

Winning ingredients for magazine publishing

 By [Louise Marsland](#)

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The annual magazine publishing awards, the PICAs, hosted by the Magazine Publishers Association of South Africa and sponsored by Sappi, were one of the more interesting this year. They were as glitzy and glam as usual, with SA's top editors in their designer best, contentious after one publisher boycotted the awards alleging publishing mediocrity, and fascinating as the obscure *Dairy Mail* won best business-to-business title for the second year in a row, while the consumer editors lined up for the first best editor award named after publishing doyen Jane Raphaely. But none of this detracted from the best magazines on the night... so what are the winning ingredients?

In her speech, Elizabeth Shorten, chairperson of the MPASA PICA Awards 2006, emphasised that the PICA Awards are about excellence in magazine publishing. And as a PICA judge in the business-to-business category for the last two years, I can say, certainly from my experience, that the winners usually stand a clear head and shoulders above the rest.

But the Magazine Publishers' Sappi PICA Awards are not just about winning, as Shorten points out, although some of the tearful faces and solemn tables of those who did not walk away with a PICA trophy on the night, belie that statement... But as Shorten explains: "Often publishers learn more from their failures than from their successes. The decisions reached and the comments made by (the) some 200 judges who are experts in their fields are an invaluable guide to those who wish to learn and benchmark and improve. That is why we make available to all entrants, on request, a consolidated judges' score and comment sheet.

"Winning this award is a wonderful accolade but it should not be the true goal," Shorten emphasises.

She's right, to a point, as the real goal should be publishing excellence with integrity; however, we all know that advertisers are swayed by awards and magazine publishing is a tough game with margins that are being squeezed all the time.

What makes a winner?

Judges were surveyed for the first time this year and had some valuable insight for the titles that did not take a win or make a highly commended. Magazines that did not make the grade consistently showed a lack of inspiration and creativity, with customer magazines being singled out in this regard. A point was also made that there are just too many magazines in the marketplace - although if they're still around there must be a market in that marketplace!

So what are the key ingredients that the judges identified in the winning titles?

The chief judge of the PICAs, Ann Donald, has identified the following factors that distinguish the front runners at the

awards:

1. Singularity of focus on their target market.
2. The courage to be different.
3. Creativity.
4. Passion.
5. Sound business judgment.

Donald explains: "The increased competition brought about by the wider choice is stimulating innovation and smart thinking. Winning editors and publishers are rising to the challenge by becoming fiercely reader-centric, which is of course the only sustainable way to deliver the audiences that advertisers expect."

In terms of editorial excellence, 79% of the judges were impressed with the overall quality. When it was good, they said, it was very good, but when it was bad, it was, well, bad.

Judges indicated what holds magazines back from excellence and winning awards:

1. Complacency, relying on the formula.
2. Lack of innovation.
3. Disrespect for readers evidenced by cheap visuals, cheaper copy and poor editing - especially in the customer and business-to-business sectors.
4. Further minuses are pandering to advertisers and poor design.
5. Magazines should make more of an effort to be relevant to the local market.
6. An overall tendency to settle for the obvious.
7. Needs a breath of fresh air.
8. Design seems to be stuck in the 90s for some publications.

Understanding of the target market was a key factor for the judges. Eighty percent of judges agreed that the majority of magazines understand and serve their markets well, but 20% had reservations, saying that in some instances, the actual content offering differs from what should be of interest to the people the magazine thinks they are targeting. Some rely on formulae that are not sufficiently relevant or progressive for their markets.

And perhaps the most damning comment: one often gets the idea that the publication is simply produced to generate advertising revenue.

Business success

In terms of the business success of the publications assessed, there was a definite vote of confidence from 81% of the judges, while 87% of them believe that the current state of the South African magazine publishing industry is healthy.

Shorten continued: "As for innovation, it has been said that no great step, private or public, has ever been undertaken in a bliss of certainty. Our 'Best New Launch category' shows that there are many publishers out there with enough courage and foresight to push the boundaries and take that difficult first step into the unknown. And thanks to them, others may follow.

"This has also been a year of firsts for the Magazine Publishers' Sappi PICA Awards. For the first time, we held the judging of most customer and consumer categories in Cape Town, which enabled us to tap into a whole new pool of talent. I was privileged to team lead two sessions in Cape Town, and was very impressed with the high quality of the judging. This is also the inaugural year for the Jane Raphaely Editor of the Year Award. The joint requirements of business and creative success recognised by the PICAs are nowhere more necessary than in the editor of a magazine. This coveted award, judged by the entrants' peers, was hotly contested. We are very grateful to Jane Raphaely, herself one of the greatest editors in our country's history, for this wonderful opportunity to recognise the contribution of our editors to publishing

success."

The editor of *Weg!*, Bun Booyens, won the coveted Editor of the Year Award this year.

The MPASA will also be taking the promotion of magazines further with Sappi's sponsorship of the new Magazine Advocacy programme. More will be released about that in the new year, but the programme, originally from the UK, will involve the training of magazine staff as "ambassadors" for the magazine industry, not just their own titles.

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