

"It's time to de-advertise advertising" - Sarah Browning-de Villiers, introducing StoryStackr

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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Since winning Sanlam Group's internal communications business effective February 2020, Machine agency's content marketing division has been hard at work reimagining the Group's internal communications content strategy with its communications team. "We've been working on an immersive storytelling experience supercharged by smart tech - StoryStackr - for a few months, but Covid-19 catalysed this effort and shone a spotlight on the need for a product like this.

"None of us saw the curveball that would hit as we were ready to re-launch with Sanlam," says Sarah Browning-de Villiers, Machine_'s chief content officer.

Covid-19 has certainly heightened the importance of internal communication within companies, while also challenging the way in which companies traditionally communicate. "Printed material was untenable during stricter lockdown levels, and employees and stakeholders are experiencing email fatigue at a whole new level. In addition, digital experience platforms traditionally used by publishers, like PDF flipbook solutions, simply do not offer a truly customisable and immersive experience for users."



Sarah Browning-de Villiers, Machine_'s chief content officer

Here, Browning-de Villiers goes on to tell us that Covid-19 has generated secondary pandemics of isolation and disconnectedness, that consumers are now demanding more of brands than to simply sell us something newer, faster or cheaper, and of course, more about this new product and how it achieves this through content that educates, empowers

and adds value.

■ **Comment on the impact of Covid-19 on the industry; Machine's response to the pandemic; how it has affected the content marketing space specifically.**

While Covid-19 has first and foremost been a health pandemic, it has generated secondary pandemics, including a pandemic of isolation and disconnectedness. We've seen this in our own workplaces, where communication and collaboration have been more challenging. In general, the role of marketers and communication specialists has been to help their clients reconnect with their audiences in entirely new ways, and under enormous pressure. But critically, it's also been about connecting with audiences in a way that's truly relevant.

Covid-19 has grounded us all back into the more basic human needs of safety and security, and so we demand more of brands than to simply sell us something newer, faster or cheaper. We are looking – now more than ever – for brands with meaning; companies who deliver to our communities not just to their bottom lines; and for stories that matter and add value.

Content marketing delivers all of these things; it always has, but Covid-19 has shone a spotlight on how critical this practice is for brands.

At Machine_, and as content marketers, we know how the product or service isn't the content. Instead, the content *is* the product.

“ Our job is to understand what audiences want and need, and then to create this content for them: content that educates, empowers and adds value. The product or brand aren't the heroes; our audiences and their needs are. By doing this for brands, they start having authentic, meaningful conversations with consumers about the things that really matter. It's not about something that gives you fewer grey hairs, lower bank fees or better cover; it's about how to self-style your hair while you're stuck in isolation, why it's time to really interrogate how much your bank is charging you, and why the pandemic is revealing how dangerously under-insured most of us are. ”

Through these meaningful conversations, content marketing builds audiences who come to trust a brand, and see its deeper value. That's when you can really unlock sustainable ROI, and a sales funnel that extends beyond a short-lived campaign.

At Machine_, we've been driving a content marketing-led approach for years, and we're seeing it pay off even more so during these challenging times. Clients like Sanlam Reality – a loyalty programme delivering discounts on things like cinema trips and public events – have spent years demonstrating their value to their members far beyond these benefits (which were suspended during lockdown).

We've been investing in empowering financial wellness content marketing and tools for years with Sanlam Reality, and during this time we've experienced extremely high engagement with the programme, despite restrictions placed on many of

its most popular benefits. It's their content marketing-led approach that's paying off, big time.

■ ***In response to Covid-19, we've seen many businesses move their employees from an office environment to a work-from-home setup, which has heightened the importance of internal communication within companies while also challenging the way in which companies traditionally communicate. How does StoryStackr seek to address this?***

I think most of us can agree that working from home, as well as being restricted from seeing friends and family, have increased our craving for connectedness. It's also put our traditional digital communications channels into overdrive: email fatigue is very real, and every quick phone call or desk-side conversation seems to have turned into an exhausting Teams or Zoom meeting. Yet, internal communications within companies is also critically important: how else do you keep your staff informed, motivated and as anxiety-free as possible?

Traditional mediums like print were untenable during lockdown, and are impractical if you rely on office-based distribution, as many companies do for their internal communication. And yet another email is, well, just that... ugh.

At Machine_, we've been developing StoryStackr – our very own immersive digital storytelling experience – with our Publicis Groupe sister practice, Publicis Data Sciences, for about a year, in response to the success of our content marketing practice and the needs of our clients. It was incredibly fortuitous that it was ready as we were due to launch the brand-new *Sanlam Connect* internal staff magazine, over lockdown.

Using StoryStackr, we were able to quickly translate this print title into an interactive digital journey that's a brilliant experience across all devices, doesn't chow your data and is super engaging. Even better, we've been able to use the rich data and analytics to feed insights and critical staff needs back into the Sanlam internal communication team, so that they're better equipped to keep their staff connected during this difficult time.

The exciting thing about StoryStackr, though, is that it has endless applications and it's fully customisable. We're already working on briefs for clients to use for remote, virtual onboarding experiences; product explainers and interactive manuals; e-commerce journeys and experiences; and even interactive education 'textbooks' for kids not able to attend school at the moment.

It's an organic experience for today's digital natives, it's versatile and user friendly, and – importantly – it's affordable: because we've developed it ourselves, clients experience zero Capex or build requirement, cutting costs for them drastically.

Excitingly, we've also created it to integrate seamlessly with a long list of third-party apps and platforms, like Google Marketing Platform, AWS Cloud Structures, Big Query, Microsoft Azure and more. We've intentionally created it to slot in with the existing investments our clients already have; so it's a sustainable solution, not a flash-in-the-pan agency sell.

■ ***How does it work?***

We have an easy six-step process we take clients through, from content marketing strategy all the way through to design, development, reporting and optimisation, and we can get things up and running in as little as three weeks (depending on the ask, of course!).

The big thing for me is the strategic intent behind StoryStackr: we spend a lot of time with clients understanding the challenge they're trying to sell, and ideating the right content marketing approach for them. This includes unpacking their audiences, distribution channels and more. The journeys we build are designed to deliver sustained ROI – not just a once-off campaign result.

■ ***What value does it offer businesses (i.e. its trackable aspect)?***

There is so much value, which is why I get so passionate about this experiential tool! Everything is 100% trackable and can

integrate into a client's existing CRM or sales tools, so it forms part of a client's overall marketing and communications efforts. You can embed pixels and trackable links to remarket to consumers and to build specific audience segments. You can capture data and insights securely (fully PoPIA-compliant, of course) and can distribute StoryStackr across any digital channel. We even set up custom dashboards for clients so they get check up on results whenever they want to; it's addictive!

■ **Why do you believe businesses need to consider shifting their future communication strategies?**

I believe fervently that it is time to de-advertise advertising. That's exactly what our Machine_ Content Marketing practice does, amplified by the bespoke, smart experiential tools we're designing, like StoryStackr.

“ Where advertising broadcasts, we as content marketers chat. Where advertisers push in, we mingle. We don't clutter, we curate – highly targeted, relevant storytelling that adds meaningful value to the intended audience. That's what we all need right now; that's what I believe every brand needs to be investing in. ”

Like I've said before, selling something newer, cheaper, faster simply won't cut it anymore. In a world shaken by uncertainty – with consumers reassessing their values, their loyalties and their spending – only the brands that communicate meaningfully to its stakeholders will survive. I believe that content marketers are best positioned to help companies do this, and that immersive experiences like StoryStackr will become vital to grab attention and cut through the digital clutter and fatigue of our time.

■ **Covid-19 has certainly fast-tracked digitisation. Why do you think digital will continue to be a priority and even more so going forward?**

I find this such a fascinating one because I do believe that the extreme digitisation we are seeing in the throes of Covid-19 has certainly made everything non-digital desirable and a luxury.

“ Disconnecting feels like the ultimate holiday. ”

But the truth remains that as something becomes more democratic and every day, as digital has, you have to do more to be noticed. An ad on Facebook or a staff email newsletter just isn't good enough anymore. We have to create experiences that are organic in our new normal, and digital storytelling needs to become increasingly engaging and interactive. StoryStackr by Machine_ does just that, and content marketing as an approach supercharges these efforts from mundane to meaningful in their intent.

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