

King: I'm still very much in the creative trenches, so to speak. I'd be a very miserable man if I didn't sit every day trying to suck something magical out of the ether. But the foundation of great advertising is laid down at a strategic and relationship level with the clients themselves. It's one thing to come up with an idea, but another altogether to create the environment in which a client will take a leap of faith and buy it, even when they aren't convinced themselves. So that's what I do - I try to create trust and then drive my teams to do the kind of work that continues to deserve that trust. I disagree when people say it's all about the work. I think it's all about getting the client to trust your personal intuition. When you have that, the great work follows.

8. What are the tools of your trade?

King: Shew, where do I start? I hate lists, but here goes...

1. Sense of humour: It's crucial to the creative process, and vital in the management of stress.
2. A positive mindset: Nothing kills the creative process faster than the habitual need to punch holes in ideas or people, or the overwhelming need to point out what could go wrong. Negativity is poisonous. When you practice it too much, that's what you permanently become. You become a Voldemort. Cynical people cannot create, in my view.
3. Mental and emotional stamina: This can be a heartbreaking and exhausting business. Not only are you battling with your own ability to produce ideas on demand, but you also face the challenge of getting it through a client. Rolling with the punches is vital.
4. Conviction: It's impossible to sell a brave idea without genuine belief in what you have created. Excitement and conviction are very contagious.
5. Persuasion: Just about every significant idea that King James has ever created was not immediately well received by the client. People love to say you have to fight for great ideas, but I think that's just rhetoric. When good ideas are bombed, you have to start persuading, and without that skill, most of your best work will never get made.

9. Who is getting it right in your industry?

King: I judge agencies by their high profile work, so FoxP2 is still my favourite agency. They have great integrity as a group of people and I believe everything they do is backed by the right motive. I also greatly admire what [Joe Public](#) is up to. Their growth has been remarkable and they're getting creatively better as they grow, which is the way that it should be.

10. What are you working on right now?

King: Ooh, so much - too much to list. King James Group grew 38% in 2014 and my goal this year is to turn that all into great work. We have some fabulous campaigns in production as we speak on Santam, Sanlam and Beacon, so that's worth looking out for. A lot of our creative drive in 2014 was to up our game on integrated work, and that will continue into 2015. I think Sanlam's [One Rand Man](#), Johnnie Walker's Meet your match and Santam's Through the Eyes of a Child is a taste of things to come.

11. Tell us some of the buzzwords floating around in your industry at the moment, and some of the catchphrases you utter yourself.

King: There are a few buzzwords being used that I cannot stand. 'Storytelling' and 'Content' are just two of them. 'Content' is being used as if it's some kind of new genre, which of course it isn't. Content is what communication agencies have always done - it's just the nature of it that has changed, and will always continue to change. 'Storytelling' irritates me for different reasons. There are many ways to build brands and sell products, so any attempt to define it, or formulaise it, is ridiculous.

My favourite buzzword is one I made up: Transdouchery. I use it to describe someone who just keeps going from one act of douchery to the next. The phrase I probably use the most in the agency is "Do more than is necessary". Too many people do what the client has asked for. I think greatness lies beyond that. I think you have to create much more than the client expects to find a creative solution that no one would see coming.

12. Where and when do you have your best ideas?

King: I've always said that great ideas are like unreliable friends: they pop up when you least expect them and mostly at very inconvenient times. But I do find that I have to fully immerse myself in the job in order to get my brain generating. I have to sit down in front of a computer or note pad and literally force it to happen. It's way more disciplined and way more stressful than I'd like it to be. I personally battle to switch off when there is a big opportunity in front of us, so the end result is that I am virtually always thinking, always searching for a better idea. And when we have one, my insecurity makes me wonder if there is an even better one still out there. There's no escape from this job for me.

13. What's your secret talent/party trick.

King: If you tell me your name, I can forget it in .4 of a second. It's a nasty trick and it embarrasses me frequently. If I attach a mnemonic to your name in an attempt to remember it, I'll just forget the mnemonic.

14. Are you a technophobe or a technophile?

King: I'm somewhere in the middle. I'm not averse to technology but feel too many people stare at it too often for life and work solutions.

15. What would we find if we scrolled through your phone?

King: You'll find lots of pictures of Maynards jelly babies. I started an elaborate experiment a few years back to measure how lucky I am, based on whether my favourite flavours turn up more frequently than my least favourite flavours. The experiment is ongoing.

16. What advice would you give to newbies hoping to crack into the industry?

King: I know that a lot of newbies put a great deal of pressure on themselves to get into the top creative agencies from the outset, and they shouldn't do so. Those agencies are not always the most nurturing environments and certainly not always the best place to learn. My advice is to just get in. Anywhere. You can develop your skills in just about any agency and it's good to learn without the pressure of a hectic creative director. Once you can knock out a solid, decent ad - which is normally after a couple of years - then look for an agency that is going to creatively demand a lot more from you. Use those formative years to build your confidence and abilities and, above all, develop the right work ethic. As long as you are self-motivated and determined to keep working until you have something great on the paper in front of you, you'll rise through the ranks. Just be patient. You have a long career ahead of you.



King's Maynards Jelly Babies experiment

[click to enlarge](#)

17. Lastly, plug your contact details and punt all the places people can find you/your work online...

- Email: Alistair@kingjames.co.za
- Twitter: [@Alsparkles](https://twitter.com/Alsparkles)
- Personal blog: I'm not that good at keeping my blog going, but will endeavour to do so in 2015: humbananabugspider.com
- King James website: <http://www.kingjames.co.za/>
- King James Facebook: www.facebook.com/KingJamesGroup

Click here for a refresher of King's insights into [What winning continent-wide awards means for the local ad industry](#), and [here](#) for the announcement that King James has been awarded number one global agency ranking at the 2014 Midas Awards.

**Interviewed by [Leigh Andrews](#).*

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at [@Leigh_Andrews](https://twitter.com/Leigh_Andrews).

- #Loeries2020: Behavioural economics as creativity, but not as we know it... - 24 Nov 2020
- #D2020: Ignite your inner activist - representation through illustration - 27 Feb 2020
- #D2020: How Sho Madjozi brought traditional Tsonga *xibelani* into 2020 - 27 Feb 2020
- #D2020: Silver jubilee shines with Department of Audacious Projects launch - 26 Feb 2020
- #BehindtheSelfie with... Qingqile 'WingWing' Mdlulwa, CCO at The Whole Idea - 26 Feb 2020

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>