

## Willing & Abel podcast: The promise of a problem with Jacques Burger

Season 1 of Willing & Abel is brought to you by <M&C Saatchi Abel>, a proudly South African award-winning creative company founded on the principle of Brutal Simplicity of Thought.

[00:00:00] **Mike Abel:** When I came back to South Africa, I remember having a drink with you at the Bambini Trust Bar. I eventually persuaded you to come back and to start the company with me and the Johannesburg Agency in October 2010.

[00:00:13] **Jacques Burger:** Australia gave me that perspective and I know everything works and it's beautiful and you know when you live in South Africa one's Got to look at it from the point of view of being vested, not being an investor, because if you're vested, you know, you don't just have commercial interest in this market. You're vested because you live here and it's your home. It's been a long time since I've seen Switzerland, uh, won significant creative awards. You know, someone said to me, you know, the last thing the Swiss invented was the cuckoo clock, and maybe it's because there is no crisis in that country.

[00:00:42] **Mike Abel:** Hi, I'm Mike Abel, a business, marketing, and communications specialist, and the founder of MNC Saatchi Abel. I'm a family man, a problem solver, a futurist, and an optimist at heart. Welcome to my podcast, Willing and Able, the home of hopeful conversations that challenge perspectives. It's a continuation of the ideas and conversations I began in my book, Willing and Able, lessons from a decade in crisis. My guest today, Jacques Berger, who has more than 20 years experience in leading communications agencies in Southern Africa and Australia, including Ogilvy, the Campaign Palace Australia, part of WPP, and the MNC Saatchi Group, South Africa. He was one of the top 40 under 40s in 2009 and is a popular guest speaker and thought leader, and has led the communication strategies and brand-building work for the likes of the Heineken Group. Volkswagen South Africa, Standard Bank, and Lexus. Casa Lager, to name just a few. He also co-founded MNC Saatchi Abel with me in 2010, where he is now the group CEO, and is also my long-time partner in crime and a great friend. Welcome Jean. So great to have you here today.

[00:02:01] **Jacques Burger:** Thank you, Mike. Good to be here.

[00:02:02] **Mike Abel:** I was wondering, how long exactly have we known each other now?

[00:02:08] **Jacques Burger:** Oh my gosh, I got to work that out. I think I met you in 98. 1998.

[00:02:15] **Mike Abel:** Well, what is that? About 25 years? So do you still remember what your first impressions were of me the day we met?

[00:02:23] **Jacques Burger:** Well, I suppose I always wanted to work for you. Well, not knowing you, but knowing that you headed up the VW account at the time and I was keen to work on VW.

[00:02:34] **Mike Abel:** So not so much me,

[00:02:36] **Jacques Burger:** no, not so much you, um, and then starting out at Ogilvy actually didn't work for you. Uh, I worked, started off working on the, on the old mutual account, so my initial impressions were distant. Um, but I suppose if I had to cast my mind back to that time, uh, I would say young.

[00:02:54] **Jacques Burger:** Uh, I remember I had hair, I remember you being, I just thought, gosh, this guy's incredibly young. How can he, how can it be a business director and on the board, um, of the, of the company. So I suppose I was, uh, struck by, uh, by some impressive, impressive credentials. Um, and I think what was, um, what was interesting is. As my time progressed at Ogilvy, I obviously got to know you a little bit more and then, uh, I suppose my ambition to work on the VW account became, or kind of had an, got an extra layer to it in that I didn't just want to work on Volkswagen, but actually also wanted to work with you, you know, once I got to know you better and got a sense of how you lead and how you were leading your team and the way people were talking about you, uh, I found inspiring and I was like, I've got, I've got to make a plan to, to get closer to this man. I had a sense that, uh, you know, connecting my, my, my trailer to your car and might take me places.

[00:03:51] **Mike Abel:** Well, that's very generous of you, especially considering that this chat is about you and not me. But I did ask at first to lead you into a bit of, uh, you know, fabulousness and all of that. But, back to you.

[00:04:03] **Jacques Burger:** It's always nicer when other people say it about you and you have to say it about yourself.

[00:04:08] **Mike Abel:** I called my book lessons from a decade in crisis Jacques, and you titled a piece in the daily Maverick. This is a once in a century crisis. Let's not waste it. Then if you recall that, I do, but what do you think it is about this crisis that we're in right now that creates opportunities?

[00:04:29] **Jacques Burger:** Yeah, I think that is it, um, wasn't that good in science at school, but I think there is something where they talk about, you know, energy or reaction in the one way, um, one direction results in an opposite and equal energy or sense of movement in the other direction.

[00:04:41] **Mike Abel:** Is it Isaac Newton?

[00:04:42] **Jacques Burger:** Is that the one? Good. You see, at school,

[00:04:57] **Mike Abel:** every force of action has an equal, but opposite force of reaction.

[00:04:53] **Jacques Burger:** There you go. And so I think what's interesting about the, the, the crisis that we're in right now, and I suppose the, the pressure that we face in this country on. On many levels and in many ways is I think that it creates an opportunity for that opposite force, um, to, to take place. And I think that, you know, South Africa has a, has a very, very long history of, you know, us seemingly loving the idea of pushing ourselves to the very precipice kind of, you know, dangling off the cliff and then pulling ourselves back. I don't know why we do that. Um, And, and, and, and why we feel like we have to get to such a scary place before we feel, um, propelled to, to start fixing things. But I do think that, um, what I'm seeing right now in this crisis is how people are taking that force and shifting it in the opposite direction and in a positive direction. And I think that's exciting. So I do think that, you know, out of crisis, out of challenge, comes opportunity. Um, you know, there's, there's always that open space that gets created through, through crisis. I think that, that pressure often brings out a force and a belief, um, in individuals, um, to act and to change and to will because it becomes a matter of survival almost. It's not pleasant in the moment and I think it can be very scary and it, it takes a lot of effort and it takes a lot of energy, but I think if you If you're able to use that momentum, then, then I think it, it creates great opportunity. I think if you look at it, uh, from the perspective of our industry, you know, if you look at, uh, creative recognition at Cannes, for instance, let's look at the countries that show up year after year and do very well, punch well above their weight. You know, often it's countries not just like South Africa, but like Brazil, um, you know, that have a lot of challenges in market. Um, it's been a long time since I've seen Switzerland, uh, one significant creative awards, you know, someone said to me, you know, the last thing the Swiss invented was the cuckoo clock. And maybe it's because there is no crisis in that country. There are no challenges, you know, there's nothing that pushes you to think different, um, to find the alternative. Um, so I think that, you know, out of crisis often comes innovation and new ideas and, and different ways. Cause you, cause you forced to think very differently, which I think is exciting.

[00:07:11] **Mike Abel:** I think it is. I mean, while you're talking, it reminds me of that saying necessity is the mother of invention, you know, and as we all know, nature has its own way enough pressure on coal creates a diamond. And I think those types of situations do force people to become resourceful, uh, innovative and resilient, which is ultimately, I guess, what you need to succeed, which I think leads me funnily enough to, um, the Ted talk I gave last year where I said, I love problems because without problems, there is no opportunity. And with no opportunity, there is no innovation. What is it that you respond particularly well to in a crisis, because I know you are, I mean, I think of you a bit like a fireman, you know, where there's a fire, you don't leave the building, you grab and extinguish and you run up. What is it that makes you so attracted, I guess, to problem solving?

[00:08:09] **Jacques Burger:** It's an interesting question. I think that, you know, there are, there are, there are two kinds of people I believe in the world. Um, you know, there are people who fight and there are people who flight when it comes to a crisis.

And so either you, you run as fast as you can in the opposite direction or you stay, I'm not quite sure what makes you stay? Um, I don't know if I figured that one out, but I do think what's what excites me about a crisis or a problem is that I get a thrill out of fixing it and solving it. Um, and being able to step back and go, it's better as a result of what I've done, versus just leaving something be. I don't, um, I don't subscribe to negative energy and I don't subscribe to the idea of being a victim.

And I suppose that's why I think often when you look at a crisis or you look at a challenge, it's one can go into victim mode and go, Oh, well, what can I do? Or it's too late or it's too big. Um, I kind of look at that as negative energy and, and, and a passive stance versus going, well, if I do something and I lean into it, who knows, I might just solve it. And I think what's, uh, What is exciting is when you start to orientate like that in, in, in how you behave in life and in work, then it becomes a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy because when you just give it a go, you find that sometimes it's not as hard as you think. And sometimes your ability to solve and to improve a situation or a project or just life in general is actually within reach if you just put your mind to it. Um, and I think that builds that sense of confidence. That you are able to do it, not always, but often. And I think then, then, you know, the fear is replaced with excitement.

[00:09:51] **Mike Abel:** No, that, that's true. I mean, it's, it's interesting because I often think that if I could see anything positive come out of negativity, then I might wallow in negativity. But I've never, ever seen anything good come out of that. So you know,

[00:10:04] **Jacques Burger:** 100%, 100 percent right. I mean, someone was saying to me, in fact, my wife was saying to me the other day, she was having a moan and I said, just move beyond this. And she said to me, I know that's your way. I know you've already moved on and you've already found the solution, but can you just come and sit here with me and be a bit sad for a moment? I was like, no, I can't. It's a wasted energy. Come, let's move, go for lunch. Solved, fixed, sorted.

[00:10:26] **Mike Abel:** Next time sit with her and listen.

[00:10:28] **Jacques Burger:** I know, I know, I've got to work on that.

[00:10:30] **Mike Abel:** I've got about seven years head start on you on the marriage thing. One can still learn a little bit there. Um, you know, you and I spoke about fight or flight. You and I left the country actually at a very similar time in 2008. When we were both incredibly nervous, I guess, of, uh, the prospect of somebody who had, I don't know, twelve hundred counts of fraud or whatever it might have been against him becoming our president at the time, being Jacob Zuma. Uh, president, obviously in inverted commas, and we both went to Australia. Uh, I went to go and run the MNC Sanchi group there. Um, you went to go and run the campaign palace and albeit that we were friends in Australia, also frenemies because we were both trying to build our companies. And uh, when I came back to South Africa, I remember having a drink with you at the Bambini trust bar and I ordered a particular street. You remember that? And, uh, I remember ordering a very expensive glass of New Zealand Pinot Noir

for you to lull you back into coming back with me to South Africa. And I remember you clinking your glass against mine and saying, good luck with that, Mikey. I eventually persuaded you to come back and to start the company with me and the Johannesburg Agency in October, 2010. How different do you think South Africa is today in 2023 to when you got back in September, 2010?

[00:11:58] **Jacques Burger:** Or maybe I should start with how I thought the country was different from when I left for Australia to when I came back. And, and I think that also to people, the one thing that living in Australia taught me was that, uh, is perspective, because I think that, you know, when you've lived in, in, in South Africa all your life, you, you have a view on, on certain things, but sometimes it takes. You know, kind of moving to another country and another culture and to confront, uh, that ideal, or I suppose the, the, the thought that the grass is always greener on the other side and to go and, you know, kind of graze on the other side for a little bit and then come back to this paddock. And I would say Australia gave me that perspective and I came back to South Africa. With the realization that some of what I thought was wrong about this country and some of what I thought was missing about this country actually wasn't that bad. And that, you know, every market, uh, in the world has its own set of challenges and its own things that you like or don't like. So when I came back, I kind of looked at some of the, the, the parts of South Africa, uh, that I didn't like or that I wasn't comfortable with. And I thought, it's not so bad. And then there are other things that I looked at and I thought it's even worse than I thought, um, you know, now that you've got the perspective of, of having lived elsewhere. And if I look at South Africa in 2010 versus South Africa now, I think the same largely applies. I think a lot of things have gotten a whole lot worse. Uh, I don't think there's any, there's any denying that. And I think that, um, if you sit here in 2023 and you ask me, what is there to be optimistic about right now in the country? I would have to say very little. Um, very, very little. You know, we don't have power. We, we, we are in a you know, a significant economic and political crisis. And you just got to pick up the paper every day and you try and got to try and hunt for those stories and, and, and you don't find them. Uh, so I suppose that is scary.

Um, when you look at it on paper, but, um, As, as I think you and I spoke the other day, you know, when you live in South Africa, one's got to look at it from the point of view of being vested, not being an investor, because if you're vested, you know, you don't just have commercial interest in this market. You vested because you live here and it's your home. And so it's not a transactional relationship that you can kind of weigh up the pros and cons on a, on a piece of paper. And I think that, um, What still amazes me about South Africa and why I've got hope for South Africa, and whilst I think that, you know, in many ways we, we, we are looking a whole lot worse on the balance sheet than we did in 2010, um, as we sit here in 2023.

I think the, the fighting spirit, um, and the fierce of South Africans and, and, People in South Africa are incredible. Um, the resilience, um, you know, the, the helpfulness, the kindness, you know, I see it, I see it every day, you know, just ordinary people going about their daily lives, trying to make a living, trying to, you know, create a world where the next generation will be better off than what we are. Um, you see what, Uh, what private enterprise are doing in this country, uh, in terms of how they're

hoping to uplift, uh, you know, I think there, I think there are brilliant human stories, um, in, in, in this country. And that's what gives me hope. So whilst on the balance sheet, we're looking pretty bankrupt right now. Um, you've got to look at a, at a broad collective of 60. You know, 60 odd million people and go, you know, well, if half of those people have are good human beings and want to make this work, why can't we do that? And I think that there is, there's great proof that we've, we've, uh, faced many, many challenges, uh, before as a country.

And because of that South African, that unique South African spirit and the can do attitude and the resilience we've managed to get through it. So I have to believe that we can do that again.

[00:15:51] **Mike Abel** Well, I think we can. I mean, you once famously told Entrepreneur Magazine that optimism has a deadline. And I think you've spoken a little bit about that now, because reading between the lines, when you say the best thing about our country is the people, all the people aren't changing. You know, they are, to your expression, vested. They're going to be here. But I also think, you know, um, news channels, uh, we all know that one gram of loss weighs ten times more than a gram of gain. And news channels specialize in negativity, because they get more eyeballs and more clicks out of bad news than good news. Now, in no way am I negating the significant challenges that the country faces. But, you know, I met with these entrepreneurs the other day, uh, one of them, uh, moved from Palo Alto to South Africa, and he believes that Cape Town, for example, is going to be the next great place in the world for tech development. So you'll have, you know, Silicon Valley, you'll have the Tel Aviv area, and then you'll have Cape Town from a lifestyle perspective. So I know that you mix and talk to a lot of entrepreneurs. Um, do you also believe that there's a lot happening in South Africa that doesn't get a lot of attention and that is actually building an economy, a new economy that we might not necessarily be aware of?

[00:17:10] **Jacques Burger**: 100%. I think that, uh, I'm fortunate to have a wide mix of friends, uh, many of them living here, um, but not being South Africans. I've got friends who live here from South America, uh, from the UK, from the US um, and it's, it's fascinating to hear their perspective and their positive view on South Africa. And I kind of go, why are you here? Why are you doing business here? Why do you live here? Why are you raising your families here? Um, and they talk about opportunity and they talk about, you know, all the positives that I think that, uh, We often take for granted. You know, people just talk about space. They talk about light, the light. They talk about the kindness of the people, um, the, the, the spirit of diversity and, and how exciting that is in terms of innovation. So I think there, I think there's a lot of that bubbling. I always say, if you look at the, if you look at the statistics, if you just take unemployment as a statistic, it can't be right. Because if that were true, then we would see a whole lot more homeless people on the streets. Uh, we'd see a whole lot more chaos, but you don't see that. So I think there's a massive informal economy, um, that happens, um, with people hustling every day to make money, to, to somehow get food on the table. Um, and I think beyond that, I think that there is a There's an exciting movement around people who are leaning heavily into the entrepreneurial space and I don't think it's always recorded or document or kind of

even accurately reflected. So, so I think that, yeah, I think sometimes the statistics look worse than, than how the reality presents themselves. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying we don't, we don't have challenges, but I think that there's, I do think there's a lot of hope.

[00:18:52] **Mike Abel:** You know, it's a, it's a frustrating thing for me because you know that I am a bit of a vigilante for trying to create a shared economy and an inclusive culture in our country and I look at the Myriad of assets that we have and I still think that there's time to do something miraculous. You know, if you look at where Dubai was or Singapore was, you know 20 years ago. They were nowhere and I really do believe that if the right people start making the right decisions now 20 years from now, because of all of our natural assets, you know, be it minerals, be it agri, be it, um, IT, be it financial services, mobile technology, there are very many brilliant people here, and a lot of the brilliant people are shaking up the world, and, uh, I think if they, if they understood the optimism, and if more of them, you know, decided, to become both invested and vested, I think they would, uh, be able to make a significant difference. So for those of them that are hopefully listening to this podcast, uh, I certainly think it's something to consider. I mean, I was at a dinner party the other night with, um, with some Swedes. And they were saying how much they love living in South Africa because they're not judged while they live here. And I heard you telling a story to someone the other day, um, when you bumped into a Swedish person that was traveling with us at a conference. Do you want to just share that story? Cause I think it's a lovely story for us to reflect on how lucky we are.

[00:20:22] **Jacques Burger:** Yeah. So, uh, we were at a conference in Singapore, I think it was three, four years ago. Gosh, COVID's created a bit of a timeline gap in my mind. Um, I think about four years ago and, uh, there was a strategy partner from our office in Stockholm and she told me that, um, she was very embarrassed, um, to tell her friends that she had flown to Singapore for this meeting, um, because of the, um, because of the, you know, her carbon footprint, uh, or, or the negative carbon footprint that she created with, uh, through flying to Singapore. To which I responded to, I said to, well, I was very embarrassed to tell my friends that I've only flown to Singapore this year. Um, let me not get the fossil fuel crowd on to me. Um, but, but I think it, it does talk to, to, to judging, you know, and I think that we are very, very lucky to live in a country where there is such diversity and where diversity is celebrated. And I think that that creates the freedom. Uh, for people to express, um, themselves to be who they are, to say what they'd like to, um, to, to have that freedom. And I think that's very, I think that's very, very special and, and that differences are celebrated versus being judged.

[00:21:34] **Mike Abel:** I agree with you. And, and, and when you talk about diversity and the magic that comes from it, I mean, I'm always immensely proud when you see, you know, a man like, uh, my close, uh, Laduma who comes from the Eastern Cape, you know, shaking up the fashion world with, uh, you know, really beautiful ethnic traditional designs that go back, you know, hundreds of years. You look at how DJ Black Coffee shaking up the world or Nelson McCarmel, uh, there is a huge amount of, uh, magic. and creativity that is coming out of our diversity and, and I think that this is a very rich place to live in terms of experience. You know, I often, uh,

talk about living in an experienced economy that people want to feel things and do things, not just want. They don't just want to watch things. Um, do you think this is changing, um, our audiences today? I mean, you also, like me, being my partner in the marketing communications world. What do you think of the experience economy? Is it here to stay? Is it going to grow? Is it going to recede? What are your thoughts around that?

[00:22:39] **Jacques Burger:** You know, I always say it's not what people say, but what people do. And I think that, uh, lived experiences is what, what, or experiences is what make things tangible. Um, you know, it, it creates the feeling, it, it, it manifests. It's not just messaging. Uh, so I think it, I think it is important and I think it's powerful and you can see why people are attracted to it. And I think particularly in the world of, of brand and, and, and marketing, uh, I think largely, uh, as a result of, of the digital era in which we live, um, people are able to match the message to the experience. Um, so I always used to say, you know, 20, 30 years ago, if you were a hotel, uh, you could have a beautiful brochure that you could print and tell people about.

You know, the amazing space that you've got, and that might lure you to go and visit that hotel. Now, I go on to TripAdvisor, and I read what 400 people have said, and how 20 of them have complained about the bad room service. And it doesn't matter, you know, how beautiful the image of the room is that's in the brochure. I won't go to the hotel. Um, and I think that starts to talk to how, you know, message is one thing, but experience is another. And I think those two are being brought together by the digital world where, where people can share those experiences and reflect on them in real time. And so as a brand and as a business, you can't hide, um, behind a message. Um, you've got to match it with what you do in terms of how you show up with your product, how you show up with your service and therefore what the, what the lived experiences. And I think that, uh, a key part today of building a brand is to understand how does that manifest as an experience?

What does it look like when people engage and interact with you live? And, and by the way, when I say brand, I include people in that because humans are also brands. So, you know, that's one thing to listen to me or my point of view, or have a conversation with me. But how do I behave? How do I show up? What's the, what's, what's the experience that you have when you work with me, uh, when you play with me, um, that ultimately becomes fundamental in terms of what people believe you are, who people believe you are. So I think that, uh, I think experiences are here to stay. In fact, I think that, uh, increasingly. People are calling, calling bullshit on, on brands and on individuals who say some things that they don't do or that doesn't show up in, in behaviour. And so I think that, um, yeah, that's, that's how people are, are, are gonna continue to, to engage with brands.

[00:25:07] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. Yeah, I think that's very interesting because of, uh, I guess it cuts to authenticity as well in terms of the brand experience and when a brand tries to fake it. And it actually reminds me of a story you told me about your daughter and the experience economy and the Tiffany brand. Um, so why don't you tell that story?



[00:25:27] **Jacques Burger:** I've got two daughters and they, I suppose, living in a world where, or in a household where brands and marketing are often discussed. Um, you know, they've now, they, they lean heavily into brands, which is not always easy on the pocket. But, uh, my, my eldest has this obsession with the, the, the kind of classical, uh, classic Tiffany Hart, uh, necklace. Um, and she's been desperate to, to get one and she's tried every angle and we went on a, on a holiday recently and I thought, okay, we're gonna treat her and it was a special birthday and, um, I'm gonna go buy her one. And we went into a Tiffany's store, um, and she was very excited and the, the lady showed her, uh, a gold one, um, She was, um, eye wateringly expensive. And I said, no, we just want the silver one, just the plain sterling silver one. And the sales assistant said to me, no, we don't sell those in store anymore. Um, we'd only sell the gold ones, but you can get the sterling one online. You can buy it online. So we left the store and my daughter was very disappointed and I said to her, but it's not a problem. I said, well, just, I'll order it online for you and we'll have it delivered to the hotel. Uh, when we, when we get to France, it'll be there. And she said to me, no, she doesn't want to anymore. Uh, because what she wanted was. For it to be wrapped in the store and put into a little blue box and, you know, into the, like that scene in Love Actually, I suppose where Rowan Atkinson spends about five minutes, you know, wrapping a gift very extravagantly in store. She wanted that experience and she wanted to leave with the bag with the Tiffany's logo on it. And, you know, I suppose take a selfie outside the store as, as the, as the kids of today do. But it did make me think that, you know, her sense of that experience was so important, what wrapped around that product, everything that the brand represents was something that she was wanting.

And just to have the product unceremoniously, you know, kind of sent via DHL, uh, wasn't, wasn't, you know, it wasn't the same thing. And so, and so it actually uh, I suppose detracted from her, her sense of the brand. And she said, no, not, not that interested. I want, I want to buy it, you know, I want to buy it live. I want that experience. Uh, and I think that it's now, you know, I believe that the LVMH group is, is, uh, on a journey to push Tiffany further upstream and trying to preimmunize it. So, you know, it might well be part of that strategy to go, you know, we're not going to sell sterling silver in our stores anymore. Um, and maybe it's worked for them. Who am I to argue with one of the richest men in the world that's made his money off luxury brands. Uh, but I, but right or wrong, I think it, it's, it's a, it's a good story, uh, when one reflects on the, on the importance of experiences.

[00:28:05] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. Look, I'm not sure that, uh, and I could be proven wrong, that, uh, Tiffany is a super luxury brand. Uh, I think it's a Masstige brand or the upper end of Masstige, really, which is a combination for those of you that aren't in, uh, advertising an old term for the combination of mass and prestige. But, uh. I think it's an accessible brand that people want to get into. So if they are going to sacrifice a volume strategy for a margin one, uh, that'll be interesting to see. But as, as you say, who am I to question the great Bernard Arnaud in his, uh, in his decision making, um, but what I am reminded about while you tell the story is two things, really. One is that when you are brand-centric as a company, it's very easy to lose the customer. But when you're customer-centric, you'll always know how to intersect your brand perfectly into their lives. And, uh, I think they lost focus of that with your daughter and she could also be a very valuable lifetime shopper. So when you get them in on

the cheap silver, not that cheap, actually, as it happens, you know, uh, sterling, nothing's cheap on the red anymore, but the sterling silver is your entry into the brand. And if you're a lifetime customer, then one day you might migrate to something much more. Much more valuable. So I think it's quite short-term thinking on their part potentially. Um, and then the other thing unless...

[00:29:30] **Jacques Burger:** Unless they're not interested in her as a customer, which I think is also fine. Um, because, you know, sometimes I, I think where, where I see brands go wrong is that they're trying to be everything to everyone. And I quite like brands that are focused and intentional in terms of their target and go, uh, I would say it's easy to talk about who you are for. It's harder to talk about who you're not for. I always say, you know, brands, we often do this tone exercise. You know, we go like, what's the brand tone and what's the brand personality. And you see people put down all these words that are all positives that everybody would want to be. We're smart, we're modern, we're likable, we're charming. You know, I go, yes, like every other brand. Put down some negatives as who we are as a brand. We're arrogant. We're exclusive. Yeah, we don't have a heart. Um, it's, uh, it's, it's quite an interesting exercise. So, you know, maybe she's not the audience. That's also okay. But, uh, but I agree with you around, uh, the power of being, of being customer-centric. Uh, I think that's so powerful in terms of, you know, if you don't understand your customer, how do you understand the message and how they're going to be receptive to it or not?

It's like often I hear people, you know, delivering public addresses and I go, so I can see you've spent a lot of time thinking about what you want to tell people and absolutely no time considering who your audience is and what they want to hear. Yeah. And you know, you sit there and you feel completely disconnected and actually feel, feel sorry for the speak. Who's prepped all that work and brands show up a little bit like that sometimes as well.

[00:30:54] **Mike Abel:** Well, I think that, uh, you know, me being a bit old fashioned when it comes to branding is I still like to subscribe to that view that the customer owns the brand or that the definition of a brand is how a customer feels about a product. Uh, and I think that's really important. And I think that you can try and stretch a brand and take a brand to places, but you know, it's like playing tennis with somebody. If you don't have someone else on the other end of the net, you can hit as many balls over as you want, but eventually you're going to run out of balls. You need somebody to, to hit them back. And you'll, you'll need a willing customer, I guess, on the other side that's prepared to hit the ball back. And I guess in our commercial world, that means to, to, to buy the product and to speak, to speak well of it.

[00:31:35] **Book Ad:** Mike Abel's book, *Willing and Able, Lessons from a Decade in Crisis*, captures the stories of clients and partners and the wins losses and learnings through his eyes in a career spanning three decades. Whether you're looking for courage or inspiration, to learn what it takes to disrupt industries, or discover how to transform your company meaningfully and truly empower your people, you'll find it between these pages. You can listen to the audiobook on Audible, download it on your Kindle, order it online, or find it at your favourite bookstore.

[00:32:09] **Mike Abel:** And while we're speaking about brands and experience and all of that, obviously the big buzzword since November last year, when, um, overnight we all heard about chat GPT is AR artificial intelligence.

[00:32:21] **Jacques Burger:** As I call it ai, ai tog!

[00:32:25] **Mike Abel:** Well, I think the funny thing about AI is that people don't really understand it. They think that it's chat GPT at the moment or something like that, or open AR.

[00:32:37] **Jacques Burger:** Have you used it at all? Um, and what do you see changing in the short to medium term as a result of AI being in our lives now? Particularly in the creative industry. Yeah. I did use it, Mike, because I, I had to, because I was asked to do a talk at Apple about ai, um, as a supposed expert in ai. So, I have to quickly go and see what it's all about. You got AI to write your speech. I got AI to write my speech. Um, you know, I think that, as you said, firstly, it's, it's not just about chat GPT. I think that there are, I mean, I saw a, a, a. Uh, uh, or a graph the other day, just highlighting all of the different brands and businesses that are operating in the AI world. I mean, there are hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of companies and, and tools that kind of live in, in the space. If you look at AI and I suppose the role that it plays and the benefit that it delivers and it's widespread and you know, I think the, uh, there's good reason for all the buzz around AI because the benefit is so immediate and so apparent, you know, you look at something like the Metaverse. Uh, I don't know, there's all the, all the rage about a year ago, 18 months ago. It seems to have died down a little bit, because I think people are still trying to figure out what to do with it, what the application is, what the upside would be. It's like this interesting toy, uh, that I'm playing with. I'm not quite sure where it's going to go. Uh, AI is quite different. I think the benefit's been, been pretty apparent and, and, and, and quite immediate. I think that, What we see is, uh, a huge amount of automation of job functions that happen, that can happen through AI, uh, where a lot of slog work can be picked up, um, where, you know, you look at, sure, I look at the legal business, for instance, um, a lot of admin work that happens in legal practices that you can see how AI can pick that up very, very quickly.

Uh, someone got, uh, AI to, to draw up a tenant, a contract for them the other day. It's a very, very good contract. I might tell you probably better than what most lawyers would be able to draft themselves. Um, so I think it, it delivers a massive benefit in terms of automation. Um, and what we see in the, in the comms industry, for instance, is, you know, I can use AI to take one product feature And spin five different expressions of that instantly in terms of messaging statements, um, that I can then go and auto optimize and see which one of those work best in terms of what audiences connect with. So I think in terms of automation, I think there's massive benefit, um, I think in terms of assistance. Uh, I think it's very, very helpful. So, you know, you talk about getting AI to do your speech for you. I wouldn't necessarily get AI to do my speech for me, but I think if you had to do research, you know, what ordinarily would take you could take you days to kind of wade through a whole lot of white papers and encyclopaedias and Google this and Google that you go on to AI and you go, you know, I need to know what the five key themes are to talk about

today, um, when someone asked me a question about AI and it kind of pops it up. So it kind of gets you off to a good start. And I think a lot of that initial, uh, brainstorming that we see in the creative world, uh, world, where it's kind of, where you're just looking for something to hold onto, kind of, you know, AI gives you those, those little, uh, footholds on the, on the mountain that you've gotta climb quite quickly.

Um, so you can start to scale and you can elevate and you can get into the space of really being creative and innovative very, very quickly. So I think it's exciting. I think it's here to stay. I think that, uh, people have gotta be open to, to understand it. Uh, use it to their benefit. I think as, as, as Scott Galloway said, uh, at Cannes recently, he said, uh, everybody's afraid of AI and people are saying, is AI going to take my job? No, AI won't take your job, but somebody who understands AI is going to take your job. Um, and I think that I thought that was a very, very good. Perspective on, on where I is, but we are using it actively on a daily basis. If I look at the time that it's taken, for instance, historically for teams to do something like a storyboard for a TV ad, you know, frame by frame or a reference board where, um, you're standing in front of a client and you, you're saying, what I want to show you is, you know, we're going to open up on a lovely lady, you know, walking by the seaside in a red dress, but the only reference I could find is of a teenage girl in a short by a lake. So, you know. Imagine it looks a bit more like the lady in the red dress by the beach. Well, now I can generate that in AI as an image in seconds, in seconds. Um, so the accuracy of the reference, the speed with which you can generate it just becomes exponential. Um, can it go into the space where it can express emotion, where it can be creative? Uh, I'm not sure that we there yet.

[00:37:15] **Mike Abel:** I think it can.

[00:37:16] **Jacques Burger:** Maybe.

[00:37:17] **Mike Abel:** I mean, I remember. Putting ChatGPT through its paces. Once, uh, I arrived at a hotel and I saw a empty table, uh, with two chairs in front of a fireplace and I put it into chat GPT And I said, there's an empty table with two chairs in front of a fireplace and I wrote a couple of things write me a story. Yes, and it printed out this deeply emotive story about Unrequited love and what had happened. I looked at this. Obviously, it's you know, grab that stuff from a whole lot of other areas But when you read it cold, it is, it's an emotive story. And the other day, um, a friend,

[00:37:55] **Jacques Burger:** I think it can mirror emotion.

[00:37:58] **Mike Abel:** It might be able to, it might, but I think it still does evoke emotion in whoever is encountering it. So let me give you a live example. Uh, a friend of mine, who's a senior executive at a large company, uh, just retired and he's. Um, a very, uh, unemotional human being and he sent me his farewell letter to the staff and I wrote to him afterwards. I mean, I was quite choked up. It was an extremely beautiful letter and I wrote to him and I said, that's the most beautiful farewell letter I think I've ever written. And he sent me back AI with a wink.

[00:38:39] **Jacques Burger:** Perhaps, you know, I think the, I think the interesting thing is, I suppose that, you know, I think we still have a role in terms of how you edit. So how you assess quality, how you look at that emotion that's been generated and go, is that authentic? Is it right? Is that me? Because I can get AI to generate it. It's a different thing on whether it reflects authentically on who I am as well. As a person or the brand that you, that you, possibly, but I also think the other interesting thing is, you know, I can only take from what exists. So I think there is an opportunity. And I think with that, there is a risk that AI leans into convention because of what it, what it scrapes. Um, and so. I think the risk for me with AI is that you can end up generating a whole lot of ideas that are all kind of the same and that are all playing into the category. And, and, you know, particularly when you start to look at the extent to which AI is applied in the world of kind of automated messaging and automated automation or supporting the creative process, I think we've got to be careful that we don't end up in a world where, because we can generate mediocre thinking very, very quickly that that becomes acceptable. Um, because I think that what, what I will do is it'll eradicate bad, bad work, bad layouts, bad thinking, bad ideas quite quickly. It'll generate very average work frighteningly quickly.

Um, can I do brilliant work? I don't know. Um, I think it can support it. I think it can springboard it, but I think we still have a job to do there because I think that, as I said, you know, you've got a, you've still got to edit it. You've sort of still look at whether it's authentic. And I think most importantly, um, particularly as creative people and as Innovators and as entrepreneurs, you've got a job to, to move into the open space out of the contested, um, to not lean into convention and, and I think AI at the moment is still very much playing into convention.

[00:40:33] **Mike Abel:** I agree. I mean, I certainly think that if you had to say to me, has anything that I've encountered so far being unexpected? Now I wouldn't say it has. I think because of the nature of the tool, it's going to give you what you ask for in an expected, fresh, uh, when I say fresh, maybe exceptionally, not idea-wise way, but, uh,

[00:40:54] **Jacques Burger:** I also think there's a, there's an interesting challenge for, for people in our industry, Mike, and that's how you build your personal brand in the context of AI. Because you look at art, for instance, you look at the art that's being generated by AI at the moment. Um, but that art's not fetching the same price as a Andy Warhol is, um, you know, or, or as a Irma Stern would, um, because Andy Warhol is Andy Warhol is not AI. Um, and I think it talks to the power of, of, of a brand. Um, so I think that whether, whether personal or whether. Uh, in business, I think what AI is actually doing is actually pushing us into a space where we need to be more focused on how we build brands that are unique and that stand out and that have personality and have texture around it. And because I think that's how you, how you create differentiation versus falling into a trap where, where as a brand, you start to look a bit like the category as AI does or can do for you.

[00:41:53] **Mike Abel:** And I think that that is fun if you are wanting to play in a category, but if you are wanting to create open space, as you say, and create

reappraisal and a fresh way of looking at something, it's going to be much more of a challenge.

[00:42:07] **Jacques Burger:** Sometimes convention's fine, as I always say. Just call it business class. Well, what's, British Airways is calling it club world. What does that mean? I don't know where I am. Sometimes, sometimes just calling it business class makes more sense. Convention's not always a bad idea.

[00:42:20] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. Yeah, look, I mean, I remember a tweet of yours funny enough in 2012. I think you probably left Twitter the following day, but I remember when you tweeted that, uh, you know, the basics, brilliant basics like saying, please, thank you. Returning phone calls, paying on time, keeping promises, all just great ways to differentiate businesses and doing the basics brilliantly. Shock. You're a curious man. Uh, I know that about you. What are you most curious about at the moment?

[00:42:49] **Jacques Burger:** I wasn't expecting that question. Um, what I'm most curious about at the moment is to see what's going to happen with the. The next generation and how they're going to show up. Uh, and I'm talking about my kids who are now kind of in their early teens, because I'm fascinated by, uh, by millennials and I can't even call them millennials anymore because I need to be reminded, I need to remind people that millennials are now in their thirties and they have kids and families. So probably like people in their, in their kind of mid-twenties, I suppose a lot of the young people that you see, uh, in the workforce today, um, and how they behave, how they think, uh. And I wonder to which, and I'm really curious, to which extent my kids will be different. Um, because I think they will be different.

Um, and, but I, I definitely think that the, the twenty-something-year-olds of, are very different, certainly to the way I am in terms of thinking, in terms of behaviour, in terms of values, in terms of culture. Uh, not being critical of them. Uh, I think there's lots that we can learn from the, from the younger generation. But I also think they have flaws. Um, someone told me the other day that, uh, the current twenty something generation is the, is the first generation that, uh, this planet has seen that has gone back, uh, from, backwards from an economic perspective that, that is poorer. Um, than the previous generation for the first time ever.

And I think that, um, I think that's quite scary if you think about it, maybe not a bad thing, maybe they've got better work life balance, but, um, yeah, I'm curious to see what my, my, what my kids are going to get up to, um, how they will, how they will change the world. You know, I think that it's, uh, there, there are a lot of, a lot of challenges, uh, coming, coming our way, coming their way. Um, yeah, curious.

[00:44:39] **Mike Abel:** It's very interesting, obviously, you know, with me having. My older son is turning 23, son of 20, another one of 15, and I see how so much of their interpersonal interaction today is via technology, via gaming, via WhatsApp messaging, uh, multitasking at the same time versus just sitting down, you know, on the couch like we used to do back in the day and have a chat, you know, uh, so I do

think that, and I don't know if that's wrong, per se. I think it's new. I think it's fresh. I think it's different, uh, as long as we don't, um, lose, um, the human connection, I guess, in, uh, in connecting with each other.

[00:45:25] **Jacques Burger:** I think it's, you know, Mike, too, that when I look at my kids, there's, I suppose, what does, uh, not so much curious, but what worries me sometimes is that there's such a mindset around now and instant, and you know, you talk about engage, engaging on electronics, you know, the sense of, I can sit back, press a button and I'm entertained instantly. I don't have to, I don't have to put much effort into it. Uh, I can have everything now. Um, I can go on to take a lot, order it and gets delivered this afternoon. It's phenomenal. I love it. I love that. I love that world, but I do wonder. To which extent the focus on the now, the short-termism, the instant, um, is going to come back to bite us. Uh, particularly in the world of brands and, and, and marketing. Uh, where everything is about what's the sale I'm generating today. Uh, what are the figures look like for this quarter? And actually I'm only going to be in this job for the next 24 months because then I'm moving on to the next. Um, so, so the whole measure of success, um, becomes all about the now and nobody's looking to the future and go, what am I building long-term as a brand?

How am I building my career? Uh, you know, how am I investing behind, uh, relationships? And I think that, I think that's something that, that. It's going to prove a significant challenge, uh, on a personal and a business level, I think for, for many of us as we move forward.

[00:46:46] **Mike Abel:** I agree with you. And I think that a lot of people don't think about when you measure the success of something in its lifetime. So, for example, if you had worked for Jeff Bezos at, Amazon for the first three or four years you would have left a failed business that was losing money and if you'd come back 10 or something years later you would have met the richest man in the world or certainly one of the top three. You know, if you at the same time you'd been in the mobile industry you would have wanted to work for a BlackBerry or a Nokia, you know, and where are those brands today?

So I think that there is um, a bit of a view on, uh, keeping an open mind in terms of how things change and how things evolve and, and perhaps not judging anything in the moment as that being the far not point, but maybe being more curious, back to that word, about where those things, uh, can go. Jacques, my late mom used to always say, contacts are contracts. And I just wanted to know from you, cause you know, you came into this, uh, advertising world, as I understand it, cold without any contacts really in advertising and you've had and continue to have a remarkable career. Which personal or professional connections do you think you've had that have helped you along with your career? And you don't need to name people per se, but maybe situations or examples, because I think there are probably a lot of people listening today that want to get ahead and say, But I don't know somebody important, whatever, but I don't know if when Priti Yendi sang recently at the coronation of King Charles, if she knew anybody, you know, and there you've got this most famous, you know, South African opera singer singing there. Do you want to

reflect a little bit on contacts, connections, and what do you think would be useful for people to know?

[00:48:34] **Jacques Burger:** I think we all know people, you know, I'm, I mean, I just met four people this afternoon, uh, that I didn't know, that I didn't know before. And I think that, uh, what people often do is they look at the person sitting next to them and they go. You know, are you going to unlock the next big opportunity for me? No, I don't think so, because you're not influential. You're not a captain of industry, but you are the person sitting next to me right now. And I have an opportunity to build a relationship, to create impact, uh, to share, uh, A thought to deliver value, who knows who, you know, and who knows who that person knows.

Um, and, uh, you know, and the kind of circle spreads from there. I always say you, you never know. I'm, I'm constantly surprised at how the world connects. You know, they, they say, you know, we always like six or seven people removed from knowing, uh, you know, uh, or having a friend, degrees of separation. That's the thing. Thank you. Um, And, and so I suppose that's been my orientation is not in terms of connections and, and building those relationships, not to sit and wait for the, uh, the iconic person to come into, into the room and to go, you know, there's Sir Richard Branson, here's my opportunity. You know? Yeah. But just look at the people that you engage with and touch on a daily basis. Because I think if you, uh, if you shine there and if you showcase your values and your belief and through your behavior and what you do, you deliver quality and you deliver value. I think it creates ripples. I think that's how people, how people reference you and how people talk about you. And, you know, I don't, you're sitting here and I don't know, you know, I know some of the people that you know, you know, that's how, that's, that's how I've connected, you know, not by starting off and saying, you know, how do I get to meet that CEO? Um...

[00:50:19] **Mike Abel:** but keeping an open mind and joining the dots.

[00:50:21] **Jacques Burger:** Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. You never know where. Where life is, is going to take you. And I suppose to be, to be open to those opportunities. I always say, you know, you're sitting on a plane. Who are you sitting next to? How many people take the time to strike up a conversation and go, where do you work? Um, you know, what do you do for a living? Where are you from? Uh, you know, there's an opportunity to make a connection. I think one's, one's going to be quite, uh, Jane Fonda talks about friendships. How funny is that reference? Oh, because it came to mind, but she talks about friendships and she says. You know what? I decided I wanted to be friends with that person. She said, I believe that friendships are intentional. You have to work at it. It doesn't happen by accident or by chance. And I think connections are intentional. And every day presents an opportunity to make a connection. But it's whether you decide to be intentional about it, to strike up that conversation. And I think a lot of it is, you know, how you build, how you build respect through, through what you do and, and, and, you know, what you deliver. So I said, like, that's You know, it's still, word of mouth is still very powerful in building connections.



[00:51:25] **Mike Abel:** And credibility, I guess, you know, can never underestimate the value of credibility, um, and not being, um swayable, I think, on the important stuff, because surest way, I guess, to, to lose trust. I mean, I think the most enduring thing about any relationship is, or any new connection, is when other people can vouch for you. 100%. Um, which I think is based on being solid, I guess. Consistent. And steadfast. Not immovable, uh, but steadfast in your views. Two more questions before I let you go, uh, and talking about not being immovable and being steadfast. What important thing have you changed your mind about in your life?

[00:52:09] **Jacques Burger:** Sho

[00:52:11] **Mike Abel:** I'm not letting you get away.

[00:52:12] **Jacques Burger:** I know. I know. I know, I always said to my wife that, you know, I want my kids to be clever because I can't imagine anything worse than having a child that's not clever. Um, but I've, I've changed my mind, uh, about that because I think, um, it's far more important to be a good human being, um, and to be kind. Um, and I think the, you know, if you, if you can have that, um, you know, you'll, you'll have a, you'll have a full life and you'll have lots of people around you. And I think that, you know, age maybe, maybe brings this about, but I've changed my mind around things.

[00:52:51] **Jacques Burger:** Um, I don't need as many things as I thought, um, I did at one point in time, um, I was watching the Beckham. Documentary the other day, and I laughed at how he got his weekly salary at Man U and he would spend the entire weekly salary that weekend and then be broke for three days until the next week's salary came in. I mean, they were quite big salaries. I think he bought a M3 with one salary, um, but, um, and, and, and they cut back to him and he says, you know, what can I say? I like nice things. Um, and I do like nice things. I still like nice things, but, uh, but I've realized that you can, you don't need that. Um, and, uh, experiences and people and relationships are far more fulfilling than, than things, but maybe that comes with age. And, and, and the power of being able to choose, I always say, if you can say, I can buy it, but I choose not to, that's very liberating. If you can't buy it because you can't buy it, well, that's, that's a bit depressing.

[00:53:47] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, uh, that, that, that is true. You know, um, yeah, I remember one saying to my late dad, you know, dad, money isn't everything. And he said to me. Yes. But you need to be rich enough in order to say that. As someone, where were your next meals coming from?

[00:54:01] **Jacques Burger:** Exactly. As someone, as someone once, as someone once said, I've been poor and unhappy and rich and unhappy, and I'd rather be rich and unhappy.

[00:54:10] **Mike Abel:** Jacques talking about problems that sounds like somebody's problem. What is the best problem you've ever had as your last question before I send you on your way?

[00:54:21] **Jacques Burger:** The best problem I've ever had? I think that the best problem I ever had was probably at the time when I had to make a decision, uh, as to whether I wanted to leave South Africa and leave Ogilvy, uh, where I was the MD at the time, uh, and go and work in another market and I was exploring a number of different opportunities. There was an opportunity in the UK, there was an opportunity in Asia and, and then in Australia. I mean, I always think those are nice problems to have, um, because they present different opportunities, different challenges. Yeah. Um. But I think that, uh, from a, certainly from a, a, a career perspective, Australia presented a significant challenge in, in, in many ways for me in terms of, uh, career where I had to go into a market where I knew nobody. I didn't have the network, uh, that I had in South Africa. I didn't have, I didn't have the friends. Um, and, you know, through those challenges, I, I grew a lot. Uh, from a, from a career perspective. So I look at, I look at a lot of those problems that I encountered, um, in that market. And I think that I've, I've learned a lot from it and I've, I've managed to come back to South Africa orientating very differently in terms of, um, how I approach marketing and, and branding. So I think that that's, that's been a, a, a really exciting problem for me to, to have faced and, and to have learned from, um, call them problem or challenges. I actually think parenthood has been my other massive challenge because my kids, sure, they test me, uh, and I'm a bit of a control freak. So, you know, trying to, and I'm probably overprotective. So, um, I have found that, uh, and I'm, I'm a bit of a selfish person. I think I have to like lean into some of my weaknesses. And I think what kids do is they completely kick that out of you. It's not an available option. Um, they also keep you humble. Um, and, and, but they bring balance, um, and they, you know, they become proof that life is about more than, and not everything is as serious or as, as hectic or as bad as you might think it is. Um, and they, they bring perspective. So I, I find parenting very challenging. Uh, I think that lots of people are, are natural born parents, as I call them. Uh, they just seem to do it with ease. I don't. Uh, I find it challenging every day, but I like it. You know, I think it's, uh, It's made me more kind. It's made me more balanced. It's made me maybe less hectic. Uh, and I think it's made me a better, a better human being. So, uh, yeah, it's a, it's a privilege to, to be a parent, challenging as it is.

[00:56:54] **Mike Abel:** That's, uh, a very, very important message to close on. And, uh, I guess there is no greater leveller in life than one's kids or as one's spouse. I've always said, you know, the world thought that Albert Einstein was a genius and probably to his wife, he was the idiot that left his undies on the bedroom floor. So our kids keep us, keep us real. Jacques, it's been an absolute pleasure and privilege to have you in the studio today and to chat.

[00:57:22] **Jacques Burger:** Thank you, Mike.

[00:57:30] **Mike Abel:** I believe that problems aren't inherently a bad thing. By leaning into them, you can unlock a bright future by running away from them. You won't accomplish anything at all. I've always said problems are like bullies. When you run away from them, they chase you. But when you turn on them, something quite different happens. Thanks so much for listening today. If you've enjoyed this podcast, well, why not leave us a five star review? Tune in to Willing and Able next time for more conversations that challenge perspectives.

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