

Exclusive: TBWA's CCO Carl Willoughby: More than just bragging rights - awards matter to creativity, credibility, business

Awards are a reminder that even in this age of algorithms, brilliant, brave creativity still matters.

 By Carl Willoughby 14 May 2025



Carl Willoughby chief creative officer, TBWA and chairman - Creative Circle Awards says Awards are a reminder that even in this age of algorithms, that brilliant, brave creativity still matters (Image supplied)

Every year, after the adulation has faded and the dust has settled on yet another round of global advertising awards, a familiar debate resurfaces: Do these awards really matter?

For some, they're the self-satisfied currency of creative egos. For others, they're a costly indulgence in a time of budget squeezes and AI-driven disruption.

More than Noddy badges

I would argue that creative awards are far more than Noddy badges and shiny trophies for agencies and their clients.

Having recently returned from judging at The One Show in the Dominican Republic, where the standard of work was exceptional, it was clear that these accolades are not just a celebration of craft; they're a reminder that creative excellence is a powerful and strategic business driver.

In a world where the value of creativity is diminished by profitability analysis, performance dashboards, and AI outputs, awards provide a form of validation that's hard to quantify, yet impossible to ignore.

They give clients confidence. They give agencies a compass.

And yes, they give creatives the affirmation they rarely admit they need.



A business function

Awards also serve a vital business function.

They are one of the few levers we can pull to prove value in an industry that trades in the intangible.

Because our sector's efforts are not product-based – we don't build cars, design clothing, or manufacture coffee machines – we shape perceptions, influence consumer behaviour, create emotional connections, and find solutions for brands.

Invisible work visible

Awards make this invisible work visible.

They show clients that they're working with a partner who's pushing boundaries, not just filling briefs.

Even if that agency is not winning work for a particular client, it's important to the client that their agency do award-winning work. And to the staff who work there.

Ultimately, creativity correlates with superior financial performance.



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Studies that show this

Several studies bear this out.

- In 2014, an [Adobe](#) thought leadership report, conducted by Forrester Consulting, found 58% of companies fostering creativity saw revenue growth of 10% or more, compared to only 20% of less creative firms. Creative companies were also 1.5 times more likely to report market leadership and 2.1 times more likely to be recognised as “best places to work”.
- One of the most comprehensive and data-driven analyses to date by [McKinsey study](#) found that top-performing companies use four key management practices to translate creativity into business value, revealing a strong link between creative advertising and commercial success.

Using an index called the Award Creativity Score (ACS), based on Cannes Lions wins between 2001 and 2016, they found companies scoring highest in creativity also outperformed their peers on financial metrics and innovation.

Top-quartile creative firms were more likely to show superior revenue growth, shareholder returns, an enterprise value.

They also scored higher on McKinsey's Innovation Performance Score.

What sets these creative leaders apart, the study found, are four key practices:

- They embed creativity and innovation into daily operations, treating marketing spend as an investment rather than a cost.
- They demonstrate obsessive customer focus, using deep behavioural insights to inform strategies.
- They act fast, turning insights into campaigns or products swiftly and decisively.
- They are agile, learning from feedback and adapting quickly post-launch.



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While creativity alone doesn't guarantee success, companies that support it with strong execution, leadership commitment, and customer obsession are more likely to turn great ideas into real business value.

Creativity, McKinsey argues, remains vital in an age increasingly dominated by data and analytics, reminding us that the art of marketing still matters.

Creative companies outperform competitors

Subsequent studies further prove the point: In asking what makes creative companies outperform competitors, [Americans for the Arts](#) demonstrated that companies embracing creativity outperform peers on key business performance indicators, including revenue growth, market share, and talent acquisition.

[“Cashing in on creativity: How better ads deliver bigger profits”](#), for the B2B Institute, analysed the impact of award-winning creative advertising on various business metrics.

The study found that high-performing creative campaigns achieved significantly greater profitability and market share growth compared to less creative efforts.

This highlights the financial advantages of investing in high-quality creative advertising.

Across the board, these studies confirm that creativity, especially when recognised through awards, is not merely an artistic endeavour but a strategic business asset.

Simply put, businesses that prioritise and invest in creativity tend to perform better financially and gain market share.

Creativity our north star

Our agency's collective recent performance proves the point.

Over the past two years, TBWA\Hunt\Lascaris made a conscious decision to focus on the work because it's everything.

It's your calling card, your pitch deck, your reputation made tangible.

And the results speak volumes: from coming second at South Africa's Best of the Year to being named the overall top-ranked agency across all Creative Circle-accredited awards.

This wasn't luck.

It was a deliberate effort to beat the drum of creative consistency.

In our case, recognition didn't come without its challenges. We lost a major account last year, which is a body-blow moment for any agency. But instead of losing heart, we doubled down on our vision.

We leaned into the work.

And the wins that followed, at One Show, D&AD, Cannes, and beyond, became a rallying point. They reminded our collective that we could rise above turbulence with creativity as our north star.



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Great work sparks more great work

There's a cultural dividend, too. Great work sparks more great work.

It brings teams into alignment, attracts top talent, and reinforces a shared sense of purpose.

Initiatives like a four-day work week and a 9 am inspiration club help foster the kind of culture where excellence thrives.

Awards aren't the goal, but they're a valuable signal that you're heading in the right direction.

And let's not forget the clients: the halo effect of an award matters, even for clients who don't win awards, yet. It signals that they've chosen the right partner.

That their agency is being recognised at the highest level. That they're playing in the right league.

Brilliant, brave creativity still matters

Of course, not all awards are created equal.

Awards shows must evolve to maintain their relevance – not just rewarding cleverness, but effectiveness, impact, and innovation.

That's why it's best to support the shows that uphold high standards and avoid those that feel like vanity metrics in disguise.

Awards should never be an end, but a means to elevate the craft, attract the best clients, and the best talent.

They're a means to prove that creativity has business value. Let's not forget: the publicity from award wins amplifies an agency's creative reputation, strengthening its credentials and opening doors to new client partnerships.

When we create work that's recognised not just for being good, but for being great, we move the industry forward.

We raise the standard. And we remind everyone, even in this age of algorithms, that brilliant, brave creativity still matters.

ABOUT CARL WILLOUGHBY

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