

Elevating SA digital agencies' specialist skills to world-class levels

By [Andre Steenekamp](#)

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South African brands expect their digital agencies to deliver industry specialist skills that compare favourably to the international market. Getting this right demands closer relationships between brands and agencies.

Brands that operate in large markets such as the US or European Union are increasingly partnering with specialist agencies to maximise the outcomes of their digital marketing campaigns and strategies. Not only do they look for agencies with deep, focused experience in disciplines such as search or social media, they also prefer to work with partners that specialise in their vertical market, be it automotive, financial services or FMCG.

The benefit is that the client gets the best strategic insight and operational expertise for its industry and for each specific domain in digital marketing. As attractive as that sounds, we in South Africa operate in a small market, which means that most agencies tend to be generalists because they don't have the volumes to justify narrow specialisation.



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What's more, we often find that big brands tie their agency partners into non-disclosure and restraint agreements that prevent them from becoming specialists in a particular industry. Because of constraints in their own marketing capacity – for example, few brands have in-house search experts – they also often prefer to co-ordinate their strategies through a single lead agency.

Yet there's no arguing that sector and discipline-specific expertise can deliver better return on investment. In our experience, the best way to resolve this conundrum is for brands and agencies to work together in a long-term relationship where the agency becomes a trusted extension of the client's business.

Aligning behind a common goal

In our case, we have many clients that we have worked with for as long as a decade, often getting a privileged view of their strategies and operations. For example, we have worked closely enough with personal loan provider, DirectAxis, to have a deep understanding of its internal metrics as well as access to its data.

Because we have insight into key performance indicators (KPIs) such as call centre call volumes and application volumes, we were able to give DirectAxis detailed and accountable metrics of our performance, including cost per acquisition. This is unusual in South Africa, where many brands get watered down campaign reports rather than ones that match their own internal KPIs.

We believe that this matters because clients need the right data and the right metrics if they are to make good business decisions. By matching our campaign data with DirectAxis's internal data, we can better deliver the best quantity and quality of leads.

For example, we have a better understanding of factors such as how mobile customers convert compared to desktop conversions plus time of day and which message provides the best quality leads. We also have insight into when leads and conversions start dropping off after a campaign so that we can fire up remarketing programmes.

A firm commitment

Getting this right takes commitment from both the agency and client, not to mention a strong relationship. This means spending time meeting face to face each week and everyday by phone, if necessary. It also requires transparency – working together to understand where KPIs could be improved, or how market trends will affect the brand's performance.

For us, that's all about getting beyond one-size-fit-all solutions and generic measures of performance and moving towards complete alignment with the client's business. To get conversion and cost per acquisition right, you need that deep relationship with the client and understanding of its industry.

In our experience, this approach enables us to deliver work that matches the standards of international specialists, even without the volumes and spend that agencies in big markets enjoy. In turn, this delivers real business results for our clients that are aligned with the needs of their industries and customers.

ABOUT ANDRE STEENEKAMP

As CEO of 25AM, Andre Steenekamp leads the company's expansion in South Africa's fast-growing digital marketing and advertising space. His 25-year career has seen him work in a range of sales, marketing and management positions for leading traditional and digital publishers and agencies. Steenekamp was appointed to his current role following the acquisition of a 50%-stake in Acceleration Media by Times Media Limited.

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