

You have to live your brand

 By Cari Van Wyk

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Sharon Gilbert-Rivett, marketing manager for [Fair Trade Tourism](#), maintains that she was born on the wrong continent, but had the good sense to move to the right one, permanently relocating to South Africa 26 years ago. She is an award-winning journalist, tourism consultant, safari aficionado and wildlife film-maker.



Sharon Gilbert-Rivett - Conservation Lab

What does brand management mean to you?

Sharon Gilbert-Rivett: First off, it's a privilege to be the custodian of the Fair Trade Tourism brand having been involved with the organisation virtually since its inception more than a decade ago. Brand management to me boils down to awareness. It means making sure that people know who we are, what we stand for and what we do to back that up. A brand

can only ever be as credible as the organisation behind it, so we have to live our brand, each and every day.

■ ***Tell us about a day in your work life.***

Gilbert-Rivett: At the moment it's madness. We have our three major international trade shows happening in three successive months. By the time this "hits the shelves" ITB will be done and dusted, we will be gearing up for World Travel Market Africa in Cape Town and then preparing for Indaba in Durban. So my days at the moment consist of serious (and sometimes spectacular) juggling and relying on my team to make sure I don't drop any balls! The best part about what I do on a daily basis is that it contributes, even if only in a small way, to making a lasting difference in the lives of so many people who are benefitting directly from sustainable tourism and the work our amazing clients are doing.

■ ***What's on your wish list for brand objectives for 2016?***

Gilbert-Rivett: Positioning Fair Trade Tourism's brand as the mark of best practice in the African, and indeed global sustainable tourism arena, and the logical choice for discerning travellers.

■ ***What do you see currently as the main challenges and/or opportunities for your brand sector?***

Gilbert-Rivett: The tourism sector in Africa has been through an extremely challenging time over the past few years, and last year was perhaps one of the worst across the board. I think the main challenge tourism faces as an industry on this continent is to overcome the stereotypes in marketing African destinations. We need to seriously rethink the way we sell Africa and to start being more honest, authentic and ethical in the products we package.

When it comes to how we sell African products, content is most definitely king, and in this respect, I think the African tourism industry has been slow to understand that you simply cannot use the same old marketing spiel packed with tired clichés and hope that SEO will save the day. Content needs to be engaging, tell stories, be inspirational and experiential. It needs to excite the senses, not numb them into apathy!

When it comes to opportunities, I am excited to see how great content – words and images - is driving brands in the digital space. I believe the development of clever, engaging content on slick, user-friendly and interactive platforms is the single biggest opportunity for tourism brands in Africa.

■ ***What do you love most about your brand?***

Gilbert-Rivett: I love what it stands for. The ethics of Fair Trade have always resonated with me, ever since I was a youngster growing up in the UK. To be working with a brand that has adapted those ethics to tourism - an industry I am so passionate about - is an absolute dream come true. To be standing up and representing so many incredible sustainable tourism products across Africa, all doing such amazing things to change the future for both people and the planet, is an honour for me.

■ ***Which creative/digital agencies are you currently working with?***

Gilbert-Rivett: We are doing all of our content creation in-house, and will be using a network of established and respected freelance writers and photographers going forward. We also want to start encouraging emerging talent, especially where photography is concerned, giving young photographers the opportunity to start showcasing what they think makes Fair Trade Tourism so special.

We are using a team of creative and digital gurus headed up by Atomic Eighty Media Mill, under the creative genius of Dylan Seegers, to develop a new tablet-based app magazine which is due for launch in the very near future (watch this space!). This team is also in the process of redesigning and redeveloping our website. The aim is to present a completely synergised, rejuvenated, crisp, clean brand across all mediums with fabulous content leading the way forward.

■ ***What do you love most about the South African consumer?***

Gilbert-Rivett: I love that South African consumers are honest. They know what they like and they don't compromise. And they are not afraid to say what they don't like and why they don't like it!

■ ***What are your own personal favourite brands?***

Gilbert-Rivett: Apple. I know it sounds clichéd, but I have yet to find a product that not just delivers on the brand promise the way Apple does, but exceeds expectations every single time. I tend to go for brands that challenge the status quo and aren't afraid to be edgy and push the envelope. I also look closely at a brand's CSR.

I've been loyal to the Body Shop since it started in the UK. It's a very different animal today to what it was then, but I firmly believe in the ethics it promotes.

When it comes to tourism there are a few - Chongwe Safaris, Great Plains Conservation, Rovos Rail, Singita, Spier, Grootbos... I just love what they do, how they do it and, importantly, why they do it.

The "lekker" local brands I go for are: Green Leaf olive oil, Fat Bastard vino and Bean There coffee.

■ ***What inspires you, personally?***

Gilbert-Rivett: Integrity and love. I am blessed in that I am surrounded by people – family, friends, colleagues, mentors - who are full of it in every single thing they do, so I am never lacking for inspiration.

ABOUT CARI VAN WYK

Cari Coetzee is a contributor to Bizcommunity Tourism, Agriculture and Lifestyle.

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