

Ogilvy, scam ads and SA's international reputation

 By [Herman Manson](#)

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Last week it came to light that Ogilvy Johannesburg had submitted ads created for AETN's South African broadcast partner, MultiChoice, to numerous trade publications and blogs, as well as having entered it into numerous international ad awards - in spite of it never receiving [approval from client](#).



In the meantime, it has been awarded a Silver Clio and was a finalist at The One Show, and one of the ads reportedly just ran in the latest issue of *Migrate* - the official Loerie Awards magazine. Marketing blog MarkLives.com had also blogged about it, as the [campaign in question](#) had been submitted by Ogilvy, along with information, which MarkLives published in good faith

Cease and desist

Then, last week, MarkLives.com received a cease and desist letter from [AETN](#), parent company of The History Channel, demanding it remove advertising material for the channel from this site. It seems MarkLives was not the only site targeted by AETN's lawyers; Adsoftheworld.com [removed the material from its site](#) on the same day MarkLives received the threat of legal action.

When contacted for comment, Graham Pfuhl, marketing and sales director at MultiChoice, stated that the campaign in question had in fact been rejected outright by MultiChoice, and confirmed "no History Channel ads can be published without the prior authorisation of AETN."

It is quite obvious that not only MarkLives.com but the local industry is owed an explanation.

The following set of questions were sent to Ogilvy:

1. Do you have a statement on the suspension (pending investigation) of the campaign in question by the Clio Awards?
2. Why did Ogilvy submit a campaign rejected by client to numerous international awards?
3. What is Ogilvy's view on scam ads and is this in fact what was submitted to said awards?
4. Will Ogilvy be issuing a formal apology to MultiChoice, AETN or the media organisations and award organisers which received legal threats as a result of this campaign running without client approval?
5. Will Ogilvy withdraw the campaign from all awards it might have been entered for, as well as return awards the campaign have already won?

Julian Ribeiro, MD at Ogilvy Johannesburg, responded with the following: "It is clear that there has been a misunderstanding regarding the circumstances surrounding the flighting of the ad, and its subsequent entry into creative awards shows. Ogilvy Johannesburg did pass the work by the local client. However, Ogilvy acknowledges that we did not go through the full and proper approval process. Ogilvy Johannesburg is taking all commercially reasonable steps to ensure that the material is removed from publication. Ogilvy, AETN and MultiChoice have been co-operating to clear up the misunderstanding, and the matter has been resolved."

Sidestepped

Having sidestepped most of the questions, the statement does little but muddies the water even further.

What does Ogilvy mean when saying that it passed work by local client without going through the full and proper approval process? If it were rejected by client, certainly it doesn't matter how formal or informal the process was - it should not have been submitted for awards.

Will Ogilvy be returning the Clio and any other awards that might have been received, given the information that has now come to light?

"Ogilvy Johannesburg is taking all commercially reasonable steps to ensure that the material is removed from publication - this includes its withdrawal from creative awards shows," was the response from Ogilvy.

So it is giving back the Clio. Yes? No? Your guess is as good as mine...

Queried the matter

MarkLives also queried the matter with MultiChoice, which previously categorically stated that the campaign had been rejected outright. Pfuhl sent the following statement: "This incident has caused extreme embarrassment to both MultiChoice and Ogilvy as this campaign did not go through our rigid authorisation channels, which always insist on written sign-off. I believe that some staff at Ogilvy were not informed of this and the ads were distributed and entered for awards. Naturally, as we did not have AETN authorisation, efforts are being made to withdraw the campaign from all public showing, including award entries. Since this incident arose we have worked with both AETN and Ogilvy to reduce any damage done."

Does this mean the campaign wasn't rejected, leading Ogilvy to submit the campaign to trade and to enter it into awards, but without actually having received final sign-off from top management?

Amid the lack of clarity, one point that can be made with reasonable certainty is that the campaign never saw the day of light outside limited trade exposure. Ogilvy could not launch the campaign without final sign-off, as certainly even 'some' Ogilvy staffers realised. In fact, it remains uncertain that they even sought such permission.

Discussion hijacked

With the discussion around the ads having been hijacked by ultra-conservative American commentators out to [prove that the ads are anti-American](#), AETN, MultiChoice and Ogilvy have all been opened to abuse by a radical fringe.

With nobody acknowledging responsibility, our industry has suffered a major setback in terms of good governance and transparency and future South African entries to international awards will face tougher scrutiny from organisers.

Despite managing the brand reputations of some of the largest companies in the world, Ogilvy has failed to put in place any strategy to safeguard its own. It doesn't seem to realise that business as usual is no longer acceptable. Accountability is the new name of the game - I guess not only bankers and brokers missed that memo.

Update:

The CLIO Awards provided the following statement after removing the History Channel campaign by Ogilvy Johannesburg from its website last week pending further investigation:

"Ogilvy Johannesburg has withdrawn the entry from the 2009 CLIO competition."

Short and sweet but at least it's an answer.

• Adapted from original blog posts [*With a pat on the head, all is well again at Ogilvy*](#) and [*The History Channel issues cease and desist to bloggers*](#) on MarkLives.com, published 26 May and 21 May 2009 respectively.

ABOUT HERMAN MANSON

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