



## PROFILE

# DESIGNING A WINNING BUSINESS MODEL TO SHOWCASE SA TALENTS

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**A**N ACADEMIC AT HEART, Ravi Naidoo, spent his youth engrossed in his studies. He completed a degree in medicine at UCT and was reading for his masters in the early 1990s – a time when change was in the air and South Africa was on the brink of a socio-economic revolution.

There was something big happening and Naidoo wanted to be part of it. In addition to his love for learning, he has always had a fetish for all things creative. Even as a serious undergrad med student, he had completed several arts courses and was a seasoned speech and drama enthusiast.

“I wanted to do something new and challenging,” Naidoo recalls. “So I wrote a wacky, irreverent letter to a whole lot of ad agencies.” He won’t be too specific about the content, but it had something to do with not wanting to spend the rest of his life nailed to a stool in a dingy lab.

He received two replies. One agency wanted him to do a graduate degree in advertising. The other, Young & Rubicam, had just launched a pharmaceutical division and was only too keen to welcome him on board.

That’s how he got into advertising. Within six months he was an account director.

But come 1993, Naidoo was ready for another challenge and he convinced his wife to enrol with him to do an MBA. They were the only two people of colour in the class, and as usual Naidoo excelled and was named MBA student of the year.

It was eight months into the programme that he launched Interactive Africa, the company that was to become best known for the Design Indaba, an internationally recognised conference and showcase of design talent that attracts around 40 000 people today from all the creative industries – graphic design, advertising, film, music, fashion, industrial design, architecture, craft, visual art, new media, publishing, radio, television and performance art.

## HOW IT ALL STARTED

Interactive Africa started life as a marketing project management company. “I had found the ad industry a trifle too formulaic, and I was convinced that we needed other models and platforms to help marketers help clients beyond the ‘picture, logo, promise’ advertising formula. Instead, we focus on creativity, media leverage and business strategy, all governed by a measurable process.”

One of his first successes under the Interactive Africa banner was the creation of the Vodaworld magazine in 1994. Today, Interactive Africa is Vodacom’s longest-serving marketing agency. More recently, the company was instrumental in getting South Africa’s 2010 World Cup bid off the ground.

But it’s the Design Indaba, a brand that Naidoo created from scratch, that he is most proud of, and rightly so. This annual event was launched at the Mount Nelson in 1995 and attended

by just 200 delegates. At the time, Naidoo was driven by the conviction that the South African economy had to become less dependent on raw commodities and start to leverage value-added products. It was a reality that Naidoo set out to change.

“We had great skills sets in this country at that time, but what we needed was to look at things afresh. I was coming at the problem from a strategic point of view – by 1994 our economy was moribund, and we were merely selling commodities without producing anything of real value.

“As the world’s top gold producer, for example, the country has not been known for its jewellery design. Yet, when a gold ingot is turned into beautiful jewellery, the value goes up enormously. My goal was to work towards creating a society that places greater value on design and innovation.”

That first Design Indaba delivered way beyond Naidoo’s expectations. “I hadn’t realised just how starved people were for creativity and inspiration,” he says. “Not only had we been isolated from the rest of the world, but we had also become insular and narrow-minded as a result.”

One of the highlights of that first event was a presentation given by the creative directors behind the Atlanta Olympic Games bid. They gave the delegates some deep insight into what it takes to package a city. People were blown away and those working on Cape Town’s 2004 Olympic bid got a nice little wake-up call. They realised they had to up the tempo and increase their workload.

A post-conference survey showed that 92% of delegates had responded positively and wanted Naidoo to do it again.

“I was a bit of an accidental entrepreneur,” he laughs. “I had a permanent staff of two at the time so I made a pledge to the design community to make the Design Indaba a biennial event. I really had no idea that it would become such a money spinner at the time.”

Subsequent events were held in 1997 (attendances doubled), 1999 (attendances went up by 70%) and 2001 (attendances doubled again), with the Design Indaba outgrowing its venue every time. From taking over the entire V&A Waterfront, it moved to Artscape and then to the Cape Town International Convention Centre after it opened in 2003.

## BUILDING REVENUE STREAMS

Following the 2001 event, Naidoo decided that it was time to make it an annual happening. However, creating an event-based business is not about an annual three-day frolic, Naidoo cautions. “You actually have to build a solid business with strong revenue streams and professional staff, not casual labourers. Don’t think you can earn money in a few days to make that business sustainable for the other 362 days of the year.”

That’s why he introduced additional income channels such as the Design Indaba magazine, a multi-award winning quarterly publication that champions local creativity, features international