

**PLAYER:** Coco Cachalia  
**COMPANY:** Grounded Media  
**ESTABLISHED:** 1997  
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**ABOUT:** Grounded Media is a communications agency that helps companies and organisations communicate their messages successfully. The agency focuses on lower LSM, and often assists in companies' CSI projects.

# BUILT TO LAST

Coco Cachalia's Grounded Media celebrates its 20th year in 2017 and boasts a turnover of more than R60 million. Here's her advice for creating a niche business that can last for decades. **AS TOLD TO GG VAN ROOYEN**

KEY INSIGHTS	
Listen to your employees	Don't let yourself fall into the trap of thinking you're the only person who understands your market or knows what's right for your business. Let your employees have a voice — some of the best ideas could come from your staff if you give them a platform to share their thoughts.
Consolidation lays the foundations for growth	When things are going well, business owners are often tempted to pursue aggressive growth, instead of consolidating and creating a decent runway that will sustain long-term growth. Growth takes money. Are your foundations in place?
Your brand is your responsibility	Start-ups often have to use contractors and suppliers, but as you grow, bring the key elements that affect your business and brand's position in the market place in-house. Stay focused on what you're good at, but control as much as you can.

**C**OCO CACHALIA'S Grounded Media started out producing educational shows for television, but over the years it has evolved into a one-stop media agency with a very specific focus. Here's how Coco has built a niche business capable of surviving tough economic times and adapting to a changing environment.

**Having a partner is a great idea.** When I first started out, I had a partner in the business. We're not in business together any longer, but I still value our early partnership tremendously. Together, we managed to create a great business model, and I doubt that either of us would have been able to do it on our own. So, find a business partner who complements you and brings expertise to the table that you don't have. Growing a company on your own is very difficult.

PHOTO: GG VAN ROOYEN

**Don't put all your eggs in one basket.** We started out creating educational television shows for the SABC, but we quickly realised that it's a bad idea to depend entirely on one client and one revenue stream. We started to diversify, and today we are a one-stop-shop that provides a range of services, including radio, TV, digital, event management, activations, community outreach and strategy development. The market can be unpredictable, but by having multiple revenue streams, you guard against the worst of it. While one area might take a dip, another hopefully shows growth.

**Find your niche.** We have diversified significantly, but we've also stuck to a particular niche. All the services we offer are related and fall within the communication umbrella. We're also selective in the kind of work we do. People tend to think that we are a non-profit organisation

were far more savvy about the opportunities that digital offered than I was. Thankfully, they spoke up and convinced me that it was something we needed to investigate. Had I only trusted my own instincts, we probably would have gotten into digital much later.

**Know when to grow and when to consolidate.** Growth can be risky, since it usually requires you to spend a lot of money. Sometimes, it's better to consolidate when things are going well, rather than to try to expand aggressively. You need to know that you have a decent runway that will allow you to sustain your long-term growth. Long-term contracts are becoming rare in most industries, but if you're lucky enough to land one, that's usually a good time to grow. A multi-year contract means that there's a certain amount of money you can rely on, which makes growth less risky.

**"Find a business partner who complements you and brings expertise to the table that you don't have."**

because of what we do, but this is simply because of the fact that a lot of the work that we create is associated with our clients' CSI projects. We focus on the lower LSM markets and don't really operate in the B2B space. This is a good area for us to operate in. You can be a socially responsible enterprise and still turn a profit. In fact, given South Africa's history and economic situation, there are some great opportunities in this space.

**Appreciate other voices.** One of the dangers of running your own business for two decades is that you can become too set in your ways. To prevent this, you need to create an environment where employees feel they have the freedom to speak up and offer contrasting opinions. For example, we had young people in the organisation who

**Control your product.** As we've grown, we've increasingly brought more functions in-house. When you're a start-up, you often make use of contractors and suppliers, but that means that you have less control over the product that you eventually deliver and the customer service you offer. Bringing functions in-house is a good way to control your brand and product. That said, it's seldom a good idea to bring everything in-house. You don't want employees to sit around with nothing to do, so it makes sense to use contractors for specific projects. Also, it doesn't make sense for us to purchase film equipment, since the industry evolves so quickly. It's far easier to simply rent what we need. **EM**