Understanding the evolution of clients' needs is the key to surviving an economic downturn

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The last three and a half years have certainly put everyone through their paces. From business owners to the man on the street, living from crisis to crisis has quickly become the norm. And just as the last lingering bits of dust from the pandemic had settled, 2023 ushered in a new range of hurdles for local and global markets alike - ranging from the Russia-Ukraine war to cost of living crises, risks of a global recession, and South Africa's own debilitating energy crisis.

Survival for businesses today, in all sectors, looks a lot like rolling with the punches – adapting to the constant changes and challenges – and making things work as best as possible. And this has been no different for the design and advertising worlds, with clients on crisis footing naturally needing to curb their spending and only wanting to focus on failsafe and results-driven activities.

Speaking from experience on this is Rogan Jansen, co-founder and creative director at DashDigital, who says that the difficulties felt this year have played a pivotal role in presenting obstacles for his studio, which is engaged in both local and international work.

“This year has brought diverse challenges in many shapes and forms, which have impacted our studio,” says Jansen. “From conflicts to banking issues, a crypto market crash and load shedding, our operation has seen it all – including client budget limitations becoming more noticeable and the drive to achieve goals within tight budgets shifting from being a debatable point to an essential requirement.”

It’s therefore no surprise that the financial constraints faced by many clients have led to budget cuts in all of their activities, requiring a thorough reassessment of each brief they share.

“And this has completely changed the way we pitch,” says Jansen, “not only from a financial perspective but from a competition aspect too. The competitive landscape has grown more intense during the course of this year, with a surge in

the number of agencies participating in pitch processes."

In times like these, failure to be mindful of clients' evolving needs and challenges could result in losing out on pitches or new business opportunities and more importantly, losing current clients to other agencies more aligned with their ever-changing needs and circumstances.

"When the costs around them go up, clients have to find money elsewhere," says Jansen. "And this means spending gets more highly considered, and results or ROI become a bigger part of the conversation because clients want to be sure they're spending their money effectively."

But this doesn't mean agencies and studios need to deliver penny-pinching work that loses its spirit. With briefs naturally shifting their focus towards returns rather than just value, the job to be done is not to see this as an obstacle but rather an opportunity to become more adaptable and empathetic.

"Luckily our agile approach to pitching and planning has allowed us to maintain a strong and steady stream of work this year. For us, the key is transparent communication with the client. It involves comprehending their needs and demands and then devising innovative, budget-friendly answers to tackle those challenges. At the same time, however, it's about understanding the situation and the overall environment without jeopardising our studio's stability," concludes Jansen.

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