

Take-home messages - the OPA looks back at 2008

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2008 was a great year for The Online Publishers Association (OPA). Not only did they succeed in opening up the organisation to smaller online publishers and advertising agencies, and in so doing grew organisational membership from 30 to 75, but they also launched the Bookmarks, South Africa's very own digital Oscars, and the first award to celebrate creativity, functionality and usability in a digital medium.

The Bookmarks was a phenomenal success. It shifted perspectives on what it takes to achieve effective online communication; and most importantly, it accelerated the growth of the industry by allowing invaluable insight into the minds of two leading creative and strategic digital executives, Johan Tesch and Dick Buschman. In his retrospective column for 2008, leading media and marketing journalist for Fin Week, Tony Koenderman, named it the award of 2008, quite a feat considering there are 27 advertising awards in South Africa alone. Koenderman commended the stringent judging criteria and the fact that trophies were awarded to deserving entries only. The winning entries of the Bookmarks can be rest assured that their work is competitive internationally. The Bookmarks, unlike too many advertising and publishing awards, did not fall prey to awarding merely for the sake of awarding.

Take-home lessons from the Bookmarks were that South African agencies and publishers alike needed to spend more time creating the ultimate user experience, an interface which intuitively understands the user. The judges also encouraged advertising agencies to put more effort into translating the client's identity online and to look abroad to see what work was being awarded at Cannes and Eurobest. According to Dick Buschman, "As a conceptual artist, designers are obliged to look at what is being awarded internationally. I strongly suggest using the internet as a tool at hand and looking regularly at sites such as thefwa.com."

Looking forward to 2009, the OPA will continue to grow the online industry with the release of new research on South African online media consumption; hosting innovative workshops, and growing the Bookmarks into a bigger and better event. Adrian Hewlett, OPA Chairperson, had this message for the industry: "The OPA is expecting an even more exciting year in 2009. We are on the cusp of a digital revolution where online consumption is increasing, and clients are waking up to the potential of online advertising. This is good news for publishers and agencies alike. With regards to the Bookmarks, we took on board the constructive feedback received from industry figureheads after the inaugural awards. We plan on broadening categories, and ensuring publishers are better represented, but we will maintain the stringent judging criteria and only award deserving entries. Ultimately, this is the only way that the South Africa online industry can catch up to the standards that are currently being seen internationally, and it is our responsibility as the OPA to see that we get there."

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