

Meet young voice Siyabonga Thwala

By  Jessica Tennant

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In the run-up to the 23rd Prism Awards to be announced virtually on Friday, 15 May, we chatted to this year's cohort of 'young voices' about their fresh approach to the judging process.

In this series of interviews, we find out what they've learnt working alongside the cluster judges (albeit remotely) and what their young minds bring to the virtual table.



2020 Prism Young Voices announced!

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"The cancelation of the ceremony was quite a hard pill to swallow, but lives matter. I was looking forward to meeting the great minds that have put together the work we have been adjudicating and building relationships with them. However, the judging experience was very rewarding and I will forever be grateful for the opportunity. I think the Covid-19 outbreak is challenging communicators to advance. The near future requires that there be improved ways of working limiting physical contact. Industry 4.0 has been preparing us for such a time as this, UberEats is one example of a technologically advanced way of selling to people at the comfort of their own beds. The outbreak has everyone on all forms of digital platforms and this is a great opportunity for communicators to plug in their brands." – Siyabonga Thwala, public relations student at the University of Johannesburg and chairperson of its Student's Public Relations Association (SPRA), commenting on the cancellation of the physical Awards and the general impact of the pandemic on the industry.



Siyabonga Thwala

Here, our interview with Thwala...

 **What does this recognition and opportunity mean to you?**

This has been the greatest achievement thus far. To me it means exposure. It also comes as a platform to learn from the

industry's best professionals. I feel privileged to have been granted the opportunity to meet and work with great integrated marketers, whom I look up to. The most amazing thing is having to do this whilst I am still a student. I stated in a tweet after the announcement that this is the genesis of greatness for me as an upcoming PR professional.

■ ***Briefly tell us about your experience in the industry.***

I cannot say I have much experience as I am still a student, however, I have managed to stretch myself outside the prescribed content required to complete my academic qualification. One of the ways I did that was joining the Student's Public Relations Association of which I am currently presiding over as executive chairperson. The association has enabled me to work with a variety of communication agencies doing volunteer PR work.

The University of Johannesburg has helped me improve my skills by allowing me to work as a student PR assistant on different projects, one of which is the TEDx University of Johannesburg. I am yet to spread my wings into the industry and am looking forward to great learnings.

■ ***Comment on the judging process.***

I must say this one was fascinating and also very challenging. It was very interesting to go through different campaigns and look at the amazing work that communicators are doing. I came across great campaigns, which were facilitated by students like myself and that to me posed a need to go and challenge my peers to go beyond the books and spread their wings so they can fast-track their growth as young communicators.

Judging campaigns from big agencies was challenging. Had it not been for the judging briefing session which was instructing as to what to look for in a campaign and everything that makes a killer campaign, I would have probably given all the agencies 100% on my scoresheet. The work was just amazing, but one also needed to look beyond the results (ROI) of the campaign and take into account everything that came together in the planning and execution of the campaign.

■ ***What has the response been to this year's entries?***

The entries in my cluster were really amazing. One thing I can tell, from conversations I had with some judges, is that the quality of the entries was astonishing and this means the industry is advancing. It is great that the judges leave comments on every scoresheet to be communicated to the entrant. I think that is very helpful in improving the quality of work, not just for competition purposes but even in the daily functioning and facilitation of PR campaigns.

■ ***Prisa also introduced the Student Campaign of the Year in 2016. Why do you think it's important that PR students are included in such initiatives?***

I think that was a great move. This gives the students an opportunity to be contributors into the work of the industry and in the process it helps them to develop their skills as their campaigns are assessed and reviewed. Winning is great, but should it happen that you do not win, there is still gain as the judges give feedback on every campaign in writing to ensure that the entrant knows which areas to improve.

This becomes also beneficial to the industry as the students bring a young perspective on board. Communication is an evolving phenomena and as times are moving the industry needs to ensure that messages are always relevant to the time and targeted parties.

■ ***What do you think young minds bring to the table?***

Generally, we are all most likely to say young minds bring a 'fresh perspective'. I had an interesting conversation with one of the senior judges and I was going on telling him about how the world is moving to the digital space and how we need to do away with traditional ways of advertising. He burst my little bubble by one question, 'Who drives the economy?'. I don't think it is wise to do away with something that works, rather improve it to maximise its effect.

I want to believe that the generation of young people we have today is a group of great thinkers. That is evident, even with toddlers of our time – when you buy a little boy a toy car, for example, they won't just take it and play, but will break it down to see what makes it move the way it does. This is the kind of curiosity that young minds carry. We are a group of people who always wants to challenge the status quo and I believe that public relations is more effective from a post-modern as opposed to functional approaches to communication. This is to say traditional ways of doing things should constantly be improved and new different perspectives be considered in order to maximise the impact of our communication.

▀ ***What have you learnt working alongside the cluster judges?***

The judging debate really blew some air into my short hair. It was great to also be a contributor to decision-making by raising my opinions as to why a certain campaign deserves a certain rating. Over and above that, I learnt a lot from the comments, which came from my senior judges. One of the learnings was looking at a communication problem vs a business problem and how these two problems cannot be approached the same way. Some campaigns successfully catered for a communication problem, but with no return in investment in terms of sales. As much as PR might be a communication function, in a business context it should serve a business function (make or increase sales) through creative communication.

▀ ***What would the title of Prisms Young Judge for the 2020 awards mean to you?***

It would mean that I am a great communicator in the making. The Prism Young Voices initiative has changed my perceptions of public relations as a student, though I volunteered in some PR functions, my view of PR wasn't broad enough. Being a judge for this year's Prism Awards allowed me to look at everything that comes into play in order to design and execute a great PR campaign. The title would mean I have a role to play among my peers, to be an example and influencer of change. The whole experience encouraged me to go back and encourage more students to be go-getters and also to inform them of the true essence of public relations and the role it plays in society and in the business world.

▀ ***Comment on the current state of PR.***

Personally, I think public relations has been playing it safe for a long time. I came across an article that said something about focusing on selling lest you risk being cut out. Well, I am a strong believer that sales matter but increasing them should matter more than just selling. 'Safe PR' limits creativity which limits the progress in which PR can bring about. If public relations focuses on maintaining existing relations so business can run as usual and just make sales, it will fail at some point. Communicators need to always be proactive and not just maintain but improve existing relationships and build more for the benefit of both the organisation and their stakeholders.

As mentioned, the Awards take place on Friday, 15 May. Follow us on [Twitter](#) for live updates and visit our [Prism Awards special section](#) for other related content and a list of all the winners following the announcement. Here's the link to our other [social media](#) pages, as well as the Prism Awards' [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) accounts. Follow Siyabonga Thwala on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

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