

IT entrepreneur built a business switching people to modern technology, writes
Greg Ardé

IN A mad multimedia world of radio, TV, newspapers, smartphones, laptops and billboards, it's hard not to feel like you're a startled passenger on an unpiloted rocket hurtling through space.

If there's one person who won't deny the manic nature of technological advancement, it's 47-year-old Durban IT entrepreneur Anice Hassim, the founder, chief executive officer and lead strategist of immedia.

The mash-up of "immediate media" is on uMhlanga Ridge. Its genesis is the Casbah, or Grey Street area, where Hassim lived as a child, the son of author Aziz Hassim, who led a colourful life as a jack of all trades.

In the 1980s Hassim sr came home with a Commodore computer that changed his son's life. It unleashed a passion for art and science that fuels his business to this day and has seen immedia land a clutch of awards.

It serves blue-chip clients like DStv, Computicket, Samsung and East Coast Radio.

It's a long and involved story, as is with most successful businesses, but now immedia is a multimillion-rand enterprise that employs 40 developers, designers, technicians, strategy and support staff and the firm recently won acclaim for producing the official Springbok rugby app.

A few years ago it developed RadioPod for iPhone that was among the top apps downloaded in South Africa. The app was later produced for Android users and won the Vodacom App Star challenge in 2012.

It was in the Casbah that Hassim learnt tenacity from his father's honest but persistent hustling to make a living.

"To get anywhere you need to know something that everyone else doesn't." That's the underdog's weapon of choice. Hassim applied it to himself.

In his teens, he developed an abiding admiration for Apple founder Steve Jobs and his vision of how technology could empower humans. As a university student, he befriended his professor, a kindred spirit who gave him unfettered access to the lab and the new Apple Macintosh computer just released.

Hassim learnt programming and his love affair with Apple persists. He has taken over a dozen staff to the company's headquarters in San Francisco (over the past decade) and when the iPad was launched he and a few colleagues queued in New York to buy a bundle and bring them home to play with.

Hassim might be an Apple fan but his business spans a variety of



Anice Hassim of immedia believes apps are the future.

Picture (and cover): SIBONELO NGCOBO

All systems go on 'Planet App'

technologies. Icon Summer, the design shop he and a friend started in Overport 19 years ago consisted of a Power Macintosh, a Golf Caddie and ad hoc design of pamphlets and brochures.

Thus began his career of partnering with talented people to create outcomes.

Hassim got married, his friend emigrated and he had to take over the business. He felt as though he was riding a runaway beast.

The business has since changed tremendously. Print turned into digital, immedia was born, the company did a lot of work online and became an internet service provider through what is now a sister company, East Coast Access.

Then it worked with ECR, YFM and Jacaranda and other broadcasters, developing a suite of tools to understand what

audiences were doing on their digital properties.

immedia also created Geek Patrol, which offers roving technical support to clients who want on-site help with hardware, software, device management and installations.

But immedia's focus is on drawing together these post-PC solutions for clients through apps, cloud platforms and hardware, and has been since Apple's 2007 iPhone launch. Hassim reckons it is the new terrain.

According to an article in Forbes magazine, there are 1 million Apple apps and they have been downloaded 50 billion times, a figure matched by Android.

In a 2012 interview with AdReview, Hassim described the development of apps as "devastatingly fast".

driving the information revolution and explosion of ingenuity and creativity in the last 30 years, imagine the incredible next 30."

There are an estimated 1.6 billion smartphones in the world, as many personal computers and about 400 million tablets. They all need apps, leading him to dub Earth the "Planet of the Apps".

Hassim says the barriers to entry are very different from what they used to be. All you need is a brain, internet connection and ability to learn to make apps.

Having said that, Hassim has acknowledged that the mobile space is tricky.

He described it like this in the Media Mag: "Tackling mobile is a bit like wrestling a slime-covered octopus in the dark."

When immedia announced the launch of the Springbok app, SA Rugby Union chief executive officer Jurie Roux said it came on the heels of an established mobile site, Twitter, Facebook and other social media channels, and a digital magazine.

"The development of the smartphone app is the logical next step in putting our supporters in direct touch with the Springboks and South African rugby.

"Apart from regular features such as news, fixtures, results, logs and player profiles, the app will also have exclusive content generated from within the Bok camp and other national teams, with the aim of bringing the fan closer to the team."

At immedia's offices on the Ridge, Hassim is animated, energetic and uses colourful language. He says modern media is a journey driven by convergence, where real time and convenience are critical. Apps need to be supported by clever technological eco-systems that cross platforms and allow users to do things easily, even though there is a lot of heavy lifting in the background.

For example, thousands of things happen that you don't see when you ask Siri on your iPhone what the weather is like today.

But heavy lifting is what immedia does. It doesn't dampen the ardour of Hassim and his team, which includes partner Bevan Andriés and long-time colleagues Tanya Wakeling and Selene Shah. The board of non-executive directors includes property guru TC Chetty.

Staff at immedia pad around clad in immedia-branded T-shirts, jeans and takkies. They write formulas on the windows and grind their own coffee beans and they ferociously guard their reputation for making useful stuff.

"We exist to create an impact in our community," Hassim says.

"We're here to do a relevant job, to make a profit and be accountable... to change our communities."

Hassim has a vision of Durban as South Africa's Silicon Valley and immedia regularly hosts workshops and open nights for local techies.

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