

Leandre Kark, brand marketing lead for Virgin Active SA



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Leandre Kark shares her journey that led to her being the brand marketing lead for Virgin Active South Africa.



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■ ***Tell us more about your role and what it entails exactly***

I am brand lead at Virgin Active South Africa. My role entails managing marketing and communication strategy from the annual campaign calendar through to the individual campaigns. I handle the media and PR and all the bits in-between. No two days are the same and that's what keeps me coming back for more.

■ ***Growing up, what did you want to be?***

A lifeguard, but then I realised that you had to swim in the real ocean and not the *Baywatch* ocean, so that dream ended abruptly.

■ ***Tell us about your career: what you studied and why, and how you ended up where you are today?***

I studied Business Science Marketing at the University of Cape Town (UCT). It combined my passion for language and communication with some pretty pictures. The mathematics, economics and statistics we studied as part of the broader business degree also satisfied the inner numbers nerd in me. It reminded me that marketing is not just about those pretty pictures - we need to be able to hold our own at the boardroom table in those monthly management meetings and annual strategy sessions.

When I graduated, I sold everything I had and bought a ticket to London where I ended up working for two dodgy brothers in publishing. After three years in London, I decided an adventure was the order of the day so I took a year off and backpacked around the world, giving my communications skills a fiery baptism.

Broke, but thoroughly high from my incredible experiences, I ended up in Seychelles for two years doing PR and Marketing for Eden Island (a commercial and residential development). The travel bug was still coursing through my veins so I took 10 months off and did an overland trip through Southern and East Africa.

Broke once more, but filled with life experience, I was finally ready to settle down back at home and joined The Foschini Group, where I worked on some of South Africa's most loved brands like Foschini, Duesouth and Totalsports for eight years. I loved the fast-paced environment of retail and I was fortunate enough to work on the rebranding of some iconic brands like Foschini, Donna and Duesouth to make them resonate with South Africans again.

I'm all about challenging myself so when the position became available at Virgin Active, I jumped at the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives with exercise. I joined the Virgin Active team on 1 March 2020 just as Covid was making its mark on the world as we know it. The challenges have been real but the potential value this brand has makes even the toughest days seem worthwhile.

■ ***What other sectors impact on your industry?***

Health and wellness trends, beauty and fashion as well as sports. With Covid and lockdowns, South Africans are slowly recognising the need for mental and physical wellness and this, in turn, has impacted the way people view exercise and nutrition, and more specifically, the type of exercise they do.

And then there are the amazing fashion and beauty trends that get paraded around within our clubs! ❖❖

■ ***What are some of your most recent brand campaigns and the rationales behind them?***

We launched our "Born to Move" brand campaign to re-open our clubs in August 2020. It served to remind South Africans that our bodies are essentially built for movement. It spoke of the need to be active to maintain physical and mental wellness and how fun movement can actually be to get them to get out of lockdown mode, dust off those trainers and get active with Virgin Active again.

We then launched our “Live Life Active” campaign that focused on the exercise experiences we offer to inspire South Africans to get and stay active with us by switching up their exercise routines.

■ ***Tell us about your most successful marketing campaign.***

The launch of Donna lingerie. We pushed all the boundaries to clearly stand for something as a brand – that Plus is Equal. We launched with nationwide events where our models and customers (who volunteered) were dressed in Donna lingerie and Denim and walked around the malls with placards showing positive slogans like “Curves are beautiful” “Plus is us” and “plus is equal”, ending with a live window display.

They were cheered and photographed everywhere they went. It was a true celebration. The campaign carried through to in-store installations, windows and then a TTL media campaign. The conversations we started were so positive and any negative sentiment was quickly drowned out by the support and positive sentiment of all women (and some men) who engaged with us at the time. Our social communities grew exponentially and the media coverage was amazing.

■ ***In your opinion, what do you think are the most successful channels for getting your brand message out there?***

It really depends on who you are targeting. We’re no longer able to broadcast the same message and content to everyone on the same channel.

“ *It’s about targeting messaging and content that’s meaningful, engaging and impactful.* ”

Where we often fall short as brands is having the right resources (and enough resources) to successfully follow through on these strategies. When we’re short on resources, we fall back on the good old “spray and pray” approach which risks alienating us to certain audiences.

The delicious targeting and tracking ability of digital campaigns, coupled with the cost benefits does however make us more susceptible to going digital-first and foremost. Activations and events are the best for creating true brand experiences.

■ ***Any career highlights you’d like to share.***

Re-defining the purpose and positioning of Foschini was an incredible experience. We were having the female empowerment conversations before it became mainstream and had to battle quite a bit of resistance when we first started. Being a group of determined women, however, finally saw the success and launch of the repositioned brand.

And then slowly changing the narrative around plus size women from negative to positive and celebratory during my time on the Donna brand was by far the most rewarding. It took months of hard work and dedication, fielding some very negative conversations, overcoming many obstacles and doing a lot of negotiating and convincing to change everyone’s mindset, both internally and externally. We persevered as a team and the reward was well worth it. To stand at an event where these women came together as a community to lift each other up, encourage and inspire was the pinnacle of my two years on the brand.

■ ***When it comes to branding, what can brands no longer ignore?***

A clear purpose. To stand for something that’s meaningful to South Africans.

“ *It unifies and drives the business from revenue generation through to social responsibility initiatives.* ”

It makes internal and external conversations so much easier when everyone is aligned BUT also understands the purpose. It should ignite a passion amongst employees and customers alike.

■ ***If you were mentoring a future you, what career advice would you give to aspiring young marketing and branding professionals?***

Network and reach out to other industry professionals. These conversations spark ideas, solve problems, create contacts for projects but can also sometimes just make you feel like you're not alone.

And, as a junior specifically, ask all the questions. No matter how dumb you may think they are.

“ *Your questions will not only help you understand a directive or strategy better, but it may spark new ideas or a different direction.* ”

Leaders and managers don't always have it all figured out.

And finally, have those difficult salary conversations. Back it up with facts and figures, but have the conversation. The worst that can happen is that they say no.

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