

Scent of an award: Relooking why we enter creative awards

By [Tumi Sethebe](#)

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Creativity is code for empathy, connection and endless possibilities, that's it. And the Cannes Lions experience has always been a gentle reminder of that for me.



Image supplied: Tumi Sethebe, ECD at the Riverbed Agency questions why agencies enter awards

I remember about a year ago starting my Riverbed journey as ECD of the largest independent black female-owned creative agency in South Africa, thinking that before me stood the best opportunity for me to connect with that again.

My first order of business then, was somewhat of a paradox. I asked the business to put a stop to entering any awards. "Why?" They asked... In order to connect with our purpose – to create positive impact," I said...

I won't forget the look of confusion from the faces of the management team in response.

Immediate results

And the results were immediate, in a space of a couple of months we lost the entire creative department.

These were very talented people that had been at the agency for years and were responsible in part for some of the great work that had seen the agency be the most lauded at the Prism awards for a number of years.

It was quite unsettling for the business, and we had many emergency meetings to see how we could resolve this, but the damage had been done and to be honest, had I been put in their shoes I probably would have done the same thing. As a creative, I understand our fixation with awards at all costs.

The best way to describe what we were experiencing is perhaps in the words of Al Pacino in one of the scenes in the movie *Scent of a woman* when he said... 'when the bough breaks, the cradle will fall and it has fallen here, it has fallen.'



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The impact of impact

It's been a year now after that 'walk out' and I'm relieved to say that I still have my job.

On reflection the biggest lesson for me was that talented individuals alone are not enough to build a successful agency, we needed a catalyst.

One grounded in a belief in the impossible and a resolve to make great things happen.

It did not come along by accident. It had been 15 years in the making and was inspired by our founder and CEO Monalisa Zwambila, the Advertising Industry leader of 2020.

We call it 'care' and as an agency we define it as 'leaving things better than how you found them'.

It's our unifying principle. A stimulant of not just ideas but 'whole ideas' because those are the ones that transform behaviour.

It's a methodology rooted in deep empathy and moves us from knowing to understanding our audience.

It's a language that punctuates our speech and is understood by everyone. At its best, it is a tool that elevates our work and holds us to a higher standard. It's a compass that guides our daily actions.

This change agent has enabled us to create a new kind of agency. One that cares about being a creative agency beyond a creative department. Having the right people on the bus, not just filling up positions.

An agency that cares about impact, above awards.

And at the risk of sounding cynical, what I know for sure is that care is a rare commodity in advertising. And when something is rare, it's very valuable, just like winning a Cannes Lion.



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Who cares?

As a creative I know the impact of winning a Cannes Lion and with over 30,000 entries it's arguably the toughest competition and the most rewarding there is, and to see South Africa ranked number 13 in the Top 15 Countries at the 2022 Cannes Lions list is truly a remarkable achievement for our young industry.

But with every passing year I do wonder just how much of that work that wins has had an impact on the brands and audiences it's supposed to rather than just on us the creative community.

In the same movie *Scents of a woman* Al Pacino articulates this point very well... 'Makers are men, creators are leaders, be careful what kind of leaders you are creating here'...

You see, I remember a time not so long ago when ads were a welcome interruption when they entertained as well as informed in equal measure.

In return audiences would give their valuable time to engage and even sometimes sing along or reference the ad in conversation.

The impact was a connection between a brand and a stranger would be ignited. This is when advertising was like a team sport, one we all cared about...and the very best work celebrated at the 'Olympics' of advertising - Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity Awards.

That's how I remember Cannes, (whole) ideas create positive impact.

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