

2013 AME Awards: Interview with AME's executive director, Alisun Armstrong

NEW YORK, US: Gayle Seminara Mandel of the New York-based International Awards Group interviewed AME's executive director, Alisun Armstrong, to find out what makes the AME's Awards tick, and get her views on awards programs generally - what makes them work, what makes them not work.

Gayle Seminara Mandel (GSM): What makes the AME Awards unique from other awards show?

We're not the 800-pound gorilla in the room, and oddly enough I think that's how we stand out - we're not mired in bureaucracy. Our size lends us flexibility, lets us make big changes really quickly, and allows us to pay attention to the details and deal with people on a personal level. We've also got a team who's very passionate about advertising and marketing, and with more than 100 years experience in the awards industry between us, we've got some unbeatable institutional knowledge.

GSM: What's new for AME this year and what strategy do you have planned to guide AME into the future?



Alisun Armstrong.

The most obvious change is a new look - the new skin is more dynamic, more versatile, and has a lot more personality. The old website was a bit bland, I thought; and since we're such a dynamic competition, concentrating on not only ideas but also results, I thought it was important for the brand to reflect that right from the starting gate.

We've also restructured the entry process. In order for our judges to get a clear understanding of our entrants' campaigns and results, we require a great deal of information, and it can seem overwhelming. I felt it was important to organise the entry form in a way that made sense to whoever was filling it out - whether it was an experienced awards coordinator or an intern. A campaign shouldn't suffer in the scoring rounds for obfuscation in the entry process.

Another big change is a new entry fee structure. Awards season is a busy time, with a lot of information to be gathered and a lot of forms to fill out. Based on some feedback we got through an entrant survey, we thought we'd give our entrants a little incentive to get their information to us earlier rather than later, when time is tight: We've instituted a tiered fee system. Basically, the earlier you get us your materials, the less you pay. For example, if you enter by 27 August, about four weeks after the competition opens, you'll pay the 2012 entry fee. But if you wait longer than that, the fees increase up until the deadline, 22 October.

We've also got some new categories, including Sports Promotion, Branded Entertainment, Ebooks, Games, Pop-up Stores, Tablets, Low-budget, Collateral, and Print, and a new category group, Social Benefit.

The Social Benefit categories concentrate on campaigns that benefit a charity's brand or initiatives and contribute to the greater good, showcasing advertising and marketing campaigns that promote peace, human rights, and social consciousness as well as a commitment to planetary stewardship. Categories include Civic/Social Education, Environmental Issues, Philanthropic Appeals, Promotion of Peace/Human Rights, and Promotion of Health & Human services. There's a lot of great work being done in this area, and I can't wait to see what comes in.

As far as the future goes, I strongly believe that if we're going to present ourselves as the arbiters of what constitutes creative, effective marketing, we better know what we're talking about and demonstrate it through our website, entry process, communications, and the calibre of our judges. We understand and empathise with the work our entrants do

because it's part of our lives, too. My plan is to re-evaluate and adapt, adopt, and improve every year based on what we learn every day as a part of this exciting industry so we can continue to be an expert in recognising the world's most effective advertising and marketing.

GSM: Is there a trend towards advertising that has a social conscience and why did you add a roster of Social Benefit categories?

I added the Social Benefit categories specifically because, yes: I do think there's a growing trend towards marketing for good. I also added it because I think there needs to be as much incentive as possible for agencies and individuals to promote a cause or an idea rather than a thing that can be put in a box and shipped to you. And there's already a lot of great work being done in this area, as can be evidenced by the work we saw in last year's competition - even beyond the big winners like "Operation Christmas" and "Save As WWF" - and the people doing it should be recognised.

GSM: How important is it for the AME Awards to select regional jurors to review the competition's entries? What are qualities are you looking for when assembling the 2012 AME Jury?

Because we've set effectiveness as the higher bar in the competition, it's important that the entry is reviewed in context. Social, economic, and cultural factors contribute so much to every part of a campaign, from planning to execution to success (or failure); a judge who possesses a base knowledge of where these campaigns are coming from and the people who experienced them can offer more nuanced feedback and a more accurate score.



That being said, it's not enough to have been born in a particular place to judge entries from there. Deciding what work earns the World's Best Award for Advertising & Marketing Effectiveness requires the world's best judges. Every year we build a team of top international interactive and multidisciplinary marketers, media planners, strategy directors, social media experts, and creative directors to score the entries. Our judges also act as advisors, helping us to keep the AME Awards relevant. We leverage their expertise as we look to future competitions.

GSM: What are the criteria for evaluating entries? Can you elaborate on the importance of the enhanced scoring process?

Judges evaluate each entry according to a four-tiered matrix, assigning each component a score between 1 and 10: results and effectiveness, 30%; idea, 25%; execution, 25%; and challenge, strategy, and objectives, 20%. It's basically a formula that breaks down what makes a creative, effective campaign: a good idea with a good execution, of course, but more importantly, effective; and if it also met the clients expectations, bonus.

GSM: What makes an award-winning campaign trophy-worthy, and why is so important to be recognised in this competition?

A winning AME entry demonstrates a ground-breaking solution to a challenging marketing problem. It exhibits the accomplishment of specific marketing goals and objectives through creative execution and strategic planning.

Winning an AME Award is a virtual stamp of approval from advertising and marketing industry leaders all over the globe. Winners also receive an invaluable amount of PR and exposure as we promote them internationally through press releases, our Winner Showcases, university media centres, the AME website and our international network of media partners. It's an incredible ROI!

GSM: What qualities does a campaign need to earn an AME Platinum Award and why is the AME Platinum Award such a prestigious honour?

To decide the Platinum winners, the full complement of judges reviews all Gold-winning work, regardless of region. The

entries that make it to this round are already exemplary; those that are chosen to represent their regions as Platinum winners were able to prove to an international panel of judges that their campaign truly represented the most creative and effective thing happening out there.

GSM: What, if any, cultural trends have you seen when reviewing 2012's award-winning entries?

The trend I see right now is community-building - social media marketing engagement strategies were a huge trend amongst the 2012 AME Award-winning entries, and companies using engaged participation dominated the winner's circle. And that was long before Pinterest caught fire. My prediction: It will only get bigger. I expect the bulk of the 2013 entries to involve some sort of community-building or social media engagement campaign. It will be a tough competition in this area, as there is so much great work being done in service to what I'm starting to think of as the Cult of Social.

GSM: How will digital and technology continue to affect the future of advertising and marketing effectiveness and AME's categories?

Our industry evolves at a mind-blowing pace. Just about every leap in technology represents an opportunity for our clients - almost every step forward provides marketers with a new opportunity to reach their target audience. Our challenge is staying relevant, paying attention to trends, keeping abreast of how messages are going out... all of that is key to recognising who's doing it most effectively.

GSM: What is the most important point or idea about the AME Awards you would like potential entrants to be aware of?

The AME Awards belongs to the marketing and advertising industry. We're here to serve them. My big boss, Jim Smyth, has told me and my colleagues to see ourselves as custodians; the competition is not about us, it's about curating and maintaining the best of what's out there. We respect the work our clients create, and we work hard to make sure they get the recognition they deserve.

GSM: Which regions around the globe would you like to expand the AME global footprint and why?

We have seen disappointingly little work from the Latin America and Middle East/Africa regions, and we know good work is happening there. The AME Awards prides itself in honouring the world's best - but if we're not seeing campaigns from all over the globe, we're not fulfilling our mission. And because we aim to recognise campaigns that are working on a regional and cultural basis, I feel it's important to represent people everywhere.

GSM: How do you as an executive director stay on top of all the evolving changes in the industry?

I read. A lot. Thank god for the internet, because I don't know how else a body could keep up with everything going on out there. I also depend on my jury - we've got a lot of smart, savvy people on board, and their feedback and input is invaluable.

GSM: How will you on behalf of AME engage future generations of advertising creatives and why is it important to invest in the next generation of advertising stars?

The audience as a whole is approaching a marketing and advertising saturation point, I think. Branding, messaging, advertising is everywhere the average citizen looks - online, on their mobile devices, on television, on the street. Some even feel like they're assaulted by advertising. The challenge today's marketers and advertisers face is, quite frankly, getting their message in front of their target audience without pissing them off. That, in my opinion, is why rewarding effectiveness is so

important; if you've come up with an ad that not only gets attention but doesn't make people angry with you and even motivates them to participate or purchase, you're doing something right. Hopefully, by promoting AME Award winners and getting them exposure, we'll inspire future creative to do meaningful work that respects the viewer while meeting the objectives of the creative brief.

GSM: What inspires you about you being an executive director for the AME Awards and what is the most rewarding part of your job?

As an unrepentant ad fan, getting to see the amazing work done around the world is a huge reward - I might never get to see it otherwise. I love smart, funny, commercials. I also like random weird ones. I love that my job lets me read up on and look at marketing campaigns that are happening all over the world. I love that I'm tasked with keeping up with these brilliant creatives, keeping tabs on what they're doing in order to make sure we're offering a competition that honours their work.

Answers to questions from Bizcommunity

Bizcom: Will there ever come a time when there are simply too many awards programs?

Any market is a prime candidate for saturation. The key is keeping your particular brand relevant - especially in our industry, one that evolves at a mind-blowing pace. The challenges the AME Awards faces aren't any different from the challenges faced by the creative and marketing teams who enter: staying on top of industry trends, taking advantage of the latest technologies, meeting our clients' expectations, and constantly striving for excellence. My plan is to re-evaluate and adapt, adopt, and improve every year based on what we learn every day as a part of this exciting industry so we can continue to be an expert in recognising the world's most effective advertising and marketing.

Bizcom: There are sure to have been instances when winning an AME award has seen the recipient see their business/career enhanced and advance as a direct result... any examples?

You know what? I have no idea - shame on me. But that's an excellent winner follow-up strategy; check back with me in a few months and I'll have an answer for you.

Bizcom: In your view, what constitutes a winning awards program?

Three things: relevance, empathy, and support. Allow me to elaborate:

Just about every leap in technology represents an opportunity for our industry - almost every step forward provides marketers with a new opportunity to reach their target audience. Staying relevant, paying attention to trends, keeping abreast of how messages are going out, all of that is key to recognising who's doing it most effectively.

The AME Awards is a business like any other business - we need to keep our clients happy and provide a beneficial service. And we understand and empathise with the work our entrants do because it's part of our lives, too. If we're going to present ourselves as the arbiters of what constitutes creative, effective marketing, we better know what we're talking about and demonstrate it through our website, entry process, and communications.

And as far as support goes, I'll come right out and say it: We have a pretty involved entry process. But all the information we ask for is really critical to the judges' understanding of a campaign and its effectiveness. That doesn't mean, though, that it has to be difficult to tell the story. That's why we make sure that the office staff is well versed in the competition rules and entry forms, why we improved and streamlined the online entry process, and why we hold customer satisfaction at such a premium. We want nothing more than to have so much great work we don't know what to do with it all. We thrive on the inspiration we get from our entrants.

Bizcom: Where do organisers of awards get it wrong, where do they get it right?

People can take themselves a little too seriously and lose sight of what it is we do. We're in the recognition business - it's not about the award, the physical statue, it's about the work and the people who create it. My big boss, Jim Smyth, sees us as custodians; the competition belongs to the industry, we just curate and maintain the best of what's out there. The competitions that put the winners first are the ones getting it right.

Bizcom: Children in advertising... in South Africa we, like every country, use children extensively when it comes to advertising and marketing items aimed at the children's market, but there are also many instances in which a child is used basically to tell Dad how he should invest his money, or whatever. Some people can find this a little irritating. Are these (the latter) uses of kids in advertising pretty universal? Do you take them as you see them or do you think some adults are also irritated?

There's an old adage in the theatre world: Never work with kids or dogs. Their guile, their innocence robs the audience of their guard and completely steals the show. It also evokes nostalgia in the adult audience. I'll admit it's cloying and becoming more and more heavy-handed, but there's a reason it keeps being used: it works. The opinions and worldview of a child is a clean slate, the perfect foil for the realities of adult/modern life.

Bizcom: What do you think of the use of humour in advertising - fun sells?

I think humour is a really effective way to engage a target audience - who doesn't love to laugh? And if someone can make you laugh, that someone has made a connection with you, touched a part of you that you recognise. But if we're talking about advertising, there has to be an idea behind it, a purpose. If it's empty or just funny for the sake of being funny, the viewer isn't going to come away with any relationship to the brand. There's an elusive sweet spot where funny and memorable make a connection; the best campaigns find that sweet spot and dig in.

Bizcom: There are marketing campaigns and then there are marketing campaigns... the good, the bad, the ugly: what in your view constitutes the ideal campaign?

I'd say my view could be illustrated through our scoring matrix - results and effectiveness, 30%; idea, 25%; execution, 25%; and challenge, strategy, and objectives, 20%. I want to see a good idea with a good execution, of course, but it's really important to me that it was effective; and if it also met the clients expectations, bonus.

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