

# From start-up to 'Agency of the Year' in five years

 By [Mike Abel](#)

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Had you been in our empty "boardroom" on 1 February 2010, the first day of M&C SAATCHI ABEL's life, you would have heard me say as part of my opening sermon, "Our ambition is to be regarded as the most admired agency in South Africa in five years".

I had 12 faces looking back at me. They were either standing, as we had no chairs yet, or sitting on the floor. Some were old friends with whom I'd worked previously - and others were eager, fresh-faced graduates.



Mike Abel in the M&C SAATCHI ABEL gallery

I'd only returned to South Africa five weeks earlier, having led the M&C SAATCHI Group in Australia. Our new little start up had no clients. No revenue. Just a big dream - and a bold plan to achieve it.

Were you to have gone online to read about this agency, you'd have found a number of relatively positive articles about a new and famous global agency opening its doors in South Africa, with proven and established local leadership. Were you to read below those articles, you'd have found a handful of well-wishers and then a free-fall of negativity from trolls predicting our demise. It was disheartening so I resolved not to read further after a day or so. And it wasn't any easier trying to find clients.

Given that we had a large network of "friends", we reached out when it felt appropriate. The calls were answered. The tone

was warm, but the general feedback was, "we know you're individually good, but how good is the agency? Let's see how you guys go and we'll chat when you're more established."

We weren't expecting it to be so hard. If everyone wanted to wait for us to become established before giving us an opportunity, how could we survive? Fortunately, we have incredible global partners who bought into my vision for the company from day one. They'd seen what I was able to do in Australia, they'd seen what I'd achieved previously in South Africa, and so we had their 100% backing. Regardless of how cold it got.

So, at this point, I'd really like to thank those international partners; Moray MacLennan, Maurice Saatchi, Bill Muirhead, David Kershaw, Jeremy Sinclair, Tom Dery, Jeff Krug and Jamie Hewitt for their incredible guidance and unwavering support.

That's not to say that there wasn't pressure - far from it. I recall sitting on the top floor of the global HQ on Golden Square in London only four months after we opened in a meeting with Maurice Saatchi and Moray MacLennan (Global CEO). As of yet we had absolutely no meaningful income, only meaningful overheads. Maurice, the Lord Saatchi, looked up at me and said, "Mike, just tell me what you plan to do - and then do it". Moray and I ambled to an iconic London eatery, and on the way, we resolved that we had to win a major account within two years or we'd forever be defined as a small-to-medium agency. And once positioned, it could take a decade or more to break through that perception and attract major clients. It's an oddity - but it's true.

I made this promise to the to the global partners, "If you give us sufficient funds to build an international airport, we'll be able to land A380s. It will be costly, but it will work". I had no interest in building an airstrip, as we wouldn't be able to land anything meaningful.

I've had one quote on my wall almost my entire career. It reads "The people with the best people win" - Jerry Welsh. So in terms of selecting my partners and our people, this was the guiding principle behind every hire.

Reflecting on some defining moments: there are naturally many - and many individuals to thank. (if you don't see your name or brand, please don't be offended as I can't possibly mention everyone and everything).

## **Awards**

Winning a Gold Loerie just six months after opening our doors for the rebranding, repositioning and relaunch via social media only of Mr Delivery. Suddenly the local industry realized we were on the radar creatively.

## **Opening in Johannesburg**

When I decided to return to SA to open the agency I met my good friend and former trusted colleague Jacques Burger at a swish wine bar in Sydney. He was then CEO of a competitor agency, the famed Campaign Palace. I told him what I planned to do and he raised a glass of New Zealand's finest Pinot Noir and said, "well good luck with that, Mikey". Eight months later I persuaded him to also return home and open our Joburg agency - Jacques was far more fortunate than we were when we started. He had furniture. But like us, he also had no people and no clients.

You see, we decided from the get-go that we needed a JHB agency in order to compete nationally. So for four months, before Jacques returned, we had a fully kitted out and branded agency where we'd fly up to JHB, unlock the door for a meeting or pitch, and then lock up afterwards and fly back. But obviously still paying rent.



Bespoke new premises for the JHB agency, scheduled for completion early in 2016

## First important win

Being awarded the Heineken brand after 18 months in business. It was a major pitch for us - hotly contested by some of the most established and proven creative agencies. Winning this account was, without question, the turning point for our agency. Thank you Gavin Krenski and Jan-Willem van Wensem for entrusting a then-baby company with your giant brand.

We needed someone to run Heineken if we won it - but also to run the Cape Town agency as I was flying around the country, in meeting after meeting, trying to grow the company. So I called my friend and former colleague, Jason Harrison, who was working in London. I said, "Jase, I need to talk to you about being the MD of our Cape Town agency." However, our diaries didn't connect so I said, "well, I'm going to be in Berlin next week on business, why don't I fly via London? We'll meet at Heathrow and you can fly to Germany with me and we'll discuss the opportunity on the plane". And so, over a 90-minute flight Jason and I discussed his joining the agency and by the time we landed we shook on it - and he was in.

## Another precocious start-up

A year into our journey, I was called by former client and friend, Kim Reid. Together with Tiger Global, he had just acquired a tiny e-tailer called Take2. Together, we rebranded the company as Takealot.com. We helped give it a distinctive positioning, identity and attitude and partnered them in developing what would become a hugely compelling brand and the market leader within four years. We also introduced Kim to our client Mr. Delivery, whom we believed could be an invaluable fulfillment arm to their business. The two parties saw the immediate opportunity and got married. And they lived happily ever after...

## Winning our first massive account: Edgars

When we were just over two years old we were invited to pitch for Edgars. It was us, only six people in Johannesburg against three of the largest and most established agencies in South Africa. A real David-and-Goliath story. We gave it our all - and against all odds, we won. Thanks to Belinda Godfrey, Jurgen Schreiber and the entire Edcon Exec Team for believing in us.

## And then came Nedbank

Two weeks later, we were invited to pitch for the below-the-line business of Nedbank. Another massive account. And we won that too. Thank you to Thulani Sibeko, Sydney Mbhele, Vanessa Singh and their teams for entrusting us with this

iconic brand.

## Clothing the homeless globally

We noticed a large number of homeless people in our area where the agency is located. The Haven Night Shelter is around the corner. We approached them to see how we could help? Max Pazak, one our original graduate trainees came up with a great rough idea for our brave client, the Haven Night Shelter. Max and his partner Kayli Levitan took it to our executive creative director Gordon Ray. Gordy called me and Jase to his office and said, "this idea could change the world". So with a lot of probing, pushing and polishing, The Street Store was born.

And because this simple idea "the world's first rent-free, premises-free, free, pop-up clothing store for the homeless" had such traction - by bringing dignity to both the have-nots and have-lots - and by going open-source, we created a global force for good. Today, every day, somewhere in the world a Street Store happens - clothing hundreds of thousand around the world with a huge pipeline of stores to come.

## To the future

In the latest *Financial Mail* mentioning our win, it says, "After 5 years of close calls, M&C SAATCHI ABEL finally broke through to become overall Agency of the Year". We were blown away, given we are only 5 years old, not only to receive this award, but to know that since inception, we've been perceived at this level.

For us, it's the ultimate validation of our unique model, our approach to problem solving and the brilliant and effective creative work we've developed in full partnership with our clients and friends. So a massive thank you to our newest clients; Nando's, TwinSaver, Lancewood Cheese, The Zeitz MOCAA and Continental Tyre's Best Drive. And to our oldest and most established relationships the AVI Group (Snackworks, Entyce Beverages & Indigo Cosmetics), Ten X, Hollard, Heineken South Africa and Global, Takealot.com, Nedbank, Edgars, Simba Pepsico, Edcon, Brandhouse, Mr Delivery, Ethos Capital, Superbalist.com, Deloitte, Namibian Breweries, Sissy Boy, Lil-lets and MWEB.

I'd like to thank my partners and dept heads, this crazy collaboration of friends, our federation of entrepreneurs and to our sensational team of people working under our Cape Town and Johannesburg roofs.

I'd also like to thank and congratulate our business partners in the Group, M&C SAATCHI CONNECT, M&C SAATCHI AFRICA and most recently Matt and the team at Creative Spark.

To the vocals of Ella Fitzgerald, Nina Simone or Michael Buble', I channel these words "*It's a new dawn, it's a new day, it's a new life. And I'm feeling good*".

## ABOUT MIKE ABEL

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