

A day in the lockdown life of VMLY&R South Africa CCO Ryan McManus

 By Jessica Tennant

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"Like everyone else, it's been anything but typical. I've gone through phases.

"Phase 1 was all about organising – work, staff and home. Home needed organising because we have a one-year-old baby. I thought this would be a great opportunity for exercise and self-improvement, baking, etc., but that went out of the window very quickly.

"Phase 2 saw me plugged into my computer 24/7. Relentless calls. With quick breaks for the baby or to have a large glass of wine. I have to remind myself to get up and walk away from my computer. Thankfully I get to be in lockdown with an amazing woman/baby-entertainer/sanity provider.

"Phase 3 I want to try and make all about balance. Everyone who has children at home is doing this balancing act. I need to make sure I get outside, breathe fresh air, have a runaround. Ultimately though, we're all working for a solid purpose and the work has to get done." – CCO at VMLY&R South Africa, Ryan McManus' account of work-life in the time of Covid-19.



Ryan McManus, CCO at VMLY&R South Africa.

■ ***What was your initial response to the crisis or lockdown and has your experience of it been different to what you expected?***

I feel like I saw it coming like a slow-motion wave from a long way off because I work with global teams and have a lot of conversations across the various offices. I'm used to a lot of remote work because I'm responsible for both our Johannesburg and Cape Town creative, and I have global responsibilities... But this is another level.

Our response was really about looking after our people, looking after our clients, and making sure they are all safe, healthy and set up to continue doing what they need to.

■ ***Comment on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the agency and creative industry and/or economy as a whole.***

Of course, spend is down across the economy but South Africa has the unusual gift of being used to doing a lot with a little. It's made us resilient and inventive, and if anything can find a way, creativity can.

It's interesting that advertising really has to fulfil its own purpose, now more than ever, to help businesses and brands succeed and thrive. Our job is to help our clients rebuild their businesses, help them navigate a new consumer landscape and get them growing. We have a bigger responsibility than ever before, and creativity is a powerful answer to almost any problem.

▣ **How is the agency responding to the crisis and current lockdown?**

VMLY&R has always been good at adapting, quick to take on new challenges and types of work, and this attitude is really helping us not only survive this but actively create new types of solutions. We've developed thinking methodologies for 'the new normal', made TV ads, created new products and launched new work... there are some fantastic new ideas, all with the goal of making a difference to the brands we are working with.



Ryan McManus on orchestrating experiences for connected brands

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▣ **Comment on the challenges and opportunities.**

It's of course a very challenging time, but I try to look at everything as opportunity. This crisis has accelerated decision-making, which helps to get into a minimum viable project mindset and iterate as we build. Decisions that used to take three weeks now take three hours. We're building the plane while we're flying it.

We also have to work with what we have and it feels truer than ever that, 'We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us'. It's amazing to see how technology is shaping our behaviour more than ever before.

▣ **Speaking of opportunities, the world has really turned to creativity during this time. Why do you think this is the case and what does this mean for the industry, agencies and their clients or brands?**

“ If you're a painter, you wake up wanting to paint – it's not a decision you make anew every day. Creativity is a human condition. I think it's driven by the deep desire humans have to be connected. When we're pulled apart, we immediately look for clever new ways to connect, whether that's playing music on our balconies, having team drinks on Fridays via Zoom, or blowing our vuvuzelas every evening. ”

For me it just means that we always find a way. Creativity is just finding a way from point A to point B, when there is no way.

While this will shift many, many things, we will always find a way to adapt and thrive. There may be different industries or yet to be invented ideas, but I hope we carry the best of the past forward with us and leave some of the unnecessary behind.



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▣ **How has the lockdown affected your staff? What temporary HR policies have you put in place regarding remote working, health & safety, etc.?**

Our people are just amazing. They embraced home working from day one. We'd already been experimenting with flexi working in the company, so we got organised really quickly, getting everyone set up with connectivity and all the tools they needed at home. They have been incredibly inspiring.

■ ***How are you navigating 'physical distancing' while keeping your team close-knit and aligned and your clients happy?***

Our business is communication, so this is what we're good at. We speak with our clients a lot and we have even held an event for clients - our Live from the Digital Edge video conference.

As for our people, we've put a variety of things in place to take care of their mental health and keep them safe along with a lot of non-work events going on every day.

The VMLY&R atmosphere is still very much evident, even through our screens. I think this is a testament to the culture of our agency, which has made it a lot easier to work remotely.

■ ***What are you busy working on? Any initiatives/campaigns relating to the coronavirus?***

Lots. We've got so much on the go at the moment, and I can't wait to get some of it out into the world.

■ ***Has this global crisis changed your view of the future of advertising/marketing in any way?***

We've always spoken about creating 'work that lives in people's lives' and this seems truer than ever before. Marketing is really about values. But now brands have to demonstrate those values, to their employees, to their customers, to society. It's about bringing these values to life as acts, not ads.

■ ***Any trends you've seen emerge as a result of the crisis?***

I see lots of momentary visual trends, which are more about restrictions than anything else. I think there are some very shallow trends. It's in a state of flux where people are trying to find new answers but are, at the same time, scared of venturing too far into the unknown. So right now feels more like repetition than a trend.

The new trends are still coming. It's going to be interesting to see what the new moments of consumption look like for highly social brands. Will we ever high five or shake hands with strangers again?

■ ***Your key message to fellow industry folk?***

Adapt. We have a key role to play in rebuilding our economy. Creative solutions are needed across all sectors. So, adapt – it's our chance to reimagine everything.

ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

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