

Sarah Browning-de Villiers on authentic, relevant content marketing that resonates

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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Publicis Machine recently received three honourable mentions at the global Pearl Impact Awards in New York for their work on the Sanlam Reality account. We asked chief content officer Sarah Browning-de Villiers, who drives the content marketing strategy for the Sanlam Group's loyalty and rewards programme along with Sanlam Reality's head of digital, marketing and communications, Francois Uys, what it takes to succeed in the content marketing space and why it's central to a brand's marketing and communications.

The honourable mentions received were for best brand partnership, best-branded content programme (B2C) and best use of social media.

"It's always exciting to receive recognition for the work that you do, and the Pearl Impact Awards are no exception. It's a prestigious global platform on which to find ourselves, and we're sharing recognition with some formidable international names.

"For me, it's also thrilling to be celebrated specifically in the space of content marketing. The Content Council, which runs the Pearl Impact Awards, is a global authority on content marketing. It just goes to show the best-in-class talent we have in content marketing in South Africa at Publicis Machine."

■ Tell us about your time at Publicis Machine so far, having joined a year ago and what these wins/mentions mean to you personally.

My first year at Publicis Machine has been incredibly rewarding and exciting! Since I joined, content marketing has become a key focus of the agency and it's a real privilege to be part of this. We are actively growing our team of content specialists because of how central it's become to what we do; it's wonderful to be part of something that's world-class.



Sarah Browning-de Villiers



#Newsmaker: Sarah Browning-de Villiers joins Publicis Machine

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■ Describe the agency's relationship with Sanlam Reality. Why do you believe you work well together?

We are deeply proud of our partnership with Sanlam Reality. It's a testament to the great work consistently delivered. We're privileged that Francois Uys (Sanlam Reality's head of digital, marketing and communications) and his team consider us a trusted business partner. It's fantastic to receive recognition from the Content Council, but the true reward comes in working with the marketing and communications team at Sanlam Reality who allow us to experiment and take risks every day. Francois and his team believe in doing the right thing, not necessarily the easy thing; this allows us to constantly evolve our content marketing strategy with them. They are open to ideas, innovations, experiments and challenges – all of the things that make a true partnership.

There is a huge amount of trust imparted to us by Francois, and for that, I am extremely grateful. Francois has a phenomenal appetite for innovation and change, which is both challenging and stimulating. I have personally learnt a huge amount from him within the space of just a year, and across both teams, there is a lot of mutual respect and trust, which is very special.

■ ***What are you currently working on for the client?***

We recently launched a new custom print magazine with Sanlam Reality, *Reality Club*, aimed at their Reality Club members, and the reception has really been fantastic. While our approach with Francois is digital-first, we're seeing the rich results of dedicated, premium print magazines as part of our holistic strategy pay-off, too.

There is also a new Sanlam Reality App, and Sanlam Reality has just launched a new benefit for its members: Independent Gyms & Studios, allowing members to avoid mainstream gyms and work out their own way.

We are constantly questioning everything we do with Francois and his team – optimising and adjusting is the name of the game! It certainly keeps us on our toes, but that's exactly where we want to be.

■ ***What other factors do you believe contributed to the agency's success in this regard?***

I think there is something powerful about how our agency's content marketing team is rooted in excellence: we all have extensive experience in the worlds of publishing, journalism and communications; we are all experts at our craft. There is also a very powerful brains trust of strategic thinkers in our content marketing team with a truly channel-agnostic approach, all backed by the broader digital, creative and PR specialists of Publicis Machine. Put these things together with a progressive client like Sanlam Reality and you have real magic!

■ ***What does it take, in your opinion, to succeed in the content marketing space specifically?***

An understanding that relevance wins.

“ *The popular meme can be that no one has any time or care to consume content anymore, but that's simply not true – series are getting longer, there is a hunger for long-form articles and people are keen to engage in content that truly resonates with them.* ”

The hard thing to crack is relevance. This comes with understanding who you're talking to, and why. Don't say something for the sake of saying something – speak carefully and intentionally. This is also why effective content marketing must be data- and insights-led, something that's at the heart of how Publicis Machine ideates and operates. The more we know, the more relevant we can be.

■ ***That's exactly it. And where does content marketing come into a brand's marketing and communications?***

Authentic content marketing puts your brand at the centre of your consumer's world because it's relevant and resonates.

“ *For me, content marketing is the way to build genuine trust in a world where consumers are savvy and demand quality. It's the 'why' that builds a true relationship. The analogy I refer to over and over again is that you wouldn't dream of knocking on your neighbour's door and asking them to invest in your business without having first built a relationship with them in a meaningful way: walking their dog, housesitting for them, lending them milk when they're low. Content marketing is all of that authentic engagement before you reach out to a consumer and ask them to invest or take a costly action.* ”

■ ***Comment on the current state of content marketing in SA.***

Globally, content marketing is well understood, but in South Africa, we still have some way to go in unpacking

what makes content marketing unique, why it matters and how it can deliver ROI. Yet in our content-overload era, it's a no-brainer for brands who want to cut through the noise and create something authentic. Winning on a global platform reminds us all of one incredible truth: we have an internationally acclaimed talent and capability on hand locally – now we need to ensure we nourish it, celebrate it and use it to its fullest potential.

ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

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