

Covid-19 a baptism of fire

 By [Zahra Mirza](#), issued by [HKLM](#)

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While the last few months have been a baptism of fire in terms of adapting how most businesses operate, the next six months won't see a return to business as usual pre Covid-19. In fact, it is highly doubtful that there will be a return to as many face-to-face meetings as most businesses used to enjoy, given that social distancing practices are likely to continue to be in place for several months to come.

Impact on the brand consulting sector

The brand consulting space has traditionally relied on personal relationships built up over time. To a large extent these relationships relied on face-to-face interactions. Covid-19 changed all that.

What this pandemic has taught us is that there are alternative ways to do things. Neither life nor business will return to the way it was. Instead, we will be facing a 'new normal' which will incorporate aspects of the old way of doing things but with innovative ways of working and interacting.

Going forward, the branding industry is going to have to evolve and adapt to a more digital offering, while at the same time ensuring they remain relevant and understand the unique needs of each client.

In the months ahead clients will need advertising and marketing support as well as branding support. There will be a significant need for crisis and change management communication.

The impact on HKLM and our approach

The safety and wellbeing of our people, clients and suppliers has always been of paramount importance to HKLM, which is why the business implemented social distancing practices and encouraged staff to start working from home prior to the government's announcement of a mandatory lockdown.

In the days leading up to the lockdown, the business provided intensive Microsoft Teams and Zoom training in order to equip staff with the necessary skills to facilitate virtual meetings with colleagues, clients and suppliers.

Adapting to remote working practices during the lockdown resulted in HKLM becoming significantly more digitally enabled in a relatively short period of time. We now rely primarily on virtual meetings. We have also prioritised making time to reach out to clients individually via regular telephone calls in order to check in with them.

The fact that the business has become more digitally enabled has also been of benefit in our dealings with clients beyond South Africa's borders. HKLM has a long history of branding in Africa, during which time we have built up significant expertise in understanding how different African markets operate and how best to market to them. The business has always maintained that you can't fully understand a country or its people simply by reading about it. Instead, you need to be informed by personal insights gathered on the ground and interacting and connecting with people. Travel restrictions and closed borders, however, have made it impossible to run projects on the continent on the ground. We have also had to be mindful of the fact that not all countries in Africa have had similar lockdown conditions imposed on them. However, until the lockdown in South Africa is eased we will have to continue to rely on virtual engagements with our clients situated in other African countries.

Perhaps due to the fact that we already had good client relationships in place prior to the lockdown, we have not seen any detrimental impact on any of our client interactions. In fact, everybody being in a similar situation has created its own bond.

Our client relationships are stronger than ever and we're having even more client interactions than we used to have.

At the same time we have adapted our models of how we run brand and communication projects and how we maximise digital so that we don't lose either energy or impact. Ultimately, it's about finding better ways of running projects given the constraints of the current environment.

The lockdown period has been a time of reflection and introspection. One of our biggest practice areas at HKLM is internal brand engagement which is focused on living the brand from the inside out. This is a particular focus of one of our founding partners, Sean McCoy, who feels very strongly about the need to take care of our people. In the current environment, it's even more important that we take care of our people and make an effort to regularly check in with them to ensure they are coping. Life can be just as challenging for a working parent trying to oversee remote learning for their children and managing their home without any help as it is for a single person living alone with very little contact with others. There is a high risk of depression, lockdown fatigue and lockdown burnout for both parties and as a business, we're very mindful of the challenges our employees are currently faced with.

ABOUT ZAHRA MIRZA

Zahra Mirza is the managing director at HKLM. With extensive experience in working across the continent, on a diverse portfolio of clients in the travel, ICT, consumer, mining and financial sectors, Zahra has the vision, enthusiasm and necessary business expertise to see the big picture in order to make strategic business recommendations and grow business relationships. Zahra has a Bachelor of Arts (Marketing and Communication) and a Bachelor of Communications (Honours) from Monash University. [View my profile and articles...](#)

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