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Article 22: Re-imagining the possible—Natalia Rosa, Director of Big Ambitions, shares her story of business transformation under COVID-19

Where it all began

The dream of journalism and travel started at a young age for Natalia, but her career story did not start there. She joined the American Embassy as a translator before being persuaded to join the travel and tourism sector to write content pieces, and was later promoted to a publisher for a stable of publications. After some time, Natalia decided to take the leap of faith and venture on her own. A retail agency group intercepted that plan and a detour found Natalia marketing and writing content at the coal face of the tourism industry. It seems the 'universe' was to intervene once again and pull her back to her intended journey to entrepreneurship. This was the time – if ever the stars were aligned it was now and Natalia took the bold leap to start Big Ambitions and freelance for various organizations creating purposeful content.

As luck would have it, the tourism community is 'small' and word got out, her reputation preceded her and more clients wanted a piece of what she offered – a true understanding and solution to their real marketing and communications pain points. She was just one lady of brilliance and needed to expand her team to meet the increasing demand, and so the Big Ambitions family (team) grew. Business began to snow ball, locally and across borders, they could hardly keep up – a great 'problem' to have. This was Natalia's wish, to offer quality bespoke services to connect travel and tourism providers to customers through informative PR, marketing and communications campaigns.

The seismic shift

Then the COVID-19 pandemic struck and within one week of lockdown, a third of her customer base was lost. Travel and tourism came to a grinding halt and the industry was bleeding out. Initially Natalia and her team became an information hub with an influx of calls from clients about so many things fundamentally impacting their survival such as UIF TERS, how to repatriate people back to South Africa, how to handle staff retrenchments, change in operational requirements issues and more. Their brand stood strong as a

credible and trusted information source.

The business focus had to change, almost overnight, to remain relevant and Natalia had to make some tough decisions to 'right size' her business. The clients pain points had changed and the Big Ambitions team scrambled to find clarity and information on a wide range of issues during a state of information vacuum. Many exhausting hours were spent tracing and connecting all the dots to keep clients informed, for example designing travel and tourism FAQ documents or developing micro sites on airline schedules.

It really come down to having grit, determination and the courage to shift thinking and understand what the client currently needed, given the COVID-19 restrictions on travel and tourism, within the realm of the digital options. Big Ambitions had done some virtual events, rather informally in the past and Natalia had received a seemingly random request. She was asked to host and moderate a virtual panel discussion on industry issues in travel and tourism with senior stakeholders and an outstanding 600 people attended. The feedback was phenomenal claiming Natalia to have a 'superpower' as a moderator.

This was it: the pivot, the sign, the new direction, the opportunity to host virtual events and since March 2020, Natalia has hosted over 200 virtual events (national and international) on various industry topics, moderating panel discussions, conducting presentations, facilitating break-out rooms and even as far as hosting virtual pub quizzes. This made complete sense, Natalia and her team could arrange these events, given their expertise within the constraints of the COVID-19 environment, whilst reducing all the logistics, physical restrictions and costs associated with arranging large events.

Providing this service has also forced Big Ambitions to learn about other industries impacting tourism such as cyber security, insurance, consumer protection laws and many others to enrich the context of virtual event topics and the outcomes of these discussions. Finding the synergies in various industries also provides Big Ambitions with new opportunities to explore outside of the current travel and tourism market place.

Learnings out of a crisis

Natalia has pearls of wisdom to share through the journey to re-imagine and re-invent her physical business operating model to a virtual one. Many of these will resonate with or open mindsets of entrepreneurs wanting to start, sustain or grow their business in the current digital landscape:

- Don't stay attached to what was, or fixate on the physical. It's not about simply taking the physical online – it may require thinking from a clean slate to re-invent or innovate a business.
- Be open and be prepared to change plans or deviate from the original journey. Think on your feet! She uses the analogy of being onboard a flight where you may need to fix the plane mid-air or adjust the flight plan: it's scary but needs to be done to ensure a safe landing.
- Nothing needs to be perfect, learn and adapt as you go along. Having done or completed something is far better than the time lost trying to perfect it.
- Be willing to learn and try new things, don't be afraid to stretch boundaries and challenge your own limiting assumptions.
- Deal with change quickly and authentically. In the case of virtual events, unplanned changes such as load shedding or the absence of a key speaker/participant can derail the discussion but if handled effectively can save the outcome.
- Shift towards humanity and find other ways to connect and communicate, there is great power in the social connection between people and the empathy shown during difficult times. Find ways to do this with your team and customers.
- Believe it or not, constraints force creativity and through innovation unconsidered opportunities can arise to re-shape a business to thrive.

How to connect:

To find out more about Natalia and Big Ambitions services, please connect with her via <https://bigambitions.co.za/>

