

CHARGE UP . CONNECT . SHARE



News Release

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Africa's first ever isabelo™ smart bench: Connecting people with the world through innovative advances in urban street furniture.

Prototype launched this week in Maboneng.

Turning heads in Maboneng this week is Africa's first ever isabelo™ smart bench, an innovative designer piece of street furniture that is fast becoming the area's trendiest new free Wi-Fi hub.

Entirely solar powered and providing the added convenience of USB power points for charging mobile phones, the environmentally friendly public bench offers web surfers relaxed seating on four arms leading off a central upright.

"The product name isabelo™ is derived from the Zulu word "to share" and the smart bench is all about sharing: Sharing a seat. Sharing public spaces. And sharing content online. What we love about it is that people can sit down, charge up and freely access information and share ideas online," says Louise Meek, the young Johannesburg entrepreneur and founding director of Public Access Consulting, the company responsible for the creation and development of the bench.

And while iconic and fun as a convivial pavement Wi-Fi zone, the core value of the smart bench is its importance as an urban data capturing facility for collecting civic and environmental data that is location-specific.

Although still in its prototype form it is a first of its kind for South Africa and considered one of the most innovative pieces of street furniture created in the country to date.

Plans are in the pipeline to roll out the bench in other major centers in the country and decision-makers in other African cities on the continent have also expressed interest.

"We were looking at ways to both reduce the digital divide in our cities and drive prosperity through access to the Internet and it was out of this that isabelo™ evolved.

"We believe isabelo™ can transform public spaces into vibrant places where people can connect to each other and to the Internet and in so doing affect positive change in our cities.

"From an urban data collection point of view, we believe we can deliver real insight into the environmental health of our cities and its people, and most importantly, start to understand the needs of city residents through ongoing two-way conversations.

"The public response has been overwhelmingly positive. Free Wi-Fi is what attracts people to the isabelo™ smart bench but accessing the complimentary service requires answering a short questionnaire.

"The questionnaire is our core revenue stream and is how we are able to cover the data costs of the free Wi-Fi. We aim to use the questionnaire as a means to create feedback loops between the public and our clients who conduct market research via isabelo™.

"We believe there are not enough two-way conversations happening with brands and their consumers, city managers and city-residents, and we see these benches as the perfect way to facilitate deeper conversations that can deliver real impact," said Meek.

Public Access Consulting raised seed capital in March this year when they were short-listed among the top eight finalists in The Green City Startup, a competition funded by the City of Johannesburg and the University of Johannesburg.

This enabled them to turn a business idea into a real product, the isabelo™ smart bench, which is now being prototyped in the Maboneng Precinct in Johannesburg. The final product will be launched in August this

year.

The design brains behind the bench are award-winning designers, Dokter and Misses, an internationally renowned Johannesburg-based multi-disciplinary product design company, with a focus on furniture and lighting.

Adriaan Hugo, lead industrial designer for isabelo™ says: *“We are working on a great product! Our vision is to have at least 10 isabelo™ smart benches in Joburg by the end of this year, with more benches being installed in other South African cities over the next 12 months.”*

Public Access Consulting is currently looking for clients who are interested in conducting low-cost per contact digital research. The isabelo™ smart bench would be their connection point to the market, facilitating real-time location specific market research.

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For more information please contact:

Louise Meek
Founder, Public Access Consulting (Pty) Ltd

(m) 0828411647
(e) louise.garner.meek@gmail.com



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