

Joe Public founders named 2018 Medium Business Entrepreneur of the Year

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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Joe Public founders Pepe Marais and Gareth Leck were announced as 2018 Medium Business Entrepreneur of the Year at this year's Entrepreneur of the Year competition sponsored by Sanlam and Business/Partners. This just off the back of being announced Loeries 2018 Agency of the Year.

Having been a finalist last year, they re-entered this year with a stronger business and more purposeful approach, which saw them become winners, according to a release sent to Bizcommunity.



Pepe Marais (back) and Gareth Leck (front)

During their speech, Marais said: "I think entrepreneurs can change this country. I'm blessed and I think we're all blessed to be entrepreneurs. It's tough but it's worth it and we grow as people through the journey."

Leck added: "We've been bankrupt. I think we didn't have a boardroom table nine years ago, and now we've got a pretty cool boardroom table and a pretty cool business, so thank you. We are very blessed, as Pepe said."

I interviewed them to find out what the win really means to them and why the recognition and networking that comes with it means even more...

■ **What does being named 2018 Medium Business Entrepreneur of the Year mean to you and for Joe Public United?**

As entrepreneurs, we aren't often appreciated for the role we play within the greater economy as job-creators, so to be recognised and awarded was truly good for both Gareth's and my souls.

■ **How did you celebrate?**

We arrived back at work after the breakfast event to a nearly three hundred-strong gang of Joe Publicans outside our building, all cheering their lungs out. It was very special, to say the least because we believe that without our people we are nothing. We cracked a few bottles of champagne, basked in the moment for a few more minutes and then all got back to business as if nothing ever happened.



#Loeries2018: Joe Public on running for the creative future

Leigh Andrews 3 Aug 2018



■ **That's awesome! What do you think makes your business model or approach to business unique?**

Our growth purpose: to be the fertile soil that grows our people, our clients and our country. We uncovered this insight back in 2010 after surviving the worst recession of our lives. It made us question our reason for being, as an advertising agency, and it made us dig very deep for an answer.

And once we found this answer, authentically, we put it at the heart of our business. It is the driver behind everything we do. Our people, our product, our specialist services, our business tools and processes and our service to our greater community through One School at a Time. It is more than just a line of copy. It is in our DNA and infuses the energy of the Joe Public building – you can feel it the moment you walk through the door.

■ **Why did you decide to re-enter the competition this year?**

We felt that we came close last year to winning the competition, but we realised that we were not adding enough value to our people, clients and the greater economy, especially after seeing what other entrepreneurs within the Top 10 were doing. So, we decided to do better than our best, and then better, over the course of the last twelve months.

By driving excellence in all areas of our business on a daily basis, we managed to improve our creative output remarkably, which increased the value we add to our clients. We had also launched our School of Growth, geared towards improving the standard of the development of our people. We had created tools that could stand as proof of our purpose. So, based on our efforts, we felt we deserved a win and gave ourselves a second chance.



Joe Public United launches School of Growth

Joe Public 29 Jan 2018



“ Although it is good for the ego, and I knew it would make our mothers proud, the greater intention is always to put our brand, Joe Public, first. We are a fiercely independent, 100% South African-owned entity and recognition like this goes a long way towards affirming to our clients that they are sitting at the right table. ”

That said, we again left this year feeling inspired by what other entrepreneurial businesses are doing and have decided to knuckle down for the next three years and focus on the job at hand. We have an obsessive commitment to steering our ship towards greater creative output and, in doing so, to start the long journey towards correcting the state of our industry.

“ Let’s be honest – we are marginalised because we do not add the value we should add, as an industry, to our clients. This is not just the fault of our industry – equal responsibility should be taken by our clients. We are backing ‘wallpaper’ with billions of rands of media spend, and that should be considered a crime in a country where 30 million people can’t afford to eat. So, we are going to take stock of our approach, focus on what we can control, and bring more strategic and creative value to our clients. How else can we expect marketing to grow brands? ”



"Just start now and be creative" - Pepe Marais on Growing Greatness

Leigh Andrews 24 Aug 2018



■ **So true! Speaking of the state of the industry, what do you think of the current state of entrepreneurship in SA?**

I have a deep belief that the only way to close the poverty gap is to create more entrepreneurs, and, in doing so, create more job opportunities. It is that simple and I do not understand why it doesn’t get more focus from our government. In fact, if it was up to me, I would make ‘entrepreneurship’ a subject at school. I believe that at some level it already is being taught – most likely at private schools – but I have not experienced it in the government schools that I engage with.

But if it is being taught, my assumption is that the subject is most likely written by academics, and that is not what is needed. Entrepreneurs are not academic. They are mostly logical and street smart. They are a mix of IQ (intelligence quotient), EQ (emotional quotient), SQ (spiritual quotient) and RQ (resilience quotient).

“ In short, we’re a far cry from where we should be. Fix education, overhaul the status quo, inspire more entrepreneurs – and we may just manage to create a country that is a shining example to the world. ”

■ **Such good advice. Given the local ecosystem, why do you think platforms such as this, that recognise high-impact entrepreneurs, are important?**

Because there are so few of them. Speak to any true entrepreneur – one of those very few people who has started a business from scratch and worked minimum 16-hour days for the first 10 years of their business’ existence – and you will find that they always put themselves at the back of the queue. Entrepreneurs also often work in isolation, away from mentorship.

Many don’t have the means, over the course of the first decade of business, to invest in their own growth. This kind of platform serves as a form of inspiration. For one evening and morning, you get to mix with a bunch of people who speak the same language and who are heralded by the two major sponsors – Business Partners and Sanlam. Both Gareth and I are more grateful just for this than the award.



Winners of the 2018 Entrepreneur of the Year competition announced

5 Sep 2018



■ **What do you mean by being ‘back of the queue’?**

We put people first, ourselves last. Always. We have sleepless nights about doing that, which will serve Joe. We always make decisions based on what is best for the greater outcome, never based on our own egotistical needs. Even awards like this are more about our brand and our people than about us as individuals. I think this aspect in both of us, as people, is what has enabled us to stay ‘married’ as partners for two decades.

■ **What would you say to encourage this year’s finalists to re-enter next year?**

Finally, after two decades, we have figured out the truth about the double-edged sword of awards – and with that I mean all awards. One of our senior strategists literally coined the phrase a few weeks ago and I have adopted it as our new mantra: make work *that* wins awards, not *to* win awards. There is a distinct difference. Awards are a by-product of our efforts, and if you believe that you have put in the effort towards adding true value to our economy as an entrepreneur,

then you deserve to give yourself a second chance.

However, I have learned that real impact needs more than a 12-month cycle, and for this reason, we are going to focus our efforts on action first. In time, we'll see where it all falls.

■ **Briefly tell us your entrepreneurial journey.**

“ Newspaper delivery boy age 12 to 18. Turned the army into an entrepreneurial opportunity, without even knowing what we were fighting for. Exchanged my R4 rifle for a 4B pencil. Discovered art. Then advertising. Launched Joe Public Take-Away advertising from Cape Town together with Gareth in 1998. Obsessed with creative excellence and a highly disruptive business model. Sold our business 100% to an international communications giant in 2001. Became bottom-line obsessed. Merged with a C-grade agency in Johannesburg and inherited some large clients. Lost our creative edge. Then, lost our largest client. Realised we could possibly afford to buy our business back. Fought hand, tooth and nail for three years. Bought our business back in February 2009, lock, stock and two smoking barrels. Stared down the greatest recession since the Great Depression. Started building a new Joe Public from the ground up with a band of like-minded individuals who somehow managed to believe enough in our brand to stay the course. Found purpose for our business in 2010. Won a major retail account in 2011 – the start of breaking through as a major player in the industry. Broke through by winning major banking account at the end of 2012. Launched four other specialist businesses – Shift Joe Public (Strategic Brand Design), Ignite Joe Public (beyond-the-line), Engage Joe Public (Public Relations) and Connect Joe Public (Digital) between 2012 and 2017. Launched Joe Public School of Growth in February 2018. Digitised our above-the-line offering by May 2018. Ranked ‘Agency of the Year’ at the 2018 Loeries Awards. Grateful every day for our people, every single one of our clients and for the diversity and challenges of our country. And of course, for our wives, Heidi and Chanti. Finally, we’re at the start of something truly great. ”



#Loeries2018: Xolisa Dyeshana of Joe Public United on winning Agency of the Year

Jessica Tennant 27 Aug 2018



■ **Quite a journey, and just the tip of the iceberg I'm sure! What are some of the barriers you've had to overcome to get to where you are today?**

Social phobia. Not being good enough, creatively. Anxiety. To name a few of the smaller obstacles.

■ **What's next for Joe Public? In your speech, Pepe, you mentioned that your vision for Joe Public is actually to become an education company, not just an ad agency. Tell us more about this dream and the next steps to making it a reality.**

Deep and authentic transformation within our business is our number one strategy. How else can we produce the calibre of insightful, mass market work that is needed to help grow our clients?

Second to that, daily improvement of our product, services and processes. There's massive room for growth across everything we do.

Thirdly, lead our industry back to its rightful place of being seen as a respected partner by captains of our corporate world.

And then, yes, to continue to improve the efforts of One School at a Time, with a greater intention to purchase our partner school in Dobsonville, Soweto, privatise it and run it as an incubation hub of what education potentially could look like in our country. Why should creative problem-solving be reserved for marketing alone?



#NewCampaign: You'd *never* believe what some school girls use as substitutes to sanitary pads

Jessica Tennant 31 Jan 2018



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