

Ask Afrika's Da Vinci Awards reveal how effective market research marries art and science

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The art of market research lies in the ability to tell a story that can change the world. It starts with observation, investigation and interviews to gather data that is collated and analysed to find significant statistics - this is science. Interrogating the data to find meaning and discover trends, ultimately making it useful for the greater good, is an art.

The Da Vinci Awards – held at Summer Place in Johannesburg on 21 November 2018 – recognise and celebrate clients of Ask Afrika that best demonstrate business acumen through the innovative use of market research to create a positive impact on society, their industry or their bottom line – preferably all three. The research uses science to tell a story and art to create a business narrative with a positive outcome.

In rank order, the top five Da Vinci Award winners are: MMI Holdings Limited, Final Mile, Shoprite, the Out of Home Measurement Council (OMC) and Routes2Results.

The top 10 finalists spanned four broad areas of impact through their research:

1. Employee wellness positively impacting the bottom line: MMI Holdings Limited and Shoprite
2. Positive societal impact on the healthcare sector: Final Mile, Routes2Results, Childhood Cancer Foundation (CHOC) and Unjani Clinic
3. Benefiting their industry sector: Financial Intermediaries Association of Southern Africa (FIA) and the Out of Home Measurement Council (OMC)
4. Challenging the status quo to implement best practice: Ithala Development Finance Corporation and the International Data Corporation (IDC)

“The Da Vinci Awards are about courageous clients daring to stretch themselves in the way they think and strategise, and to change their behaviour,” said Sarina de Beer, director: client service at Ask Afrika, at the awards gala dinner.

“The award entry submissions were adjudicated by a panel of nine independent judges with predefined criteria to evaluate the research, the methodology and how it is applied to have a definitive, positive impact. To score on innovation, the research had to be unique, exclusive and difficult to actualise,” De Beer said.



The Da Vinci judges with the Ask Afrika team: Ilisa Prentis, Sandra Gordon, Khaya Dlanga, Andrea Gevers, Johan Prins, Langa Khanyile and Sarina de Beer.

CEO and founder of Ask Afrika Andrea Gevers explained the choice of name of the inaugural Da Vinci Awards: “Leonardo da Vinci was essentially known for bridging art and science, which is exactly what we do at Ask Afrika. He was a universal genius with a curious mind and an insatiable desire for knowledge.

“He sent a letter to the king of France to apply for a position of thinking leisure, which read, ‘I am architect, sculptor, military engineer and (as an aside) I also paint.’ Da Vinci was not only the greatest inventor of his time, he was the most ardent student of the human body and mind,” she said.

“The primary premise of market research is to understand human behaviour. Humans are obsessed with being understood. The way that we understand the world is through symbols and stories. The distance between poets and economists is smaller than you think – both are storytellers. Storytelling organises societies and countries and world economies. Even though more people believe the stories that economists tell, the future will more likely belong to poets.

“Human innovation holds great value, but science and technology can be deadly without good human leadership – and good leadership is impossible without awareness and empathy. This is what artists, poets and musicians bring us,” said Gevers.

Khaya Dlanga, CMO of Rain and one of the judges who spoke at the awards, expressed the same sentiment, explaining how successful marketing marries science and art. “The Da Vinci Awards is such a perfect name – because Leonardo da Vinci was a scientist, but he was also an artist; he was able to create beautiful works not only in science, but also in art, because he understood humanity,” he said.

The out-of-home (OOH) industry in South Africa had no available audience measurement, relying on media-owner commissioned traffic counts. Measuring OOH audiences is a hugely complex science, but the OMC’s Roadside Outdoor Audience Data (ROAD) has made OOH research an art.

The OMC has pioneered cutting-edge scientific methodologies through a nationally representative travel survey by Ask Afrika, and satellite image analysis by Cuende – to produce a comprehensive traffic model – which when combined with the location and panel orientation of all media owner billboard panels, paints an accurate and representative picture of OOH audiences. Every week the sites that are measured deliver 1 113 067 975 impacts and a massive total of 288-million trips are taken per week, which is on average 11 trips per person.

“The OMC’s ROAD research opens the door to improved implementation and integration of OOH in the media mix, with the specific role or function it is meant to play in the sales and communication funnel. It is deemed by media planning software providers to be the most sophisticated dataset that they process,” said De Beer.

MMI Holdings Limited’s research quantified employee presenteeism – the negative impact that distractions at work have on productivity. The research, which spanned a diversity of South African businesses and industries, found that South African companies are losing R89-billion per annum due to unproductive employees, equating to a 5% gross profit loss. There were a few key areas that resulted in reduced productivity, including health issues, financial stress and personal issues.

This was the science. The art was listening to the stories the employees had to tell and coming up with innovative ways to improve their lives, which resulted in improved productivity.

MMI Holdings set up internal wellness programmes to assist its employees. The results of the research were released in a report about employee presenteeism, which garnered comprehensive media coverage on business shows and in key publications – introducing a new narrative on employee wellness for the benefit of other organisations.

“The research is used to quantify the problem of presenteeism for employers and track the impact of implemented interventions to determine ROI and improved employee engagement levels, leading to improved profits for the organisation over time,” said De Beer.

Final Mile’s research aimed to understand adolescent girls’ and young women’s decisions and behaviour with regard to HIV testing, prevention and treatment.

Final Mile wanted a nuanced understanding of what specifically drives behaviour and factors that affect HIV-prevention; and how to positively influence these behaviours, specifically to improve adoption of and adherence to HIV-prevention methods and products.

“The scale and complexity of this study was outstanding and Final Mile demonstrated an absolute commitment to execute the research perfectly and rigorously. The research was agile, resonant and relevant, optimising science through best-practice methodologies. The art of this research was centred around understanding choice and how to change behaviour for future generations and a better tomorrow,” said De Beer.

The Routes2Results research on HIV challenged existing ways of doing HIV research and enabled strategies to address HIV prevention among young women in South Africa. The findings are important for the current practice of clinical trials and propose new thinking to inform clinical trial design for the future.

“The research is directly related to Routes2Results’ mission to improve lives by bridging the gap between the art of understanding people and science of clinical trials,” said De Beer.

Shoprite’s research was for its Super Service Awards. This internal motivational programme was a hugely successful incentive – it ensured employee participation, increased morale and ultimately enhanced the success of the Shoprite Group of Companies.

Annually the initiative, with a strong scientific base of data gathering, runs across all 16 brands within the group, which totals more than 2 300 stores in South Africa and Africa (15 countries), with 180 000 staff members participating.

“The true beauty and art of this initiative was the sense of community it created and the absolute passion it entrenched within each staff member. From driver and store staff member to the C-suite, this research brings people together on a common goal – to be their very best for the customer,” said De Beer.

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