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Blooming PR guru is the envy of her industry peers

Public relations took her from the soccer World Cup to Aids and basketball, writes **Nicola Jenvey**

BRIGHT Spark Communications managing director Michelle Govender emits energy and enthusiasm.

She has that enviable ability to be effortlessly chic and professional while also warm and personal, so it's not surprising she has already notched up business milestones that her competitors can only dream about.

A year before matriculating from Chatsworth High School, Govender knew her career would be in public relations.

She continued her education with a PR diploma (later converted into a degree *cum laude*) from ML Sultan Technikon and in-service training with the University of Durban-Westville (now part of the University of KwaZulu-Natal).

A developmental management course followed before she was placed in the Durban city council public relations department.

She retained that position until 2006 when a friend suggested combining their skills and experiences to found an advertising company.

Active Communications, formed with Chris Chappé, was the forerunner to Bright Spark Communications.

Govender bought out her business partner two years ago and renamed and rebranded the company to have PR at its core, backed by events, brand activation and project management.

Her years in the industry were spent forging a network of contacts across KZN political, business, media and city official platforms, enabling her to offer clients a complete approach to media campaigns and launches.

Last year, Bright Spark secured the contract for the Volvo Golf Championships in what Govender



Bright Spark Communications managing director Michelle Govender shows what it takes to succeed in the public relations industry.
Picture: TERRY HAYWOOD

called "an awesome experience" that saw her interact with the world's leading golfers and take responsibility for the billboards and advertisements across Durban.

The company was part of the consortium awarded the event publicity and management for the World Cup fan parks and publicity transport for Durban and has developed marketing, communications, PR and event strategies for Unilever's Sunsilk Salon educational workshops in 2011 and Motions Stylists workshops last year, Coca-Cola, the Aids Healthcare Foundation, eThekweni Municipality and the

annual East Coast Radio House & Garden Show.

The last saw their client produce a R5 million return on investment in 2011.

As South African public relations agency for the Aids Healthcare Foundation, Govender managed all publicity for the World Aids Day in March.

Based in Los Angeles, the foundation has representation in 22 countries.

Govender conceptualised and created video messaging between South Africa and US basketball player Magic Johnson, who has celebrated more than 20 years living with the disease.

As the foundation's strategic public relations and marketing consulting agency in South Africa, Bright Spark developed a billboard campaign that the client successfully used in the US.

However, success does not come without challenges and Govender acknowledges she entered business "without knowing anything about it".

She also had to prove herself to the market based only on her background experience.

After surviving the initial "tough two years", South Africa was caught in the global recession that "only made surviving even

tougher", but Govender says she "climbed out, emerging even stronger".

An anchor in that success was the House & Garden Show; a contract she has now handled for five years.

She counts among her milestones being featured on the cover of *Destiny* magazine alongside the publication's editor, Khanyi Dhlomo.

The magazine was featuring businesswomen to be mentored as part of its five-year anniversary and Dhlomo was Govender's mentor.

Five years hence, Govender believes Bright Spark can be a Durban-based agency with a national client footprint.

She is steadily making her mark in the market, growing her clientele and embracing opportunities to offer government departments corporate knowledge and experience.

Experience has taught her that key to entrepreneurial success is doing the homework – speaking to people in the industry, working with mentors and taking to heart their knowledge and expertise.

While almost laughable for a PR person to have to consider, Govender acknowledges one of the lessons too easily forgotten is self-marketing.

"My business is based on marketing for clients, yet applying those principles to my own business somehow has a foreign ring to it. It is an essential lesson," she says.

On a personal level, Govender and her husband, Clinton, delayed starting their family for a decade as they worked on their careers.

However, when she launched her own business, she knew the time had also come to launch her motherhood career too.

Today the couple count their four-year-old daughter, Isabella, as their greatest achievement.

"My strong faith and belief in Jesus as the captain of the Bright Spark ship has got me through the tough times. When it seemed I could not or would not get a contract, leaving it in His hands meant that some doors closed while better opportunities awaited at the next one," says Govender.