

Johanna McDowell shares insights from 2018 AdForum Summit

By [Juanita Pienaar](#)

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Having recently attended the AdForum Worldwide Summit in New York, Johanna McDowell, MD of the Independent Agency Search & Selection Company (IAS) and the South African partner of Scopen, presented a detailed and in-depth report with case studies on global trends and up-to-date information on agencies at a masterclass session that was aimed at IAS subscribing agencies. The event took place on 17 May 2018 at the Winchester Mansions Hotel in Cape Town.

The 2018 AdForum summit was held in New York between 23-27 April 2018 and McDowell explained to an eager group of industry professionals that the event is by invitation-only and held biannually bringing top players in the advertising industry together and offering them the chance to grow their business and network, and experience how they are shaping the future. The IAS is the only South African company that has consistently been participating in the Summit for the past 11 years.

At the forefront of global issues and trends facing advertising

More than 20 participating agencies including big names like Dentsu Aegis Group, Havas Group, DDB Worldwide and Mullen Lowe Group were visited during the Summit week, where these participating agencies set up private meetings with more than 35 search consultants from around the world at their respective offices, in order to have one-on-one conversations about agency goals, strategies, key corporate messages and showcase their creative visions and talents with a focus on developing new business leads.



Johanna McDowell, managing director of the IAS and the South African partner of Scopen.

During the masterclass, McDowell made us feel part of the select inner circle when she briefed us on her experienced at the Summit. She took us through the day-to-day schedule, also listing the different agencies that were visited, shared her impressions and insights she gained during these visits and showed us a selection of case studies from the different agencies showcasing their current work and offerings.



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McDowell told us while there, the agencies didn't treat or talk to them as if they were clients because they were not. They are all intermediaries and so they need to know the good, the bad and the ugly, as she put it. And so that is why when the consultants go back to their respective countries and report on what happened, they can give real, honest feedback.

After every agency meeting, they had to fill in a booklet with their burning comments about what they've heard and seen. What was good, what was bad and suggestions on how the agency could improve.

McDowell said the whole idea of showing us what happened during the Summit is to give us a glimpse at how these agencies position themselves and what they talk about as their main points of difference. Those are the learnings that they as consultants write down and comment on throughout the Summit.

Highlights of Day 1

On day one, they visited, DDB, Grey, Work & Co, You & Mr Jones, SS&K and Virtue. DDB was the first agency visited and set a very high bar for the rest of the week, not just because of their work but also because of the way they presented, the way they treated the consultants when they arrived and the fact that they presented in the middle of their agency, which no other agency did. McDowell shared case studies from the visit that included work done for McDonald's, Skittles, Marmite and John Lewis. This is one of the case studies featuring work they did for McDonald's for International Women's Day:

Another highlight was Grey. The Grey Group is a global advertising and marketing agency and what was interesting here is that the agency shared that they are investing quite a lot of their resources (up to 75%) into creativity, and they also do a lot of their own production in-house, which is a big trend as of late.

Highlights of Day 2

Day two saw McDowell and the rest of the consultants visit MullenLowe, Project Worldwide, Oath, Kiip, WPP, TBWA and CP+B. At MullenLowe, global CEO Alex Leikikh gave them an update on the merger of the two agencies (that happened in 2015), and said it has been a very successful merger and that they are doing extremely well. As such, they have been named the most effective agency network for seven consecutive years. Leikikh shared with them that he believes that creativity will be the last legal means of differentiation. Netflix is one of their clients and this is what they created for them:

[NETFLIX | BLACK MIRROR](#) from [MullenLowe Group](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Project Worldwide was up next. This is a network of agencies that operates mainly in the activation and event space, with a strong emphasis on musicians. Their case study was all about the use of virtual reality and revolved around the forthcoming three-year tour planned by Sir Elton John (his last tour). Here they showed the consultants how they created this virtual reality (VR) tech using some very early footage of concerts he did 30 or 40 years ago. They used this VR experience at the press conference to announce the world tour.

Another highlight for day two was WPP, where joint COO Mark Read talked to them about the recent changes at WPP.



An annus horribilis for WPP

Sam Swaine 17 Apr 2018



The team at TBWA spoke about what they have done to make sure that women have as much representation on their senior level as on their junior level. This was demonstrated by the eight senior-level women who presented the eight parts of their presentation. This was a stand-out session because of the way they did it. McDowell said they really took them inside to the heart of the agency by showing them their leadership programmes.

At CP+B, the last agency of the day, they encountered an agency that is busy reinventing themselves. Their ethos is to create the most talked-about and outrageously effective work in the world. The client is at the center of everything they do and they have a very experienced top creative team and a new approach with some great case studies for Domino's Pizza, Carlsberg Liverpool FC beer, and Amazon streaming.

Highlights of Day 3

On day three, the consultants visited Dentsu Aegis Network, IBM iX, Phenomenon and Havas.

McDowell told us that Dentsu Aegis is a relatively new network, with Dentsu having only bought Aegis five years ago. The company is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Japanese advertising and public relations firm Dentsu and is known to be very mysterious and discreet. We don't know much but we do know that it also has a number of media companies and digital media brands in South Africa and Africa. They are focused on real growth. What was impressive was that 55% of one of their digital media companies, 360i, is media and the rest is content, and that is where most of their growth is coming from.

Phenomenon, an independent agency, showed them what happens when agencies are involved with clients from the beginning. Their ethos is 'familiar is failure'. They encourage their clients to think of a remarkable question which presents a problem that the agency needs to solve. They showed a case study of work they did for a company called Intuit. This is what they created:

The last agency for the day, Havas, explained that it sees itself as the 'smallest big agency' and that they were committed to breaking down barriers in the world of marketing. They told the group that they have been busy building their Havas Village concept, that they have also gone from creative to creator and that entertainment within advertising is very important to them.

Highlights of Day 4

Day four saw them visit Fly, Serviceplan, 4A's (American Association of Advertising Agencies), The Escape Pod and The Media Kitchen. Serviceplan, a German-owned agency was one of the highlights being the largest in Europe and perhaps one of the first ad agencies that was fully integrated. What stood out was that this dynamic team seems to be able to overcome the typical cultural issues that beset agencies which operate in many countries.

At the Media Kitchen they met another high-energy team who works with many agencies within MDC. Media Kitchen shared about trends that they were currently observing; like by 2020, 50% of all searches on the internet will be voice-led. The fact that we touch our mobiles an average of 2617 times a day and that Google and Facebook account for 99% of all advertising growth worldwide. Collaboration is the name of the game for them.

Highlights of Day 5

On the last day, the consultants got to visit MDC and R/GA. They learnt that MDC sees itself as a federation of agencies with 52 agencies and 30 reporting units. The principle of this network is that the agencies remain owner-managed, although MDC takes a 51% stake. MDC told them that its top 10 clients in the federation work with at least four of the individual agencies in the group.

The last agency, R/GA was a big highlight and some of the things they commented on intrigued the group:

- The ad industry is in decline.
- Clients are building more and more capabilities in-house.
- Audiences are declining in the media that has traditionally been supported by advertising.
- There are two economies — legacy brands which compete with disruptive innovators.
- Companies that predate the digital revolution.
- Companies that now have asymmetrical competitors eg., Amazon competes with Walmart, Uber competes with owned automobiles.

McDowell goes into more detail touching on trends from this year's summit here:



South Africa on par when optimising the client-agency relationship

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ABOUT JUANITA PIENAAR

Juanita is the former editor of the marketing & media portal on the Bizcommunity website. She was also a contributing writer.

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