

BIRCHWOOD PUTS BOKSBURG ON THE MAP

When Jazzman Mahlakgane was first headhunted to work for Birchwood as marketing director in 2000, the Birchwood was a small hotel stuck in the middle of a town twenty minutes outside of Johannesburg.

“The biggest challenge I faced was the location and the racially dubious history of Boksburg, especially as I was targeting the emerging black market,” says Mahlakgane. “I needed to find a way to take Birchwood out of Boksburg.”

Until then, the Birchwood had been running breakfasts to try and draw corporates, but with limited success. “We had to align ourselves to bigger things,” says Malhakgane.

The following year Birchwood built its Grand Centre, which houses 200 people, and Mahlakgane started communicating with the Premier Soccer League. He enticed senior management with the promise they could hold their award’s ceremony for free at Birchwood. They accepted the offer. “That year Orlando Pirates won. Pirates is a top club so it was a big event, with the who’s who of SA business coming to see the venue. People loved it. That was the breakthrough moment.”

“After the PSL we started looking for the next big thing happening in town. If we could accommodate it, we would sponsor it. Big government corporate events were using our facility for free. We knew they were followed by the media and business leaders, and so the hotel started to take off.”

“We have a unique concept. We are a village rather than a hotel and that is what works. People like coming here knowing they will feel at home.” S

HOSTING THE PSL AWARD'S CEREMONY WAS THE BREAKTHROUGH

Mahlakgane’s research also alerted him to the success of jazz houses in Newtown that were drawing a lot of upwardly mobile black middle management. “These events were small and sporadic and I wanted to capitalise on their popularity,” says Mahlakgane, so he started a monthly jazz evening with top acts, at the hotel. Guests who booked for the concert got discounts on rooms, encouraging them to stay the night.

“People started to know about the Birchwood. The word spread. From that market, we were able to capture government and the unions. Our rooms started filling up. No one had known about this place before. It just snowballed and here we are.”



Jazzman Mahlakgane