

Grid takes branding to new heights

 By Jessica Tennant

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As part of Absa's recent rebrand, I interviewed Grid Worldwide's chief experience officer Yatish Narsi to find out how they came up with the idea to conduct a drone show to showcase the vision for the brand, South Africa and the African continent as a whole.



On the night of the official rebrand, 300 software-controlled drones operated in a synchronised mass formation directed by a single pilot. The aerial ballet performed by the drones was AI driven and co-ordinated. It took four practice shows across two late nights for the Grid Worldwide and Intel teams to calibrate the drones for the grand show.



Absa embraces Africa with new brand

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Narsi says this was not just a logo reveal, but a statement of intent. “Absa has clearly outlined growth as key to its strategy. It has also tied itself to the African continent. We often joke about an idea of Wakanda for real. There is no reason why we can’t be a world-class continent, not just a charity case, and to have a business such as Absa driving that intent is very encouraging and inspiring for anyone who chooses to call Africa home.”

The idea to conduct a drone show was a random, crazy, left-field thought. “The actual thought of using drones was inspired by a journey through the full rebrand process. We knew that the ambition for the new ‘Absa’ needed more than just traditional marketing initiatives to land. We also knew the importance of inspiring with the launch, not just creating awareness.

At the same time, they wanted to thrill their audience. “We designed the whole soundscape and all those experiences became the mnemonic around the whole relaunch and the television ad. In the past it would have just been a new jingle. We decided to do this ridiculously epic thing.”

Here, Narsi shares more of the thinking behind this bold stunt and why he believes it has set new benchmark for branding in SA...

■ **So, how did you come up with the idea?**

The idea was pitched as a random thought at the end of another presentation. We came up with the idea and decided to throw it in as a crazy, left field thought. A week later we got a call asking how possible that crazy idea was. Absa had been looking for a big-impact concept to mark and celebrate the start of the next chapter in its history as it separates from Barclays.

There were key criteria we needed to attend to. How could we represent the future forward ambitions of the brand? How could we help inspire 42,000 employees? How could we showcase our vision of Africa or Africanacity?

■ **Why was this relevant to Absa's brand relaunch?**

The Absa story has been more about a purpose and vision for Absa and less about a brand relaunch. This meant whatever idea we settled on had to land the new thinking and vision for the business. Launching 300 drones above Johannesburg gave us an opportunity to push technology and innovation for a brand that had lost of some of its innovative reputation but is now determined to regain that position. It also gave us an opportunity to create some iconic imagery for the city that makes it feel as iconic as a Dubai, New York or London, and why shouldn't it?



■ **Do you think this has set a new benchmark for branding in SA?**

We believe it does.

“Branding is no longer just about logos, typography, colour and photography. It's about instilling purpose in an organisation, because we believe brands with purpose will win in the 21st century.”

This was not a TV ad or an activation but a 4 minute experience that inspired 42,000 employees to think about themselves

differently. Your experience of a brand is increasingly becoming the new battleground. It is about how a brand makes you feel, how it inspires, entertains and informs you.

■ ***How do you feel about being part of this activation?***

Tremendously proud of both the client and everyone in the agency for having the balls to make this happen!

■ ***How did it work?***

The technical hurdles were vast. We built an airfield in a day, diverted traffic from OR Tambo and Randburg airport and closed six city blocks with minimal disruption to traffic flow. We scored an original soundtrack, crafted a greeting via an animation, and all this in two months from idea to execution.

■ ***Comment on your work with Intel on this.***

Intel was amazing. We collaborated on every little detail and they were willing to make the technology fit the idea and not the other way around. This was key to the success of the event, so much so that Intel commented on how emotional and powerful this show was versus any other they had previously been a part of.



■ ***And the client: How would you describe your agency-client relationship with Absa?***

Fantastic. Firstly, for anyone to back an idea that had this many potential pitfalls, was so risky from logistics to permits to permissions, and timelines is unprecedented. They were brave enough to not only support but enable at every turn. They were very hands-on and a great creative partner.

■ ***What was the response?***

The Absa staff were incredibly inspired. On the night we had people chanting 'Absa!', we had exco members in tears and the public in awe. We couldn't have asked for anything more. Our intention was always to inspire and raise the bar on what was possible, not just for Absa but for Africa.

▣ **Final thoughts on Absa's new brand design?**

For us a brand really comes to life when it engages customers; it's in how you experience it. If you take the sum total of the new Absa experience I think we are all extremely proud of this start. There are many challenges ahead and a lot to still be done but the brand has the potential to truly become a brand, not only a bank, that Africa can be proud of.

Absa's new brand design will be rolled out in South Africa as well as Absa Group's banks previously branded as Barclays in Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. The South African rebrand is expected to be completed in 2019 and the rest of Africa by mid-2020.

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