

# A day in the lockdown life of The Jupiter Drawing Room's managing and strategy director Michelle Beh

By  Juanita Pienaar

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Now that I don't need to do school runs and drive to work, I have more time in the morning to do some yoga first before opening my laptop to plan my day. We have a daily team catch-up at 9am to make sure we stay connected and list priorities for the day and the week. It's a good way for managers to still feel like they're in control, yet not disturb the individuals constantly through the day. I try to log off between 5pm to 6pm to maintain some routine and avoid having work take over my day. - Managing and strategy director of The Jupiter Room, Michelle Beh's account of work-life in the time of Covid-19.



The Jupiter Drawing Room's managing and strategy director Michelle Beh.

■ ***What was your initial response to the crisis/lockdown and has your experience of it been different to what you expected?***

Initially, I didn't think it would be so serious even though we heard reports of what was happening in Wuhan. When the government announced they were going on lockdown, there was a bit of shock but we just went straight into action mode. Having been through Sars in Singapore, I knew it would pass. It was only after lockdown that I think we really grasp the scale of the pandemic and how it is disrupting lives around the world. What I found beautiful is realising that my friends, from all over the world – US, Canada, Malaysia, Singapore, Holland, China and Australia – are also on lockdown and we are sharing the same experience at the same time. It is comforting to know that we are not alone.

■ ***Comment on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the agency and creative industry or economy as a whole.***

In the immediate term, most businesses are struggling as there are trading restrictions. In already a very tough economic situation before Covid-19, businesses are facing the challenge of losing at least five weeks of income and even more. The uncertainty of when the restrictions will end makes it really hard to plan and figure out what the actual impact is. But we know that the impact is devastating for many businesses and individuals.



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At the same time, we have seen businesses adapt to find new opportunities. They are selling new product lines that are needed and allowed to be traded. They form partnerships which would not have happened previously. Businesses and consumers are moving online much faster. I just saw a news report about Pam Golding looking at how to change their process of buying and selling a house – challenger brands Leadhome have already been doing that – but it took a crisis like this to make traditional companies realise how they have to embrace digital or face extinction at some point.

■ ***How is the agency responding to the crisis and current lockdown?***

Before they announced the lockdown, we started discussing the risks of the virus to our office and what we need to prepare if we had to go into quarantine. Having seen other countries going onto lockdown, we knew there was a big chance of it happening. We went into remote working a few days before the lockdown to test it, got Internet connections for a few colleagues who didn't have access at home, agreed on a working process and by the time the lockdown started, we were more or less prepared.

■ ***Comment on the challenges and opportunities.***

As an agency, it has really showed us that we are able to work online. It hasn't stopped us from doing what we normally do; we just had to ensure everyone has the tools they need – Internet connection, laptops, desks, printers, stationery, etc. The opportunity is that we can now work with anyone from anywhere and not let geographic distance be a barrier.



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The challenge is not so much how we work remotely but how we fill our new business pipeline. Projects that were previously planned have been put on hold. Businesses are not sure what is going to happen and are not willing to commit.

■ ***Speaking of opportunities, the world has really turned to creativity during this time. Why do you think this is the case and what does this mean for the industry, agencies and their clients/brands?***

Being creative is about solving a problem. And right now, most businesses have huge problems and that's why agencies can bring a lot of value to their clients. Beyond just creating ads, we should apply our creative thinking to helping clients find new ways of engaging their consumers who may not be out and about for quite a few months, how to launch a new product, how to channel their sports sponsorships into other areas to build brand love or how to connect with their audiences through online events.

■ ***How has the lockdown affected your staff? / What temporary HR policies have you put in place regarding remote working, health & safety, etc.?***

We are all working remotely and will be for a while. Our employees' health is the most important thing for us and we want the all-clear before going back to the office. We are monitoring how every employee is doing mentally, besides physically. It is a stressful time for all of us and we are trying to reach out to those whom we think are struggling and who may not have a close support system.



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■ ***How are you navigating 'physical distancing' while keeping your team close-knit and aligned and your clients***

*happy?*

We managed to collaborate online quite quickly. We check-in every morning at 9:00am, have a cup of coffee and just discuss our day. Every Friday, we have a remote sharing session where guests are invited to talk about a topic. We also have lunch together once every two weeks (we normally get someone to organise lunch at the office, but now everyone has to make their own) just to socialise and hang out. I think what we have done is continue chatting and communicating constantly even though it is via an online channel. And we use tools like Slack to communicate about projects and collaborate on proposals or documents through Google's platform.

▣ ***What are you busy working on? Any initiatives/campaigns relating to the coronavirus?***

We have just launched a few things with our existing clients. For example, Sasko has just launched a series of 10 storybooks for children through an audiovisual reading on their Facebook page or digital download on their website. We are also collaborating with a few influencers like Jenny Morris to create recipes that people are interested to bake (I personally have been baking non-stop!).



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▣ ***How have you had to change the way you work?***

To be honest, little has changed except that everything is done remotely. Not having to deal with traffic is nice and gives me more time. But my children are homeschooling, so I have to toggle between work and helping them which is not easy sometimes. Brainstorming over Google Hangouts took a while to get used to, but I think we have adapted.

▣ ***Has this global crisis changed your view of the future of advertising/marketing in any way?***

It has cemented my belief that brands need a purpose or point of view even more. What you have seen is that brands with a perspective could engage with their audiences, even when their products cannot be sold. An example is Dove who believes in natural beauty and has paid a tribute to doctors and nurses but is still brand-driven.

## ABOUT JUANITA PIENAAR

Juanita is the editor of the marketing & media portal on the Bizcommunity website. She is also a contributing writer.

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