

Why Meropa won't be at the PR awards, again...

 By [Peter Mann](#)

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Luminaries from the public relations industry gather in Johannesburg this Sunday, 25 March 2012, to celebrate the annual [PRISM Awards](#). Meropa Communications will not be among them and - once again - we will not be winning any awards.



I don't believe PR agencies should win awards. This is a wrinkle of mine, which my colleagues will probably change as soon as they can prize my fingers off the tiller of the good ship Meropa... but I was taught by my former business partner and mentor, the late, great Aubrey Sussens, that PR agencies should never get between their clients and the footlights.

"We are not in it for the glory"

"We are not in it for the glory," Sussens would say to anyone who would listen. And, like me, he was deeply scornful of agencies whose lifeblood seems to be doing PR off the back of the endless awards they have invented to win.

So Meropa, for my tenure at least, will remain a determinedly low-profile company. Which means we just have to suck it up and be gracious when the rest of our industry win and celebrate their own awards.

Of course, it also means - and I am aware of the delicious irony of this - that every year I have to re-justify my decision to my colleagues, at the very least.

We don't enter awards for a number of good (?) reasons:

- **They are subjective and tend to position us as publicists**
 - Getting publicity is just one of the many things we do - and it is often not the most important thing we do.
 - There is an old PR joke about the guy presenting his successes to his client by saying, "And I kept you out of this newspaper, and I kept you out of that newspaper".
 - Should we win awards for publicity? I really don't know.
 - I do know that we get a hell of a lot of publicity for our clients.

- I also know that most of the content in all of the media - print, electronic, social/digital - is managed by people like us. Some international studies hold that more than 70% of all editorial content comes from our industry.
- Tell that to journalists and you really piss them off - earning the spin-doctor epithet all over again.
- And, of course, some clients are just more newsworthy than others. Another PR truism is that, obviously, the bigger the story, the bigger the coverage. It's the quality that counts - what did you do that was special and different and built understanding for your client?

- **As communication partners and strategists, our work should be deep in the background**

- Some of our very best work is hidden. It is issue- and society-related. If we went out and won an award for it, our clients would be simply aghast.
- These can be big issues - how to act when you are deep in crisis, how to use communication to best position your business over its competitors - or they can be small things - how best to answer a question.
- I can't imagine our clients being happy with us winning awards for that.

There are many more reasons not to enter awards. Brevity precludes me from listing them all. And I hasten to add that I am not opposed to others winning awards if they suit them. It's just not for me.

If there are to be PR awards, I would prefer there to be an in-depth survey of agencies by their stakeholders: their clients, their staff, the media and their suppliers. That would give a much better idea of our value, but I guess it would be a difficult and costly exercise to undertake.

Setting cat among the pigeons

Who is to be the judge of all of this fairly arcane art? To set a large cat amongst a flock of very excitable pigeons, an examination of the [list of 2012 judges](#) doesn't fill me with glee -- containing as it does a television writer, a beauty queen, various radio and TV presenters, a media buyer, an academics and some client-side reps.

I suppose the best reason for winning an award is the supposed marketing benefit that will flow from it. You can boast about winning and clients will flock to you!

The PR industry is trying to crib from advertising, and has fallen into a deeply ironic trap.

How do ad agencies market themselves? By doing PR! They promote the hell out of the awards they win. I remember being told famously by the [Red & Yellow School](#) in Cape Town that advertising did not bring it students. To get enrolment it had to do PR.

Last ad campaign for ad agency?

When last did you see an advertising campaign for your favourite ad agency? Never?

But our industry has seen that as successful and thought, "Oh God, we had better compete. We need some awards."

So what's next? Should we all start advertising?

Now hold your sides and laugh - because we have just bought an ad in *AdVantage* magazine to announce that we are the only South African or African agency to be in the [Holmes Report Top 200](#) global PR company list.

Lest I sound like the grumpy old bugger that I am told I am: there is a debate around all of this. I am not hugely certain that my decision/judgement is entirely correct.

So, to those of you who win PRISM awards, well done from Meropa. We salute and admire your professionalism!

ABOUT PETER MANN

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