

What can South African agencies learn from the PR Cannes Lions winners?

By  Dan Pinch

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There's no reason why South African agencies can't compete in the PR category at Cannes Lions.



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Learning from last year's winners, it's evident that Cannes celebrates exceptional ideas that are exceptionally executed.

For PR, there's the added expectation of having earned media at the core. For us to enter the arena, we need to dissect what makes a winning idea. Looking at 2017's successes, it's all about having a key, relatable insight that often taps into a broader conversation.

With this in mind, here are some lessons from the 2017 Cannes Lions winners that I believe SA agencies can learn from.

The stand-out campaigns

Fearless Girl, the defiant statue of a young girl facing down the Wall Street Bull won Grand Prix in a number of categories including PR. You can't really argue with it as a PR Grand Prix winner – it's an idea that transcends marketing and is a timely piece of culture that will be remembered for decades.

Meet Graham is arguably similar in that it was also a physical model, this time of a person evolved to survive car crashes. Possibly not as culturally iconic and well-timed as Fearless Girl, it was nevertheless a clever idea that was well produced.

A personal favourite in the PR Golds was *Narcos Spanish Lessons* – which used the Netflix *Narcos* show, set in the Columbian drug underworld, to teach Spanish.

I also loved *Pitching French Films to Hollywood* – a film showing Hollywood execs rejecting movie idea pitches based on some of the most successful French movies of all time.

What did they have in common?

Although the execution and media used for the ideas was vastly different, ranging from statues to social media films, there are some common threads among the winners. Most of the awarded work has a clever observation at the core of the idea.

Netflix noticed people talking about learning Spanish from *Narcos* in social comments; Cheetos, which won for its museum of weirdly shaped crisps (think Nik Naks), noticed people talking about finding crisps shaped like celebrities and objects (the Eiffel Tower for example).

“ *It's become a cliché, but work with a higher purpose or entering a broader public conversation often does well.*

However, that's not enough by itself. This has to be partnered with an amazing creative idea. ”

What can we do better?

I think the South African PR industry should definitely look to the Cannes Lions for inspiration. Look at what wins. Break down the components to see how it fits together. What was the insight? How do you think they got to that insight? What was the idea? How far did they push it so it was the best version of that idea? What kind of production values did they bring to the work?



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Often, we tend to think that we don't have the resources to compete with big agencies overseas. But South Africa regularly

wins top awards at Cannes (in radio, for example) and there is no reason why we can't compete in PR as well.



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We need to understand where the bar is for quality and present our work in a compelling way for judges.

There is some cynicism around work in award shows and whether it really drives business results. But there has been enough credible research on this to show that creative or conceptual marketing works substantially harder than more traditional work. That's important to remember next time you get a brief for something "hardworking". A hardworking brief is like the work that wins at Cannes: it's brave; it uses lateral thinking; it has an insight at its core; it's culturally relevant; and it's beautifully produced.

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