

What's it like to be a digital marketing entrepreneur?

By  [Stephen Sandmann](#)

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So, what's it like? I'll share a candid collection of experiences I've picked up along the way. Sharing the lessons I've learned may help and motivate other digital marketing entrepreneurs starting out in life.



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Many of the clichés about entrepreneurship ring true but experiencing it for yourself is different in an exceptional way. There is nothing like it - being fully in control of my career gives me a most satisfying feeling, and the freedom to do the work I want to do with SA's leading brands and their highly-skilled teams.



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Stephen Sandmann 10 Oct 2017



You can't do it on your own and strive for excellence

Grow and push what can be achieved with all facets of digital marketing. Become a good collaborator- you can't succeed on your own.

Find people you can trust to work with who also are at the top of their game. You can't afford to have people let you down when you need them most.

I push myself creatively. I enjoy collaborating with creatives to achieve the best results, together with data and my technical skillset. Don't mistake creative flair and problem-solving with focused creative input from creatives. Yes, a creative's take on digital marketing is a key quality for digital marketers to follow. But a focused creative input from creatives for the 'big idea' is critical to overall success.

I enjoy dreaming up creative solutions for my clients. But I also thrive on the general technical aspects of digital marketing – return on your client's investment can always be further improved.



Why should all digital marketers care about creativity?

Stephen Sandmann 24 Dec 2015



Teamwork, creativity and the right data form the framework to maximise ROI. I refer to the right data because you have to be mindful regarding digital marketing data, with so much at one's fingertips, you don't want to experience 'analysis paralysis.'

Clients' brands should become your brands

I don't run my own agency. I offer a boutique consultancy service to my clients. I don't use the word 'consultancy' to disguise an agency setup either. Each to their own, of course, but an agency setup isn't for me. I've been in agencies for most of career, which has been great, but I don't want to run one.

I become part of my clients' teams. I'm on call 24/7, and the buck stops with me. I'm not going to palm off major responsibilities to anybody else. Don't be that exec, who, through smoke and mirrors, wins a new client's business, and then provides B-grade work, because it was all delegated to inexperienced juniors.

Clients pay for my time and I personally vouch for and am involved with the work at all times, period. That's why my business is called Sandmann Digital, not some abstract out-there name.

Plan far ahead

Think 3 steps ahead. Plan your next, next, next move, because time flies and you don't want to miss an opportunity or be unprepared for one.

Widen your horizon

My horizon has widened rapidly. I'm not limited to office work parties and award shows. I've met leading entrepreneurs from SA and abroad – they are real digital thought leaders and disruptors that inspire us all.

How to pick clients?

I get a kick out of results-driven digital marketing. I'm drawn to innovative brands and have been collaborating with some of SA's coolest brands.

Work with brands that appreciate your skill set and that give you the freedom to do your work to the best of your ability. It's important that they take feedback well, and that positive teamwork can be achieved.



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Stephen Sandmann 2 Nov 2017



Embrace plenty of travel

I've travelled sporadically in the past for work. However, now, I travel often and jump on many flights. 'Red-eye' flights are something one must get used to, but they bring excellent opportunities.

Mind your work/life balance

My biggest challenge is the work/life balance. It may sound lame, but when you're passionate like me in what you do, then each day is a great day. There is always something new to learn and the need for new ideas. No two days are exactly alike.

Be careful not to burn out. Leading research says that many entrepreneurs fail due to emotional/psychological issues. I'm very careful to keep a healthy mind and relationships. I get so focused on my work that I sometimes struggle to keep a balanced lifestyle. I'm working on relaxing more often. Not working 7 days a week, which I would gladly do. I can really zone in on work and unintentionally block out the entire world.

Hang out with great people who support and understand you. You need to bounce your ideas off people. Keep company with great friends. Family is super important. Entrepreneurship runs in my family. From my wife, my grandfather, now to my father, and brother. My brother, who has had his own video production business for many years, always gives me sound advice.

Don't drink your own Kool-Aid

'It is vital to not drink too much of your own Kool-Aid,' I usually say. It's a reference to cult leaders, who hit the news drinking poisoned Kool-Aid (a brand of soft drink) together with their followers. What I mean is, don't be full-on fanatical, full of yourself, and have tunnel-vision. Wearing blinkers would be detrimental to your work's success.



It's a short ride with your own wind in your sails

Vincent Maher 6 Apr 2011



Don't get me wrong, you should not be wracked with indecision. Just be open to other people's perspective and ideas. Always be prepared to quickly adapt, based on how the data presents itself. In other words, we need to challenge what we think we know every day.

Challenge what you've been taught. Challenge what you've read. Challenge your clients' thinking. The outcome of this process is marvellous - you achieve the best results.

Maintain a good work ethic

I study the latest work from around the world and read articles to keep my perspective fluid. Spend time doing the work that you love – then you will perform at your best. Never settle for doing good work. Nothing stands still in digital marketing and good can always be exceptional.

Believe in yourself, but don't take yourself too seriously either. Be humble. Listen more than what you say.

It is critical to see your work and your role from your clients' perspectives.

I fully immerse myself in the work - I become part of the furniture. I look at the full picture, not just the digital marketing aspects.

Find a trustworthy accountant

Get a trustworthy accountant with a sense of urgency. I hate admin and my filing system is scary. You need sound financial advice regarding your business model, balance sheet etc. – they need to be in order. I focus on the work that I'm skilled at and let other people help me with stuff that I'm not skilled at, such as doing my taxes and my books.

Manage your time

Time management is important. You want to always offer your clients the best possible service and attention, which means you need to carefully allocate your time and maximise your use of it.

No more dreaded start to each week

Sundays are no longer a downer. We all know it. Sunday evening and you're wishing the weekend wouldn't end. That's all gone now. I take breaks when I can and work when I need to. I stick to a fluid approach, and yet strictly stick to my calendar appointments.

See challenges as good things

I've still got a lot of growth and challenges lying ahead of me, but I'm not scared, really, I'm not. I'm looking forward to it. It's a funny, unique feeling, growing your own business – hard work, stress and immense satisfaction.

ABOUT STEPHEN SANDMANN

I have a keen interest in innovative, digital marketing-lead advertising and search marketing (SEO and paid search), which I've developed through my award-winning agency and corporate career at Ogilvy, Quirk (now Mrum), Vodacom and now a specialist digital marketing consultant at Sandmann Digital.

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