

EXCLUSIVE: Charl Bassil on his new role as VP global marketing at Absolut Vodka

Pernod Ricard recently announced that Charl Bassil is leaving Pernod Ricard SA to go and head up Absolut Vodka globally.



Charl Bassil, marketing director at Pernod Ricard SA will be joining Absolut as vice president, global marketing.

Here, Bassil exclusively shares more about his new position and what the future holds.

You are about to take up a new position as vice president, global marketing – Absolut Vodka, based in Stockholm. Tell us what that will entail.

It will entail leading a global team of approximately 60 marketing professionals (based in Stockholm, London and Los Angeles) who are all focused on building the Absolut brand globally.

The role requires custodianship of the Absolut brand's heritage and legacy while pushing the boundaries of creativity and innovation so that the brand can continue to connect with a new generation of urban millennial consumers. Key markets for the business include the USA, the UK, Germany, China, Brazil, Australia and of course South Africa.



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Leigh Andrews 5 Sep 2016



Worth noting is that Absolut is the largest brand (by volume) within the Pernod Ricard portfolio, with 11.2 million cases sold in the 2017 financial year. By comparison, Jameson globally sold 6.5 million cases in the same year – to give you an idea of just how big the Absolut brand is.

It is good to see that South Africans continue to be top contenders for senior positions internationally. What specific value do you think South Africans bring to the table?

South Africans have something very special – and that is soul. We are able to connect with one another authentically, to think on our feet and very importantly, to adapt to changing circumstances.

I guess because we have grown up in an ever-changing environment with periods of real volatility, South Africans are truly resilient. We internalise our nuanced surroundings in a way that allows us to focus on potential solutions and mitigate against risks.

What makes South Africans truly powerful around the world is that we are ambitious but not entitled. As a result, we remain humble in our approach and ultimately we have empathy for one another and for our consumers. But if I were to bring it down to one word, that would be “empathy”. Nelson Mandela remains our most important role model in this regard.

Today we have many South Africans on the global stage doing big things and I am sure they would attribute part of their success to their South African resilience and empathy for others.

You gained career recognition as IAB Bookmark Awards Marketer of the Year in 2016. What contribution to marketing in South Africa are you most proud of?

My philosophy is that we should bring humanity into the workplace and we have defined that at Pernod Ricard as “Authentic Brands and Authentic People”. What we’ve really worked hard at is being authentic to ourselves as human beings in the workplace and being authentic to our consumers. Only by being truly authentic internally can we be authentic to our consumers. That has been my driving force.

Secondly, I am a genuine believer in the excellence of South Africa and its people. I often tell people abroad that South Africans are underrated and I am very proud that I have fought hard for South African work to be recognised globally within the Pernod Ricard business.

The work we have been producing has substance and is compelling - to the point that it has influenced our global brand strategies. And of course, in some instances, the work has been recognised by global awards including a Gold Lion in Cannes for Absolut One Source Live.



One Source Live: Festival of Africa's Creative Revolution

VML South Africa 25 Apr 2018



I’m happy we were able to achieve those things – encouraging our authenticity and humanity in the workplace and harnessing the excellence of South Africa, proving to our global counterparts that Africa has a lot to offer the world.

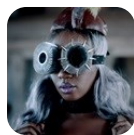
What legacy do you leave behind at PRSA and what would you hope to see the company continue to achieve?

Putting people at the centre of everything we do is something that is critical to business success – both in terms of the people we work with and our consumers.

Any business would do well to focus on how they recruit the best people and retain top talent. We have spent a lot of

energy to ensure we find the right people to work with and that we also partner with exceptional creative agencies and influencers. We want to collaborate with influencers that are creative and authentic – take for example Black Motion on Ballantine's and Khuli Chana on Absolut.

These are incredibly talented people and we should not try to “own the relationship” but rather genuinely collaborate with them to engage with consumers authentically.



Africa is on fire in Khuli Chana's star-studded new music video

Egg Films 7 Oct 2016



Putting our consumers at the centre of everything we do... that's a legacy to leave behind.

Secondly, we aspire to maintain an entrepreneurial mindset - using our instinct to envision the future and then backing that up with data and strong analytics. This allows us to create solid business plans that guide the business from year to year. Through the business planning process, we have managed to bring key people together to collaborate and pressure test our approach.

Those business plans are communicated in a way the rallies both our partner agencies and our internal staff so that they get to grips with the strategy, hopefully, buy into it and are excited to implement it.

It is that balance of putting people at the centre of our business and our mindset for growth that allows the organisation to continue to be successful.

Pernod Ricard has a strong employer value proposition of being a global company with opportunities for growth and international transfer – how does that work in practice?

We remain engaged with our people through our leadership development process and we identify talented people relatively early on in their career. We also clarify whether or not they are mobile globally.

Then the work begins with our HR counterparts around the Pernod Ricard system to establish if and when opportunities outside South Africa match both the capabilities of the individual and their aspirations. This process prompts conversations with the individual that may lead to a global move. Several routes are on offer:

- Short-term assignment, where someone can go abroad for six months up to one year
- International transfers that are typically for a much longer period
- Permanent moves where employees can become a local employee of the new business

What are the most exciting challenges that lie ahead in working for the Absolut company?

Absolut believes in a world where all people are equal, a world where it shouldn't matter who you are or what you believe in... because all people should be allowed access to the best vodka in the world.

Absolut was the first brand that publicly supported LGBT rights globally as manifest in the nightclubs of New York in the 1980s. It has always been at the forefront of fighting for a more open society.

The brief I received to fuel a global movement that embodies the values of the Absolut brand is hugely exciting, but of course, it is challenging because it is about balancing the ideals of the brand against some tough commercial realities. Communicating the Absolut values of progress and openness can be polarising in different societies around the world.

Another challenge that all marketers face is to ensure that the Absolut brand remains consistent to its essence while being able to adapt to local consumer nuances in the same that way we've been able to work with the Absolut brand in South Africa and give it a unique African creative voice.



A festival of African creativity launched by Absolut

5 Dec 2017



On a personal note, my family and I will be embracing the challenges of learning to adapt to Swedish culture and surviving the colder winters of Stockholm. But we are happy to embark on this new adventure and count ourselves privileged to be offered this experience.

We hope to take the warm spirit of Africa to Sweden and beyond!

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