

Do award shows really matter?

 By Jessica Tennant

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On the back of the Publicis Groupe's announcement at Cannes this year that it will be transferring its award show spend to its investment in AI, agencies are increasingly questioning whether participating in award shows really matters.

I asked James Moffatt, co-founder and CEO of Promise Group and Johanna McDowell, founder and CE of the Independent Agency Search & Selection Company (IAS) to share their thoughts on exactly that, from an agency and client perspective respectively...

■ **James, congratulations to Promise Group on winning the 2017 AdFocus Medium Agency of the Year Award. What does this recognition mean to the agency, and in fact past recognition you've received from other awards?**

Moffatt: The win means a great deal to us. Oftentimes, when one is focused inwards on client work and agency matters, one loses context of progress achieved. External validation is a great way to have your efforts recognised and confirmed.



■ **Tell us more about the actual award and what it says about the agency.**

Moffatt: Each agency was judged against four measures: New business and growth; business retention and relationships; training and industry recognition; and empowerment/social responsibility. Every questionnaire response feeds into one of these criteria. The judging and scoring is audited by Deloitte SA. So, in order to win, we had to outperform all other agencies in the above metrics. We have been finalists before in 2015 and couldn't have asked for a better 2016/17, so we were hopeful.

Given we started Promise with no founding clients or start-up capital, we had to build the agency from nothing, so this achievement is absolutely fantastic!



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Promise 28 Nov 2017





James Moffatt

■ ***How does the agency or how do agencies in general leverage its accolades and award-winning campaigns to win more business at the end of the day?***

Moffatt: Clients often claim that awards are not important to them, but the Scopen research shows a different picture – that they do consider both business and creative performance when seeking out a new agency partner. There are some agency gems out there that don't show up in awards, the underdogs who are actually great performers – but having low visibility doesn't facilitate your business development. I think visibility and business or creative ranking go hand in hand.



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■ ***Johanna, from a pitch consulting point of view, what role do awards play in the selection of agencies on behalf of clients?***

McDowell: 43% of clients do not attribute any importance to awards according to our Agency Scope 2017 results. But that means that 57% do look at awards as a measure of agency ability, then we conclude that there is a role for awards when clients select agencies.

■ ***What are your thoughts on agencies participating in award shows?***

McDowell: They must choose carefully the ones that will be of most benefit to their reputation among clients.

■ ***What are some of the advantages and disadvantages?***

McDowell: Award shows can become very pressurising for agencies in terms of expenses. They might feel obliged to participate and yet may not be able to afford the time and money.

Moffatt: The disadvantages are twofold: cost and time. Particularly since margins are forever being squeezed and agency resources are stretched. Smaller agencies can never compete with large agency award budgets. So there is unfair skew that occurs every year. The advantages to a high ranking are also twofold: talent and client acquisition.

■ ***How did you react to the Publicis Groupe's announcement at Cannes this year?***

McDowell: It was a brave decision and one that they were unafraid to take given their need to invest their cash in other

tech investments for the future of their group.

Moffatt: I agree that it was a brave move, and I respect leaders who lean into the wind, but I did have mixed feelings about it. Their AI project has enormous potential, both for failure and success. Since it was launched I've heard nothing more about it, apart from the fact that the group is now re-entering awards. I don't know if that means the project is now delivering or nearing completion.



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Johanna McDowell

❏ **Do you believe the money spent on award shows is money well spent, or should the industry be shifting its spend to other areas, such as AI in Publicis' case?**

Moffatt: AI for a global group is brave and interesting, although I believe there are better AI projects being driven elsewhere and some which are already available to independents, should they be interested in collaboration and of course high subscription fees. Personally, I do believe in entering awards but most of our investment continues to benefit our clients, as we continue to diversify our offerings, such as data, at Promise.

McDowell: Each agency has its own business priorities. Agencies can be trusted to make good commercial decisions.

❏ **Another notable learning from Cannes this year is that the best agencies aren't driven by awards, but rather brand purpose. There's a fine line between seeking to create great advertising and achieving the end goal of winning awards.**

“ The days of campaigns being driven by awards should be long gone. It's a cliché but completely true – awards should be a by-product of effective work. - Moffatt ”

Well said, James! To discuss this further, feel free to contact Promise Group at hello@promisegroup.co.za or the IAS on (010) 594 0281, or follow [@PromiseAgency](https://twitter.com/PromiseAgency) and [@jomcdowell](https://twitter.com/jomcdowell) on Twitter.

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