



FOUNDER

Rob Stokes

COMPANY Quirk Marketing Agency

LAUNCHED IN 1999

DAY JOB WHILE LAUNCHING QUIRK

Business Science student and erstwhile waiter

START-UP CAPITAL

None

PEAK ANNUAL TURNOVER

R150 million

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Before we loved all things digital
Before Facebook ruled our lives
Before the words 'social media strategy' existed...

THERE WAS QUIRK

The guys at Quirk say the company was 'born digital' - but its entrance into the world of e-marketing wasn't an easy one. There were hiccups. There were cock ups. There were bad websites. Rob Stokes talks **Juliet Pitman** through the company's labour pains.

PHOTOS BY BEVAN DAVIS

"WE BOUGHT AND SOLD HARDWARE, did some network stuff and made really bad websites. We quickly ditched the hardware thing, slowly ditched the network thing and in time got better at the website thing. And here we are today."

For Rob Stokes, 'here' is leader of Quirk Marketing Agency which this year will turn over R150 million. With offices in Cape Town, Johannesburg and London and around 300 employees, it's a far cry from its humble beginnings, and looking at the company today you'd never guess the hurdles it's had to cross. But Stokes is nothing if not candid about how accidental some of his success has at least seemed.

business. I thought, 'I like marketing. I like technology. How can I put them together to make some cash?' Three weeks later Quirk was born - out of necessity," he says.

He'd read somewhere about Michael Dell cutting the door of his dorm room in half to create a counter-top over which he could sell computers and thought, "Hey, if he can do it, why not me?"

Stokes was still at varsity, studying a Business Science degree, but he was used to multi-tasking, particularly when it comes to starting businesses. He's been an entrepreneur "since forever."

"I ran an ice-pop cartel when I was in primary school. I was the smallest

he says. He started 17 different businesses while at school, all of which were banned for being, as the school powers-that-be put it, 'disruptive'.

But disruptive is where you want to be when you find yourself starting a business with no capital, at 3am in the morning, on a couch.

Stokes' idea was to leverage email for marketing purposes. "A group of us started building South Africa's first and worst email marketing software - at least, they built it mostly. I had to write exams so I took a break while they got grumpy with me and got on with the work," he recalls.

While the software was "an absolute maintenance nightmare," it worked. They made some money. But the product, although clunky and unwieldy, was still ahead of its time. A bit too ahead.

Necessity is the mother of invention - even if it's bad invention

"I'd love to be able to tell you it all happened according to some grand vision, some master plan - but frankly it didn't. My last job was Christmas Day 1998 as a waiter. I was asked to do something that really went against my grain and I quit that day. Six weeks later I ran out of money. It was my twentieth birthday. I was lying on the couch at 3am and I decided to start a

guy in the school and entered into a mafia relationship with the two biggest guys. They would hold all the other little guys back when the break bell rang and I'd run to the tuck shop to buy up the ice-pops which I'd then sell at a 3c mark-up,"





It sucks when you're ahead of your time

“When you're ahead of your time, no one knows that they need what you're selling. So no one buys it. People tell you it's a good thing to be 'ahead of your time' but trust me, it's not,” says Stokes, as he talks about the first seven “really, really tough” years of business.

There was simply no money. “On five or six occasions we were on the verge of bankruptcy and then a deal would come along that would buy us another month or two,” he says.

The Quirk team realised early on the power of search engine optimisation (SEO), which determines the relative ranking of search results in search engines. “We worked out how to get companies to the top of Google but everyone was like ‘Why would we want to be at the top of Google?’ We were just too early, I guess,” he says.

At 20 Stokes admits he had no instinct for timing when he started the business. “I thought the market would wake up to the power of e-marketing about six months after we started. As it turned out, that change took years,” he explains.

But when the turn eventually happened, all the pain, hard work and sleepless nights about paying salaries paid off. Quirk found itself in exactly the right place at the right time with a foundation and track record of real experience. As Stokes puts it, “We were more ready than anyone else.”

They had also revamped their software system, a mammoth but necessary task that fell to chief technology officer, Craig Raw.

“We locked him in a room for three weeks and fed him yoghurt and ProNutro,” says Stokes. The pressure to deliver a better system

1998

Rob Stokes resigns his waiter's job.

1999

Has an idea to start 'something with marketing and email' while lying on his couch, broke, at 3am.

1999

Uses exams as an excuse to skive off the majority of work building 'SA's first and worst email marketing software' with co-founders.

2000

Believes the market will wake up to the power of digital marketing.

2001

It doesn't.

2002

It still doesn't. Quirk has a number of uncomfortably close brushes with bankruptcy.

2003

It still doesn't. But a large call centre client promises a contract if the company can meet its SLAs. CTO Craig Raw rebuilds the software platform.

2004

Quirk employee moves to Johannesburg to chase his now-wife. Quirk Johannesburg office opens as a result.

2005

Companies start to realise the digital world might offer some promise in terms of performance-driven marketing.

2006

Quirk employee (a different one) emigrates to London to follow her boyfriend. Relationship doesn't work out but Quirk London office is established.

2006

Wins *Financial Mail* Best Corporate Websites award.

2006

2008

Stokes spends six months a year in London getting the operation established before handing it over to adman Nic Ray to run.

My biggest fear is Quirk becoming a corporate

Stokes describes his role as that of a 'culture captain'. “Culture is the flowerbed of talent. People need to have fun. They need to be encouraged to be creative and inspiring, to be passionate about ideas.”

With a growing workforce in three offices spread between South Africa and London, achieving this is easier said than done. “Over the past five years I've become unavoidably detached from the day-to-day operations of the business. What I'm really obsessed with is the culture. I really believe it's an extension of the founder's personality and that it's my obligation to spearhead it in the business,” Stokes adds.

He believes it is possible to retain an entrepreneurial culture, even in a big business, but he doesn't claim it's easy: “When a company is run by the founding entrepreneur they have a good idea of what's going on in the business. But when they leave, you end up with professional managers running the business. Because the shareholders sit externally, the only way for them to protect their investment is to ensure systems and processes are in place. These are not always bad things, but a large overly-bureaucratic and systems-driven business can encourage 'corporate coasting'. What you end up with is a 'safe place to work'. I never want us to be that. I always want us to be restless.”

One of Quirk's culture cornerstones is a tendency not to take itself too seriously. As Stokes says, “This applies to me. I have no office. I sit with the interns in reception. I learn from them. After all, I'm almost already three or four years too old for this game.”

If that's the case, how does he see his role in Quirk's future?

2007

Becomes a shareholder in BrandsEye.

2008

Qualifier in the Technology Top 100 awards.

“My job is to keep us relevant in five year's time,” he says simply, adding that his real skill lies in “piecing together bits of information and predicting an outcome.” That outcome, he believes, will precipitate a need for the company to move 'beyond digital'.

“In ten year's time, digital agencies won't exist. Even now, I really don't believe clients are looking for a 'digital agency' and a 'traditional agency'. What they want is a trusted partner. At the moment, we're a full service digital agency with a little bit of non-digital stuff, but we need to grow that. That's where our future lies. There – and in Africa. That's what keeps me busy at the moment,” he says. **EM**

Invests in 42 Engines, a start-up accelerator for software agencies.

Buys Red and Yellow School, an advertising college started by Ogilvy.

Becomes a certified Google Analytics Partner.

Becomes a certified Google Adwords Partner.

Wins award for the Best Contribution Made to the Marketing Industry.

Quirk delves into marketing education – one of Stokes' passions – launches a ten-week online interactive marketing course and writes a textbook.

WHEN ALL IS SAID AND DONE, WE LOVE WHAT WE DO AND DO WHAT WE LOVE.



Educating the industry

When he's not thinking about how to drive Quirk's unique culture, Rob Stokes spends a lot of energy thinking about how to improve the overall skills base in South Africa's marketing industry. To this end he started Quirk Education, which developed a ten-week online interactive marketing course, and wrote a textbook on marketing which, now in its fourth edition, can be downloaded free on the Internet and is used by 450 universities around the world.

The company recently bought the Ogilvy-founded Red and Yellow School advertising college. “It wasn't a big strategic move. We thought it was the right thing to do. The industry's biggest problem is lack of skills and we're big on getting off our own butts and doing something about it,” says Stokes, who lists an award recognising the company for the contribution it has made to the industry as “among our most important accolades.”

This passion for education permeates throughout the Quirk business. Ntombi Mayoyo, who started out as a cleaner, is now one of the company's traffic managers, thanks to Stokes' request to his team that they all spend an hour with her a week to teach her new skills.