

TBWA's Tessa Conrad on how SA rates in the global arena of innovation and disruption

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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Canadian-born Tessa Conrad, global director of operations at TBWA\Worldwide's headquarters in New York, recently visited TBWA\South Africa's Johannesburg office where she did a series of presentations and assisted the local team in producing a module for DLearn.

Conrad's role entails conceiving innovations for the agency and its clients and seeing them through to implementation. With a focus on digital, data, tools, partnerships and ways of working, she helps key offices and clients on their path for growth. Among the likes of Nissan, Infiniti, Datsun, McDonald's, Apple, Henkel, one2free, H&M and more.

Here, she shares some insights on how South Africa rates in the global arena of innovation and disruption as sustainable business operating models and how they impact the company's objectives and the greater industry...

■ What brings you to SA?

I'm lucky enough to be able to come to South Africa to meet some of the clients as well as with the agency, around how to continue to push for innovation as it relates to creativity and how we work.



Tessa Conrad



"The world needs creativity now, more than ever" - Chris Garbutt

Leigh Andrews 17 Jul 2018



We've been doing some more work around how to make sure we are building for what's next so that we can continue to work with clients on future-proofing their business.

Disruption is always key to what we do and we're using innovation to ensure it brings impact for key business objectives to give our clients a larger share of the future.

■ Describe your role in more detail.

I'm a Canadian that joined the company in Hong Kong before making the move to the USA, so I'm able to bring a bit of an international perspective to the table. I focus on a few key things for TBWA, such as:

- Building and revamping around Disruption Live, which is our way of working across people, process and tools.
- Integrating digital and innovation into how we work while also ensuring we have some envelope-pushing craft and ideas as well.
- Further our data capabilities across the collective.
- Building bespoke teams for clients to customise how we work with them.

■ **What do you love most about the agency and where it's going?**

What I love most about our collective is just that – that we're a collective rather than a network and I think that mostly resonates with me in relation to the people that our collective is made up of. The people I get to meet in my travels and work with from all around the world are insanely smart, driven, always pushing innovation and provocative – all things that I love and respect. It's a privilege to be able to work with and learn from people like this who are consistently at the top of their game.



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■ **How does South Africa rate in the global arena in terms of innovation, creativity and disruption?**

It's amazing being in South Africa as it's such a vibrant place with amazing people and a variety of perspectives. In my trips here and through working with the office and the region from afar, it has always captured a special place in my heart due to how open the people are when it comes both to scaling innovation as well as in bringing new innovations to the table that we can grow globally.

“ South Africa is also special outside of TBWA given the leapfrog way the continent tackles innovation.

While there are some trends where it hasn't progressed as quickly as some other regions and countries, it's perfectly primed to surpass those with the right steps and an early-adoptive culture. ”

■ **What are some trends that companies need to be planning for and activating against?**

There's a slew of innovation trends that companies need to be planning for and activating against, both with regards to creative communications being put into the markets, as well as shifts in how businesses can change and how they operate to be future-proofed.

It's also important to note that innovation relates to anything where there's a shift creating an opportunity for evolving and creating – it's not limited to new technology, which people can sometimes mistakenly solely equate innovation to.

Voice is a big one. Making sure that it's a touchpoint that's always thought of and created for when it comes to crafting and activating against customer journeys. Also, using it to open up accessibility to brands and consumer-driven interactions. This is only going to continue to grow, so we need to be activating and concepting against this now.

Influencer marketing is another one. While it's been talked about for a while now, we see it segmenting more across mega, macro, micro and nano influencers both in how they can be worked with as touchpoints within themselves and in how businesses need to change to be able to efficiently and effectively build strategic outputs with them. Then, considering things more on the cusp of innovation like AI influencers, where we can work with brands to craft the exact experience they want an influencer to evoke – this is exciting.

Work revolution is yet another trend that businesses need to adapt to. This comes through in the consumers you are serving and how they are defining a large part of their lives through how they work and what they need from work. It also comes through how companies are able to evolve to attract, retain and train their people to be the strongest, most empowered workforce possible. Touching on aspects like flexible working hours, new tools, new ways of working and the like, there's so much innovation across this wider trend.

■ **Any suggested new ways of working?**

With Disruption Live, we're set up to work at a quick pace and with scale to create relevant work for brands that drives business impact.

"You have to be pretty damn disruptive to grab anyone's attention in 2018" - Karabo Denalane

Leigh Andrews 2 Jul 2018





With the move towards further integration and ensuring teams and offices have the right people across the right disciplines working together, Disruption Live sets us up to be able to continue to evolve how we work and to be able to do it at speed.

■ ***Tell us more about Disruption Live and of course, referencing your Breaking Ballet which won an award for disruption***

Disruption Live is how we use our disruption methodology in a practical sense, across people, tools and processes. A few years back, we worked to get TBWA globally working in this way to ensure we can work with clients at speed and scale, while ensuring we bring culturally relevant and driven ideas.

For TBWA, disruption is our driver and through this, we have a common language that lets us take on very open and quick collaboration across our global offices, which is crucial.

Disruption Live specifically helps us ensure we have and upskill the right people in our business to be able to behave and deliver this way.

With an ever-growing amount of tools out there, we constantly adapt which tools we use and how, to suit our ways of working, which also changes for different markets and clients.

While 'processes' can sometimes be seen as a boring word, I believe the Disruption Live processes are what help us get a consistent level of strategic and creative craft in how we crack ideas and deliver them, ensuring we're on the same page and ready to deliver.

With the people, tools and processes in place, we're then able to locally adapt to how we need to operate and collaborate with our clients.

Breaking Ballet is a clear example of Disruption Live at its finest. It's a platform idea built around the need to reframe ballet in the eyes of a younger generation and show its relevance. With that platform goal of driving cultural relevance set, the team then created a format to consistently deliver against, to keep production at speed and scale. Then with the format set, each version created for that was able to be directly relevant to cultural moments of the 'now' spanning from *Game of Thrones* through to the water crisis. This is a prime way of using Disruption Live to help set the idea and strategy, while then enacting the necessary processes to be able to consistently deliver culturally relevant material against. It was brilliant to see the team come together to create this and I love seeing their success.



#NewCampaign: TBWA, Joburg Ballet launch series of little ballets inspired by big social stories

[Jessica Tennant](#) 6 Oct 2017



■ ***Comment on the current state of the industry and its transformation from specialised and siloed to needing more integration.***

With the rise of digital being ever-present, it's no longer enough to have digital specialists that are tapped for key digital activations. It's got to be integrated with opportunities for specialised craft, in order to build a cohesive brand experience regardless of which touchpoint a consumer is starting from.

This is also interesting when we look towards data or performance marketing or similar offerings that often are viewed as more specialised. While it's important to have it as an offering, it's crucial to be able to work specialisations like this into the norm of how businesses and agencies work in an everyday fashion. This is what creates cohesion again and makes room for more impactful marketing and innovation.

■ ***What's next for TBWA?***

TBWA is the number one global agency collective in the world and is also on *Fast Company's* list of most innovative companies. We're happy with the progress we've made over the years but are working hard to make

sure we continue towards what's next even more vigorously, without taking a pause and getting comfortable.

Our use of data in the conceptualisation and development of insightful and culturally relevant work is crucial. Continuing the push on using data to drive each step of how we work as 'The Disruption Company' is a key focus for us. Using data for measuring and optimisation is table stakes now but using it in a way to help differentiate our clients' brands is where we're driving.

Continually evolving how we work through Disruption Live is also crucial, in how we operate as a business and ensure we're a solid collaboration partner. This means that being constantly aware of and activating against innovations and shifts as they relate to talent, tools and ways of working is key for us.

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