

Oliver's in-house digital agency model pays off with double growth in the last year

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Oliver South Africa's in-house digital agency model has paid off big time both locally and regionally with the agency showing double revenue growth, a substantial increase in gross profit and operating profit, and a doubling of its headcount in the last year despite the Covid-19 lockdown.



Oliver was established globally in 2004 and now has a presence in over 46 countries. It is the world's first company to exclusively design, build and run bespoke in-house agencies and marketing ecosystems for brands. Oliver SA was established in 2017. In just four years Oliver Africa's creative agency and MORE its creative and production support business has grown into a R250m business with 200 regional staff.

Oliver's executive director Africa, Nonhlanhla Koza, says that this impressive growth has been achieved by the agency optimising client brands with Oliver's innovative in-house digital agency model.

"Being inside means that Oliver can partner with clients to 'operationalise' brand priorities," she explains. "Unlike other agencies, Oliver is part of the implementation, development, crafting and operational solutions team. We are not merely the pretty pictures team but rather the people who build and action brand objectives."

She says that Oliver focuses on providing purposeful and beautiful work for some of the world's best-loved brands. "From fully-integrated campaigns, eCommerce and video content to CRM, social and digital advertising, Oliver enables clients to have an agile, highly effective and consistent experience across their brand ecosystems."

Oliver CE for the Middle East & Africa Paul van den Berg, says that they were able to double Oliver South Africa's business in 2020, both in terms of headcount and revenues, due to two main factors:

"One, our business model has always been built around finding the client's problems or pain points and solving them through our understanding of their total marketing and digital ecosystem," he says.

"The fact that our people don't have to necessarily be on-site to be 'Inside' was a key learning for all of us and given the innate agility of our model and teams compounded by the digital-first nature of our services with a particular bent towards e-commerce, we were in the right place at the right time with the right people."

He continues: "The second reason for our success is due to our incredible, resilient and agile people who were able to work through the initial Covid chaos with a positive attitude and carry on focusing on solving client problems. The fact that Oliver has grown so significantly during a pandemic is testament to the fact that the agency's in-house model is working."

Concerning any negative impact on the business because of the Covid-19 pandemic, Van Den Berg says that he can't deny that they have had some tough challenges to face with some client churn, mostly with some smaller clients who had to cut back on spending.

However, he adds, we have to be where our client needs us most so our innovative model and our innate digital offering positioned us well to deliver on the e-retail fast forward that Covid drove.

Operations director for the Middle East & Africa, Colin Herholdt comments: "Our model and delivery approach ensured that our teams and our clients were already equipped with the right technology, resources and ways of working to easily facilitate quick adjustment to the demands of remote working which other, more traditional agency operations have to catch up on."

"Oliver's commitment to innovation, technology and forward-thinking, allowed us the opportunity to consider each client's needs and ensure that the necessary teams remained effective and that our ability to partner and deliver remained intact which ultimately resulted in client and resource confidence and trust."

With this in mind, he says, "It's fair to say we doubled our size over 2020, particularly with UStudio, our inside agency for Unilever. Our overall growth continues, primarily from organic relationships with Bayer, Adidas and Diageo, which will see our complement in Dubai and Nigeria scale up as we move through the second half of 2021."

"In addition to Oliver's expansion into the Middle East and Africa, Oliver's sister agency MORE, which focuses on delivering dynamic omnichannel production support to Oliver globally, now has around five-hundred people in seven countries which includes; two-hundred in the South African operation," adds Van Den Berg.

Theo Spencer, managing partner for UStudio Oliver SA's inside agency for Unilever adds: "We are the digital agency on record for Shield, Magnum, Ola, OMO, Dawn and Wuhu, working across all Unilever brands in our different e-commerce, Webmaster and Shopper Marketing divisions."

"Recently, we have partnered with the UFS brand team to drive a business-to-business strategy through tech and innovation," Spencer says. "As well as partnering with the You & Mr Jones Group of companies to create an augmented reality solution that we will be launching soon."

"We've more than doubled the Unilever business last year and organic growth is continuing into 2021," he explains. "For example, we now have a team of 40 people dedicated to the Unilever account which, makes us one of the biggest agencies that work on Unilever in SA."

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