

Graham Lang on the resonance of locally relevant work and trying harder

 By [Ann Nurock](#)

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Graham Lang, Chief Creative Officer of Y&R South Africa and Africa, judged the Film category at this year's Cannes Lion Festival of Creativity. He tells Cannes media correspondent Ann Nurock about the importance of keeping film focused on the intended local audience...

Year after year, the type of work that actually wins the big awards doesn't change - it's work that resonates emotionally and has been shared virally. Lang shares his favourite work from this year's Cannes Lion winners, and speaks of the importance of judges having a chance to see the work before it's even known as an entrant in an awards show, to give it a better shot at being remembered, shortlisted and awarded.

Nurock: What category did you judge?

Lang: Film Lions.

Nurock: What stood out for you, in terms of judging the entries?



Lang: The "Leica Gallery São Paulo" commercial that ended up winning one of the Grands Prix, came up in my pre-judging and came up in the shortlist, came up for medals. It really stood head-and-shoulders above any other piece of work, and not necessarily because it's a better piece of work but I'm just a fan of the brand. In terms of the filmmaking storytelling and the whole narrative, the whole package, I thought that it was just the most beautiful commercial. It would rate among my top five commercials of all time, and was almost a unanimous decision, with 19 of the 22 votes. It just felt really big and really important. Some people thought that it felt too small, celebrating 100 years for an exhibition, but when I did some research on the topic of the Leica 100th year, 100 years of photography idea, I found that they took the idea and wrapped it around a lot of

their comms and online. So there were some really great extensions of that film, it wasn't just a gallery of São Paulo, it has become a big story for the brand.

Nurock: You did well in the film category yourself, with a silver lion for LandRover campaign.

Lang: Yes, so it was a campaign of three short, inexpensive or low-budget commercials for Genuine Parts, a brief where the client wanted us to do some press and radio work on, but the team came up with some charming, funny solutions, just using stock library footage. We pitched it to the client, who buys a lot of television media. They loved it so much they ended up filming it and were really happy with the result.

Nurock: What I found disappointing though was that South Africa didn't have many other awards in the film category. What's your view on that?

Lang: For the past couple of years, we have struggled to convert film and I think there are a couple of things that played a role. I think to our credit, we've become really good at producing locally relevant stories and locally relevant film. Just look at Nando's. The quality thinking, the execution, the ideas, the way it's put together, it's excellent and world class, yet it really is so locally relevant. However, it struggles to talk to judges globally. And that's a good thing - as a nation, we should never start tailoring our ideas and stories to each international award show requirement. That's one of the issues.

The other issues is that even when we have good, locally relevant work that can translate globally, we don't have the platform from a PR point of view to really get those films out there. If you look at a lot of the films that win the big awards, and even our silver, we manage to get on a lot of international, and those spots have been picked up and even gone viral. So a lot of the judges actually knew those little films before we even got to the judging, which is why I think we did really well.

Nurock: That's an important point you've raised. Everybody talks about how we don't have scale in South Africa, but we have to create the scale, because any commercial that has real appeal does go viral. We need to actually seed more of our work.

Lang: Absolutely, that's the key thing. That's why I'm saying you will sometimes get the really locally relevant work coming out of South America, or coming out of APAC, but because they just manipulate the work really well in terms of getting it into the social scene and the public consciousness beforehand, it's that much easier. If you're looking at 4,000 pieces of work, it's actually too much to remember. The work that you're going to put through is work that pops. If you've seen the piece of work before, it's so much easier to do. So I would encourage agencies to work with either the Creative Circle or a journalist, and bloggers, and sites such as Bizcommunity, with their global PR officers to really embed the work into the relevant seeds, so that the PR gets out before the show.

Nurock: How did you feel about much of the work seen at Cannes this year having a higher purpose, making it the Cannes of doing good?

Lang: I'm a convert here, I know there were a lot of cynics - I was one at first. Brands connecting themselves with higher purpose drive business results. Chief marketing officers have cottoned on to the notion - take McDonald's or Coca-Cola. There's a major PR perception based on how much sugar content is in their product or how unhealthy their product is. If they can associate themselves with a community cause or a higher purpose cause, it is one way of deflecting the negative aspect of their brand in terms of something that they do positively, to impact the community or society. That's good marketing.

Nurock: Coca-Cola's higher purpose is really about moments of happiness, and they dimensionalise that on a local basis with such relevance.

Lang: Absolutely, so there is a lot of work that touches you, and makes you feel good about brands that are trying to connect you with a higher purpose. But I think it's a divide, in a way, that will get you to love that brand more, which will only impact you purchasing or being involved with the brand from a commercial standpoint. It's a big trend and I encourage all corporates and brands to spend more of their marketing budget on doing more than just what it says on the pack. Try to impact society in a positive way. I don't look at Volvo Lifepaint and go 'Oh that's just bullsh!t because all they did was try to connect the brand, but that's advertising, trying to use the brand to evoke emotion and persuasiveness to get people to prefer your brand over another.

Nurock: I loved Lifepaint, and it does tie in 100% with Volvo's proposition of safety.

Lang: Yes, so now no-one can deny that wasn't a viral activation, and no-one can deny that it massively impacted the brand in totally unexpected, non-traditional way, which is terrific. So let the naysayers have their say, maybe it was too skewed. But the whole thing becomes a little out-of-control when a lot of NGO work is awarded. Lifepaint could quite easily have been done for a pedestrian or bike safety NGO in London on a small scale, keeping it very local. But the fact that it was done for Volvo makes it really legit. So I think that one has to be careful about all the NGO work that gets awarded at these festivals, but keep in mind the big idea, the big social or good ideas need to connect to big brands, and I think that's fine.

Nurock: Most of them were connected to big brands. If you think about 'LikeAGirl', which is sanitary protection, or even the campaign that Procter & Gamble are doing

again for Whispers in Mumbai. That was breakthrough work. But another disappointment was that we had no shortlists in the mobile category, where SA is such a mobile market. What's your view on that?

Lang: Here's the thing: a lot of great work falls through the cracks. I do know that it really helps to have a judge being vocal for work on the jury, and we do struggle in the category. So half of it is about luck, and the other half is about how we get our work out there better and understand the categories better and what's winning in the categories better.

Clearly we know how to do radio, we've almost played that category out. Maybe we play that category too heavily, and need to go out and look at the other categories in the way we should. We're too reliant on press and poster, or TV, or radio, maybe it's just down to a lack of trying.

Nurock: At the Innovation Awards, the work wasn't hugely creative, but it was innovative. Just looking at some of the apps that were awarded, some of them could have been created for the South African market.

Lang: We need to look at more non-traditional work. To put it bluntly, we just don't try hard enough. When it comes to actually packaging and entering the work, I don't think we look at the case studies and try hard enough.

[Click here](#) for a reminder of Lang's pre-Cannes expectations.

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