

Halo: Proof that seven human years = one agency year

 By [Leigh Andrews](#)

8 Jun 2017

Halo MD Dean Oelschig explains while there is no secret to overnight success, there is a magic ingredient for creative trust - time. Here's how much of it you'll need.

If you don't know Halo, you likely know their work. This is the self-proclaimed 'uncommon agency of creative freedom fighters', behind the 'giraffe in the kitchen TV spots for King Price and the world-first for radio live, lip sync, audio-visual campaign for Jacaranda FM earlier this year.

These are not your run of the mill product placement campaigns. They're big, brave ideas that involved risk and optimal client trust.

Here Oelschig explains his belief that it takes seven human years – that's one agency year – to build enough of that all-important trust to begin to be taken seriously by clients and achieve the execution that justifies the idea. He also talks us through the importance of remaining independent or independently-minded as this gives you that all-important challenger-brand mentality, and what to say if your clients keep turning down brave ideas...

■ ***Let's start off with an explanation of the dog years/human years/agency year analogy.***

One human year is equivalent to seven dog years, and I believe seven human years are equivalent to one agency year.



Halo MD Dean Oelschig.

It takes seven years for an agency to learn how to walk. More specifically, it takes seven years to build a reputation, for clients to start taking you seriously enough to give you larger projects and to start taking yourself a bit more seriously – talking about your talents and value with more confidence. But mostly, it takes seven years for an agency to find itself, and plant its feet firmly in its beliefs. You confidently know what work you are capable of doing and what work you want to do, with a sweet spot being a meeting of the can and the want. Knowing allows for better alignment of people, both internally and externally, as we attract and actively retain the kind of talent who fit with the agency culture and vision. This self-knowledge as an agency allows us to attract and pursue the kind of clients we want – independent or independently-minded.

That said, I believe it takes seven years for an agency just to get going and thus I feel if you can make it to seven you get to finally celebrate your first birthday.

■ ***Hearty congratulations on this then, your ‘first’ (seventh) birthday. Talk us through the highlights package of Halo’s seven years, with the key learnings along the way.***

When we began in April 2010, we were part of another larger agency group; in their building and leveraging off their operational structure. In 2012 we bought out our independence and moved to our current premises. In 2012 we launched our first campaign for Commercial Bank of Africa in Kenya who have now been a client of ours for almost six years. The biggest and proudest highlights have occurred in the past 12 months. We rebranded ourselves, went live with a campaign for a new disruptor unbanking brand in Kenya called Loop, successfully launched campaigns for Jacaranda FM, Virgin Atlantic and Elliott and won significant new business with Capital Hotels and Viva Gym. We also completed meaningful work through Demographica, a B2B agency we provide creative services to, which included the rebrand of Zurich Insurance to what is now Bryte Insurance.



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Jessica Tennant 15 Feb 2017



The biggest lesson I have learnt is that there is no magic trick or secret to overnight success. Walking those first seven years were critical to development and growth. And all learnings have led us to the biggest one of all; the importance of culture. As an agency, we live and work by the belief that people are our biggest asset but the most talented people don't want to jump in and work at small, startup agencies.

Our focus now is almost exclusively built around culture; creating and protecting the right employee, and client, experience. Culture is everything if you want to do great work.

■ ***Now that Halo is seven years in, share what it can and can't do, what type of clients it wants to work with to create meaningful partnerships and work that works.***

We define our ideal clients as being “independent or independently-minded”. We are a small agency and aim to fiercely protect our independent, small creative culture. There are only 18 people at Halo and it tends to behave a bit like a large family. We try partner with clients that share our same philosophy; independent thinking and the importance of creative excellence. Believe it or not, not all clients believe in the power of creativity. Independent and independently-minded clients have a similar approach to doing work that works and work that we all should love.

If we don't buy into a brand or company's service offering or products, we won't work on that brand. It's a tough stance to make but one we are prepared to stand for. As an agency, we would love to do more work for proudly African brands that offer opportunities to create real connections with an audience. Looking at our current clients, with the likes of Elliott, Viva, Loop, Capital Hotels and Jacaranda FM, we have begun to do just that and we are very proud of the work done on those brands already. I think it's also important to note that on all these brands our relationship isn't only with the marketing team but with the CEO, GM and product teams too. We enjoy thinking more strategically about how we can add value through creative design thinking across all aspects of our clients' businesses.

■ ***How do you build clients' trust so they allow you to do brave work?***

Recently, we discussed trying to work with the right clients rather than the right brands. Creative success is hugely dependent on people and the connections you have with them. You cannot flog a dead horse and force someone to create brave work if they inherently prefer safer options. Independent or independently-minded clients do tend to have challenger brand mentality, which naturally creates an appetite for risk. However, there are obviously moments when clients say no and in those cases the best approach is to let them see your raw passion and belief in an idea as well as walking clients down a path that allows them to absorb the idea slowly and build trust in the idea over time. I never like to throw in the full scary idea all at once. But, that all said, the magic ingredient for creative trust is time. The longer you work with a client and the more you deliver for a client, the more they'll trust you.

■ ***Elaborate on the link between agency culture and quality work.***

I categorically believe it's one and the same. Great culture is when everyone wants to do great work with each other, for each other. A poor culture is when everyone is working against each other, for themselves. There is so much that goes into making a creative idea work that it can never happen in isolation or from a single individual.

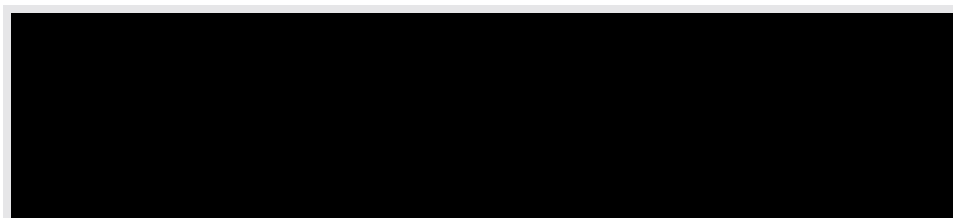


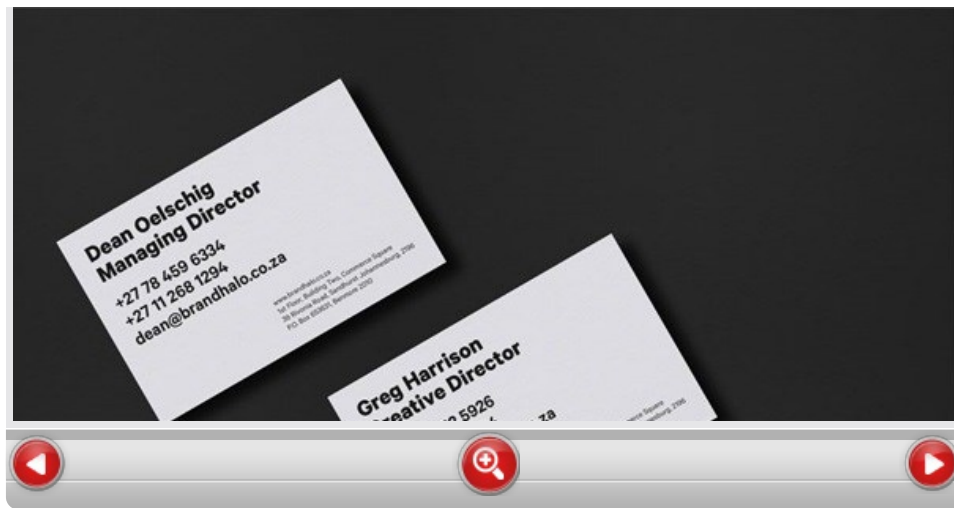
The Brand Halo team. See the cinematographic version [here](#).

Quality work is a team sport; it needs time, stamina, frustration, a dose of desperation and collaboration. And that can't happen if a team won't work together, which is the definition of culture. An invaluable benefit of a good culture is the resulting retention of talent. Like a sports team, the longer a group works together, the better they perform. A strong culture creates an environment people love and don't want to leave. And that keeps your core group of talented people together for longer which can only create a stronger team. We've been very fortunate that only one staff member has left in the past 18 months but she is on a sabbatical in Canada and hopefully will return soon.

■ ***Clearly Halo has its own culture right. Share why you thus redesigned Halo's site and brand so the non-static team page is the most important aspect.***

The [rebrand itself](#) took about 13 months. With all the client work we've had, our own brand took a back seat at times but I am glad we persevered and eventually gave it the time and effort it deserved. It feels good to no longer be the cobbler with no shoes. Agencies should practice what they preach and if you're asking clients to invest money in design and creativity then you should do it yourself to prove your belief and capability.





By 2016 I think we began to know ourselves a bit better and thus wanted to create a new brand that signified that. The new brand is designed to represent our creative process; one of experimentation, craft and trust. It's largely how we approach our work; we don't have some scientific, methodical step-by-step guide. We allow each project to develop its own set of boundaries but we have to always trust the process will achieve the right results.

And thus, the idea behind our rebrand was to use everyday household materials: milk, dishwashing liquid, ink etc and create a series of experiments with no true knowledge of the end result but trusting that they would become something beautiful, as you'll see in the behind-the-scenes footage embedded below:

But, as I have said previously, people are our most important asset so we wanted to make our team page, as well as our work page, something special. To create it took time. We flew Andrew Brauteseth (Guy with Camera) up from Cape Town and he shot the cinemagraphs for us over a full day in studio.

Every member was briefed to conceptualise three ideas to showcase their unique personalities, so [what you see](#) is a true reflection of the team we have. Greg always rubs his beard in thought, Sena plays with her glasses like that all day, Akona loves to make smoking look elegant, Jurgen loves a creative challenge and KG is **always** on his phone.

Clever, engaging and definitely a sign of the times. It sounds to me like the agency has definitely earned its stripes in the first seven years, and that they've been successful in their quest to make brands memorable, as Oelschig mentioned to me a few years ago:

2014 - No awards necessary to have a Halo of a good year!

Leigh Andrews 12 Dec 2014





Keep an eye peeled for further highlights through [Oelschig](#) and [Brand Halo's Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) accounts.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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