

Nedbank IMC speaker Pepe Marais



By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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Taking a break from his role as MC this year, Pepe Marais, founding partner and group CCO of Joe Public United is going to be speaking at this year's Nedbank IMC on the topic of 'Basic Instinct. Have we forgotten our marketing instinct?'



Pepe Marais

Joe Public United is a 100% locally-owned, purpose-driven brand and communications group, currently ranked as the number one creative agency on the African continent.

Marais has been the recipient of numerous local and international industry awards, was ranked as the number one creative leader by the industry's Loerie Awards in 2018, and voted by marketers as the 'Most Admired Industry Professional' in

South Africa. He also recently launched his second book, *Growing Greatness: 20 Habits That Break Habits*.

Here, we find out more about what's really behind his mask, but we'll have to wait and see if he'll be wearing a short white dress on the day.

■ ***Pepe, comment on your involvement in this year's Nedbank IMC?***

For this year's show, I am taking a break from my role as MC, and rather grabbing the opportunity to deliver one of the TedEx formatted talks.

■ ***What are you planning to speak about, why and what are some key talking points you plan to discuss?***

In line with the theme, my chosen movie is *Basic Instinct*, and I will be posing the question of whether we have lost our instinct as marketers and advertisers. Whether I will be wearing a short white dress is something I am still debating inside my head.

■ ***What are you looking forward to with regard to the event?***

There is no real platform of marketing mettle in our industry, and I have always left the Nedbank IMC conference over the years with that one "When Harry Met Sally" insight that has made an impact on my own growth journey. I am looking for another one of these nuggets this year.

■ ***Tell us about your role as founding partner and group CCO at Joe Public United?***

My passion remains our creative product. To me, it is the key competitive advantage of any great agency and the only way to play our part in the growth of our clients' businesses. Hence you will find me in the trenches with Xolisa Dyeshana and our creative teams, at any given moment in time, as that is where I love to operate from. The creative process is after all the heartbeat of any agency that strives to be great. That said, I am equally obsessed with the idea of 'purpose' for business, and am entrusted with driving the purpose and the vision of our business.

■ ***When did you start the agency and tell us a bit about your journey to date?***

Launched in March 1998 in Cape Town, by myself, Gareth Leck and Noel Cottrell. Noel, unfortunately, didn't have the stamina for the enriching hardship of the entrepreneurial journey and we parted ways in 2001, shortly after selling our business to FCB / IPG. After losing half our business in 2006, we saw the opportunity to buy Joe back, and on 26 February 2009, amidst the worst recession prior to the one we are now experiencing, we bought our "child" back. We introduced purpose into our brand in 2010 and over the next decade systematically built our business on purpose, to where we find ourselves today as the largest majority black-owned proudly SA agency in our industry. But no matter our achievements, we maintain in the words of Jim Collins, that good is the enemy of great, and that if our purpose is growth, that every day would remain day one of our journey.

■ ***Tell us more about your experience and any career highlights to date.***

Career highlights, aligned to my personal life highlights, will have to be the birth of our bricks and mortar child in 1998 and Joe's rebirth in 2009 upon uncovering our greater business purpose. Other key highlights include every piece of profound work that resonated with the market and as a result, drove the brands which we serve, including our Loerie Grand Prix winning piece for Nedbank Secrets. If I am totally truthful, we only are as good as our last ad, so the two that I am currently involved with – I have just stepped out of the client pre-production meeting of the one and about to step into the online of the other – are both bound to be career highlights in the short term.

■ ***How has the pandemic and subsequent national lockdowns affected the agency and your work?***

We are extremely blessed in the context of how Covid-19 has affected so many businesses in our country. Our people

have seamlessly adapted to the new ways of working and we have managed to maintain a high level of output across all services of the business. I can only attribute this to the resilient nature of our people, and the clarity of focus that a purpose for business brings.

■ ***What's really behind your mask - literally and figuratively speaking?***

Behind my mask is a human being who is striving to be the best version that I can be in this lifetime, who makes mistakes daily, and who is willing to make up for these mistakes no matter what. I am also very clear on the fact that if business is not fun, then why be in business in the first place. Over the years I have learned that excellence is the key ingredient to fun, therefore I have immense depth of support for people who strive for excellence, and an equal level of intolerance to the things that make our experience lesser than what it should be. Average is a disease within our nation that has far more devastating effects than Covid-19 would ever have, hence excellence is my anti-serum to average.

■ ***Growing up, what did you want to be?***

I wanted to be rich, and a friend of mine who lived in a big house on top of a big hill had a father with a big job at an engineering firm. Hence civil engineering was my head dream. Yet, as life would have it, art came and found me, and I fell head over heels in love with art with all my heart.

■ ***What did you study, where did you expect your career to take you and how does this measure up to your current reality?***

I studied at The Ruth Prowse School of Art in Woodstock, Cape Town, where life drawing (drawing nude people) was the foundation of design. Once I discovered my passion, I knew that I will have my own ad agency before the age of 30 and that it would become the best in the business. It may have taken a bit longer, but we are starting to get there. However, the dream has now expanded beyond the borders of our country.

■ ***Joe Public United is currently ranked as the number one creative agency on the African continent and you, yourself have won numerous local and international industry awards. You were ranked as the number one creative leader by the industry's Loerie Awards in 2018, and voted by marketers as the 'Most Admired Industry Professional' in South Africa. What is your 'secret' to success?***

Purpose. Without purpose, there can be now a profound vision in the service of others. Then people. Without people, I am nothing. And lastly, knowing that awards, just like money, is a natural by-product of bringing value to the world. Increasing my personal value and the value of Joe to our people and our clients daily is what gets me up in the morning with excitement, and makes Mondays feel like Fridays.

■ ***You believe that accolades are merely the building blocks toward a vision of creating an organisation that inspires greatness, and that all of Joe Public's past and future successes will be because of its people. Please elaborate.***

Ideas are a product of a process way beyond one or two individuals. From the brand to the marketer, to the brief by account management, to the strategy, to the insights, to the environment, the media approach, the creative team, the traffic managers, the producers, the suppliers and their suppliers, each idea is inspired, then birthed and then grown by thousands of hands, minds and interactions. Yes, I am very fortunate to be credited with these ideas as the creative leader of our group. But ultimately, all these accolades are simply a product of an incredible amount of energy by a collective of people, without whom I won't be anything. People are the only appreciating assets within any business. Without people, we won't have a business. It really is as simple as that. What I can take credit for, though, in order to not sound too humble, is an absolute obsession for their growth.

■ ***And tell us about your new book, Growing Greatness: 20 Habits That Break Habits.***

It is my second book, inspired by my personal purpose. It talks about the power of habits and how we have two kinds of habits: Those that limit us and those that liberate us. In the book, I propose exchanging limiting habits with liberating habits towards living the best life that you can within the time available to you on this planet.

▣ ***What do you love most about the creative industry?***

I love that we have completely lost our way. I love that 99% of all advertising is wallpaper. Because just like any solution, it starts with a problem. So I love that there's this opportunity to once again make creativity the heartbeat of our industry, and in doing so, put our industry on the global map. And yes, we have won many international awards for radio commercials that ran once in the wee hours of the morning to win an award, which may give us a false sense of achievement. But what is the value in that? So I love that there is a mountain to climb. I love the opportunity of making things good, then better, then great. Almost sounds like that incredible line from the days when advertising professionals had a real voice at the boardroom table: Good, better, butter.

▣ ***What's your typical workday routine?***

Rise at 4 am. Meditate for 10 minutes. Study until 6:15. Gym. Plan my day. Start working at 8 am. Focus on spending more time being an adman than on admin, finish at between 6 pm and 7 pm, supper time around the kitchen table, storytime, bedtime at 8:30 pm sharp. Repeat. Because nothing creates a lack of anxiety more than routine.

▣ ***When you're not busy working, what do you do? How do you socialise these days?***

We have a beautiful home on the Vaal, Injabulo, where we entertain our family and friends on the weekends when I am not bound by my studies. We love all forms of water sports, and as I am typing this answer, I am still recovering from a day of fun in the sun.

▣ ***What are you reading/listening to/watching at the moment?***

I am busy with my 11th subject towards my MBA, so the only reading I have been doing is academically based. I am however reading the Charlie Bone series to my teenager, and loving it.

▣ ***What's the first thing you plan to do when things go back to normal?***

Burn my mask.

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