

Meet the SME Heroes: No use crying over spilt milk - how one local business was able to reach new markets during lockdown

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Earlier this year, Tractor Outdoor - one of South Africa's largest out of home (OOH) and digital out of home (DOOH) media owners - launched its SME advertising fund, with the intention of supporting businesses that were hardest hit by the pandemic.

Through the fund, Tractor aimed to provide qualifying small and medium-size enterprises with free advertising via its extensive media networks, in an effort to help them survive the country's challenging lockdown period.

*This weekly video series shares the stories of Tractor Outdoor's **SME Heroes**, and how they managed to endure the most devastating pandemic in modern history.*

OkJa, one of the beneficiaries of Tractor Outdoor's fund, is a plant-based food and beverage business that was founded in 2019 by Rui Esteves and David Chait.

With its most popular product being oat milk, co-founder Chait explains that OkJa was borne out of a desire to provide a more sustainable alternative to dairy, as well as the other dairy alternatives currently on offer. "We are aiming to transform the landscape through offering an environmentally-responsible, delicious, plant-based option, which is great for adding to your cereal, foaming up and pouring into your coffee or enjoying on its own.

"We pride ourselves on the integrity of our product composition. With no unrecognisable or unpronounceable ingredients, OkJa offers a creamier, richer mouthfeel and a denser foam for your latte."

When the pandemic first hit South African shores earlier this year, OkJa's sales came to an immediate and devastating halt. "Cafes and restaurants are our primary customers. With the announcement of lockdown, the hospitality industry was required to stop trading, and one of our sales channels - which is also the largest contributor to our monthly revenue - was effectively blocked.

“With the phased reopening of the economy, many companies do not yet require that employees return to the office; meaning that even when coffee shops were able to reopen, there was much less foot traffic than before.”

As a company that is responsible for the employment of around 25 people, OkJa was forced to re-envision its business model. “We needed to shift our brand to become more consumer-facing, so that people would readily recognise us, understand our value proposition, and be driven to purchase our goods from grocery stores and other retail outlets.”

It was during this challenging time that Chait first came across Tractor Outdoor’s SME advertising fund on LinkedIn, and he applied straight away.

Explains Remi du Preez, commercial director at Tractor Outdoor: “SMEs are the backbone of our economy, and we felt that it was our responsibility to assist companies that were struggling to manage their cash flow at a time when trade was restricted.”

OkJa was selected as one of the fund’s deserving beneficiaries, receiving R100,000’s worth of free advertising in the form of digital billboards located at high-traffic sites across the country.

Says Chait: “As a relatively young company, this exposure helped us to build brand awareness through tapping into a market that we otherwise would not have been able to reach during lockdown.

“We received fantastic feedback from consumers, many of whom sent us photos of our adverts on the billboards, and I believe that this exposure has contributed to us becoming a household name.”

With the recent announcement of Level 1, Chait says that the situation is looking far more promising. “As an entrepreneur, navigating new and unexpected obstacles is par for the course, and we are pleased to have been in a position to work through many of these challenges.

“We understand the potential of our business and the importance of investing in people, and we will continue to look towards the future,” he says.

Are you an SME that is interested in exploring opportunities within OOH and DOOH? Get in touch with Tractor Outdoor at info@tractoroutdoor.com

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