



IN CONVO WITH *Debbie O'Connor*

1. Where were you born and where did you spend your childhood?

I was born in a small South African bush town on the boarder of the world famous Kruger National Park, called White River. I spent most of my childhood there before being shipped off to boarding school at the age of 13. Even though I've hardly lived there since, I still think of White River as home.

2. Where did your professional dream begin?

Growing up in Apartheid South Africa where we had sanctions imposed on us, meant I wasn't exposed to a lot of brands. However, without any of these companies ever advertising their products, or having their products on our shelves, I somehow still knew about brands such as Nike, Pepsi and McDonalds. This fascinated me. As a naturally artistic child, I knew that my career had to involve creativity in some form or another. So after graduating with a degree in graphic design I set out to conquer the world and change the direction of businesses one brand at a time.

3. Tell me a little about your business and where your passion comes from?

I've always been creative. I loved drawing and painting as a child, collecting packaging from products and later on, choosing my wine based on what the label looked like! My father used to introduce me as his 'eldest, unmarried, arty-farty daughter!' While

hugely condescending, I knew that I had to prove to him that creative people could be as successful, (if not better) than what he deemed a decent profession (doctor, lawyer or accountant). It wasn't until I started working in the design industry that I realised I was entrepreneurial as well and had a knack for being able to tap into the personality of a brand.

4. What have you learnt about yourself during your career?

I've learnt so much. As a designer you'd think that I would be very detailed, but I'm more of a blue-sky thinker. Detail irritates me, so I've learnt to surround myself with detail people. I have a talent for branding that enables me to build what others find incredibly hard. I've learnt that I'm more resilient than I ever gave myself credit for and that an 'arty-farty' person can be successful and significant.

5. What 3 key gems of advice would you share?

1. Always look for the win/win in each situation as everyone will then be happy
2. You have one mouth and two ears, use them accordingly
3. Look after your team, they will help grow your business far more than any client will

6. What are some of the mistakes you made and learnings from them?

Oh god! Where do I start? I have so many. I think that holding onto a staff member for



too long was one of my biggest mistakes. It caused so many sleepless nights and started to poison the rest of the team. It was stressful and draining and the relief when she left was proof that I should have followed my gut and got rid of her long before I did. I think it was Alicia Beachley who said, “hire slowly and fire fast”. Words of gold!

7. What keeps you going?

When I was 17 I was in a freak train accident where a bunk bed full of people landed on top of me. My body was completely crushed and I broke my back, three ribs and fractured my femur. When I was picked up out of the mass of falling bodies, it was discovered that I was paralysed from the waist down. This news was devastating and I recall lying there thinking of all the things that I wouldn't be able to do. I can't walk. I can't dance. I can't swim...

My mind was filled with the word 'can't'. Deep in the darkness and silence of the night, I got the most excruciating pain in my legs. I call it the 'exquisite pain' as even though it felt as though I was being stabbed by hundreds of knives, the realisation that feeling was coming back lifted my spirits. Within hours, my 'can't' turned into 'can'. Reminding myself of that night, and the many months of rehabilitation afterwards is what keeps me going. That and my kids, husband, team, clients...

8. How important is it for women to have mentors/their own circle of excellence to guide them?

Women are more powerful than we give ourselves credit for. We can make things

better with a simple kiss, solve problems with our ears and lift those around us higher with our steady shoulders. We can also crush spirits, destroy reputations and question ourselves. Tall Poppy Syndrome is a real thing. With so many haters out there, having a tribe of strong, independent, encouraging women around you is key to success. Knowing that regardless of what happens or what people say, you have this unbreakable circle of women who have your back, know your worth and rejoice when you achieve.

9. What's next in the journey of BRAND YOU?

Life is exciting and there is always something to plan, do and achieve. I recently launched my personal brand DebbieO with a focus on consulting, training and speaking. It's a little nerve wracking as it means that I have to step into the spotlight. I'm not sure if it's what I want to do as creating brands (with personality) is my first love and I'm not sure I can live my days without it. Watch this space, it may just be another learning to add to my list...

10. Your favourite things:

- Destination: Just one? South Africa. Other than it being home, it really is a melting pot of culture, colour and adventure.
- Drink: Skim latte – my day isn't complete without one
- App: Instagram – love it!

11. If you were a hashtag what would it be? #brandmagic