

TDMC takes the lead

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How women bring different eyes to business and why it has worked for leading South African digital agency TDMC



Cheryl Ingram, managing director and co-founder The Digital Media Collective (TDMC)

Recent top three finalist in the Santam Women of the Future Awards, Cheryl Ingram, is the managing director and co-founder of one of South Africa's most successful e-commerce agencies, The Digital Media Collective (TDMC). TDMC is based in Durban and has been in business for 9.5 years, with clients throughout South Africa and internationally. They are one of only four accredited Shopify Expert Partners in Southern Africa and are also a Google Expert Partner and Meta Business Partner. TDMC's client list is impressive and their approach to business even more so – of their 50 staff members, more than half are women. Cheryl shares her business ethos and insights into TDMC's success.

Is the moniker 'female business owner' still relevant in a 21st century business landscape?

Cheryl thinks it is, but not for clichéd reasons. "Of course, lack of payment parity and equality is an issue that continues to be problematic in many corporate scenarios, but what I think women bring to business are factors that aren't always very tangible, but are no less valuable. I think our relationship building skills can be more honed than men's and I think we are skilled in growing robust companies with healthy company cultures that don't necessarily fit corporate moulds. I also believe we really can juggle more and can get more done – there, I said it!"

Leading the charge in the e-commerce + digital landscape

Over the past four years, experts have gathered solid statistics that show an enormous uptake in online shopping in South Africa. BrandMapp's latest data shows that over 60% of the 33,000 respondents had shopped from one of SA's largest online retailers in the last year – a 25% jump from two years ago. And, as BrandMapp's director of storytelling, Brandon de Kock, points out, this trend is going to continue for the foreseeable future with it becoming increasingly important for anyone selling goods, services and products to make sure that they have the right e-commerce partners and platforms in place to create a competitive advantage.

It is this competitive advantage that TDMC gives its clients, providing extensive e-commerce experience as well as performance marketing expertise for businesses large and small, focusing on – but not limited to – South Africa. It operates within a sector of digital business that didn't exist in this country 15 years ago and in just under a decade TDMC has become one of the most significant e-commerce players in Southern Africa. Top clients in their portfolio are investing six figures+ monthly on Google and the same across social media. This level of investment is showing no sign of slowing with

many clients pulling back on TV budgets and reinvesting that spend in top funnel video first strategies online instead.

A passion for fellow female entrepreneurs

Cheryl says she has worked with many incredible people, both men and women, but it just so happens that many of the online SMEs TDMC has onboarded as clients are startups led by women. “It is so exciting to see so many women take their futures into their own hands with innovative concepts, products and service offerings,” says Cheryl. “This has been particularly evident since Covid-19, when so many people became more resourceful than ever before. It’s an exciting time to be helping people reach better and more engaged audiences on a daily basis.”

The South African online retail landscape is exhilarating and TDMC prides itself on its agility in applying itself to new challenges. “The digital world moves incredibly quickly, and we are able to adapt our focus accordingly, whether it’s through our tried and tested paid media strategies, or by kicking off innovative influencer campaigns through our content marketing arm led by my fellow director Nicola Ashe. Collaborating with creators, many of whom have built their social side hustles into thriving small businesses, is a particularly interesting opportunity for clients and one that is proving time and time again to be hugely beneficial in ways that go beyond just conversions for our clients” says Cheryl. “That’s the thing with digital, it all happens so quickly and that’s exactly why we love it so much – no day, campaign or challenge is the same and we are determined to create the best possible outcome for each scenario and ultimately for our clients.”

We’re not an ‘agency’ agency

Cheryl describes TDMC as a non-agency agency: “Yes, we have the expertise and track record to work with major companies and considerable paid social media budgets, but our structure is not very hierarchical. Our digital native experts immerse themselves in trends and stats every single day to help us ensure the products we recommend to our clients’ specific challenges are not just another copy/paste approach – and many of them are younger than 30.” In fact, TDMC’s youngest director and shareholder is in his mid-20s and has been with the company since he was a student intern.

“We also make a point of paying fairly. I don’t believe in paying an elusive ‘unicorn’ a pittance to fulfil a multi-faceted role – the days of allocating content and Facebook ads to a ‘junior’ are over, or at least they should be,” says Cheryl. Is it because she is a woman that fairness is so paramount? “Yes and no – I think it’s just better business practice and promotes a healthier company culture. Maybe that’s because I know how hard I have fought to be respected. But to be honest, I try not to let that be my driving force as a leader, I just want to be a decent human.”

Making strides side-by-side

Cheryl, who was once a school teacher (and whose father was a headmaster), is a natural mentor and much of the focus at TDMC is built on peer-to-peer skills sharing. “I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have entered the digital market in the ’90s at MSN UK while living and working in London. I had some incredible mentors there who taught me how to get the most out of people through their own then-progressive leadership styles.”

What Cheryl brought from these positive mentorship experiences – coupled with her own business and personable people savvy – is a desire to share-to-learn and keep adapting. She says this is why TDMC has an in-office expectation. “Much of the learning happens on the job, by hearing and seeing exchanges between more experienced colleagues – you can’t replicate that in a work-from-home office scenario.” Conversely, Cheryl is the first to say how much she learns from her younger team members. “I need millennials and Gen Z experts around me. They were born into this era, it’s already in their DNA.”

There’s no denying the playing field is levelling and even talking about women in business can sometimes feel like a moot point. But when women excel in what has traditionally been a male dominated arena it is worth celebrating – and kudos to Cheryl Ingram for flying the flag for woman-owned businesses in South Africa.

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TDMC



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