

Graham Lang on leaving the SA creative industry in good hands

By Leigh Andrews

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This year's 6th-ranked CCO, according to the just-revealed [Loeries Rankings](#), Graham Lang is off to Toronto from end-November. He elaborated on the importance of good relationships - both within the agency and with partners and clients, as well as the need to motivate and mould others.

Graham Lang, currently one of the continent's most celebrated creative minds and CCO of Y&R SA and Africa, only has a few more weeks in office before jetting off to 'make the creative world a better place' from elsewhere – Canada, to be exact.

I pinned him down for a quick face-to-face catch-up session on Y&R SA and Africa's success under his leadership, as well as a temperature check on the SA creative industry overall and his views on what the future holds.

Signature baseball cap on head, he's a true fireball of enthusiasm, but it's when speaking of [collaborating](#) and realising that true diversity starts with your own actions that his eyes really lit up – read on for yourself...

■ Y&R is certainly a local success story, as the most awarded network in Africa at this year's Cannes Lions, and with the highest number of contributing winning offices within a network structure at Loeries 2017. Touch on Y&R's trajectory and the focus on Johannesburg as it moves forward.



Image © Jan Verboom, photographer at Roodebloem Studio.

Y&R was so well celebrated this year, both at Cannes and Loeries. Since I've been at Y&R SA, one of my initial prerequisites was to make an effort to have a strong showing at the award shows, and to create work that we celebrate and the industry celebrates.

“ The Pride of Africa [@YoungRubicaSA @AdvantageYR @crea8iveYR](#)
[pic.twitter.com/m1NU9scEht](#)— graham lang (@langgraham) [September 15, 2017](#) ”

It's a great way for me to end my run at Y&R SA and Africa. Behind the scenes, I've really been trying to build an overall Y&R community in Africa – getting the ECDs and creative directors together at least once a year, for two full days of going through everyone's work from the region, really putting a spotlight on the campaigns that we as a group think might do the best at the various shows. So it hasn't been by fluke. We've been building and developing and have a very active creative community where we share a lot of content and banter. It's a very fluid and dynamic group of people, and it's my real desire and wish to see the Y&R Africa creative group continue to do well, which I predict it will. It's always been part and parcel of what I love doing, which is trying to get the best work out of whoever I'm working with.

I've worked in agencies the world over in a global capacity, on pitches and on productions. Of course there has to be talent, but there also has to be a willingness to want to work together. It's just the way the industry is moving, the way the clients want to work, the way the best brands are trying to work – it's not like taking a brief into an office where a copywriter and art director sit together and a week or two later, you get your result. Right now, it needs to be far more fluid and collaborative.

There are many moments in that creative process where you need to have little check-ins to see where you need to push and nudge, and help the idea along. Either, from being killed, or to try and make it better. So, working collaboratively is a real art form and skill.

The two biggest ingredients are a willingness to want to [work collaboratively](#), as not all creative people want to or even can do so, the other thing is that you have to strip out all the ego and make it feel like everyone has a part to play.

■ **No easy task. Sticking with the theme of ‘winning work’, some of my favourite recent work by Y&R that also did well at award shows is the Gui Ling Yuan Fang Herbal Tea [Poophemisms](#) radio campaign, as well as the [Mandevu beard balm](#) print campaign – very clever ideas. Do you favour a specific type of advertising yourself?**

It's a strange one. Growing up, I loved print and as an art director I slept with *D&AD Annuals* beside my bed, I studied them and was brought up on British advertising so that was always my go-to thing. I never had a burning desire to win a Cannes Lion but getting into “The Book”, that was the Holy Grail. I can tell you what page certain campaigns are on in certain *D&AD Annuals*! I think it's because the brutal simplicity of just having a page, and to create a message on the page, was something we could do as well as anyone else as we didn't need those big budgets to do so. Then it moved on to film. My love of film grew and became something I really dug into. Now, if you had to ask me about my favourite medium, I wouldn't be able to tell you. That's the great thing about the world we live in right now. It's about all of the channels and mediums doing something together.

My least favourite is probably radio, though – purely because I don't think I'm very good at it.

■ **I would not have guessed! Let's dive into the bare bones of your personal SA creative career then – the key highlights and low lights you've learned from along the way.**

It was never an intention of mine to leave London, I was very happy at Y&R London. We had our first son while living there and it was all ticking along. Then the opportunity came along to help resurrect an agency from a creative point of view. To be fair to the agency, they had started doing some interesting stuff, under the stewardship of [Tony Granger](#), who I worked with for many years before Y&R, at Saatchi & Saatchi in London, before he moved to New York. I saw that there was this impetus within the Y&R network, this undercurrent of a couple of offices hiring some key people, and I could see that the trend was definitely there, that this network was about to catch fire. That was part of Tony's philosophy.



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Leigh Andrews 28 Mar 2017



So I thought the timing of everything, for going back to South Africa, a country and marketplace that I love, made sense. One of the big reasons I came back was that I met Andrew Welch in London. He was our CEO and came over a month or two before me, and the decision was really made between the two of us in London, where we both looked at each other and went, ‘This could be really good’. That chemistry between us was instant. If I didn't have that connection with Andrew, I'd never have taken the leap. It's all in the timing and how it came together. So that was definitely a highlight – meeting Andrew and deciding to come back.

Seeing the agency very quickly shift gears was amazing. A few important things happened. The first was that I got a call from the local client at Land Rover and Jaguar. He was keen on bringing the business into Y&R based on my relationship with them, having run the global business. Land Rover became a really important relationship for us, from a creative point of view. The big thing that Andrew and I needed to do was to stabilise the Pick n Pay account and to do some good work. We produced a really beautiful integrated campaign called “Goodness”, which I still see up on the trucks and on the shopping bags, and I still get a warm, fuzzy feeling when I see that it's still going. Just think about retail advertising and the way it changes from one season to the next. Amazing how that campaign idea has really stuck. We worked with a fantastic chief marketing officer at that time, who allowed us to do some terrific work. So that was great.

Getting stuck into a big client, bringing in a sexy car account, and then we won a big piece of business – Telkom, which made everyone take note. Then I brought in [Rui Alves](#), who became our ECD in Johannesburg. Everybody loved him and he brought such a sense of calm to the agency. In our Cape Town office, I recognised that a young writer by the name of Nkanyezi Masango had massive potential. So I set him the challenge of helping to turn our CT agency into a creative force.

Watching Nkanyezi blossom into a terrific CD was incredible to witness.



Gunning for creative diversity on Nkanyezi Masango's Blackboard

Leigh Andrews 3 Jul 2017



Both Rui and Nkanyezi played key roles in shaping Y&R SA's creative success. But without Andrew's support, backing and will to want to make Y&R SA famous, we would never have been given the space to make it happen. So a big highlight was coming in and getting things to fall into place quickly.

The thing that I am most proud of is the ideas and brand platforms that will endure long after I'm gone. Awards and accolades are nice, but where an agency earns its respect is by the impact they make to the organisations and businesses that they work for, which Y&R will continue to do. When I look at some of the brand-building work we've done, for brands such as SKYY Vodka, Russian Bear Vodka, Sunfoil, Caltex, Land Rover, Western Cape Government, Operation Smile, Amstel Lager and Investec to name a few, I'm filled with pride. I'm really grateful to all the staff that I worked with over the years and all the clients that let me into their brands and gave us a platform for doing some terrific work.

One of the low lights then would obviously have been losing Pick n Pay – that was a huge blow for the agency, a massive cathartic exercise and it brought on a lot of change. It did, however, prompt us to go out and win business. I saw it as an opportunity to move forward without one large client influencing our culture. In a very difficult and turbulent time, we managed to win Edgars and Amstel, which we pitched for against the best in the business and won. It proved to us that there was life after Pick n Pay and that we could win business because of our creative calibre. Our creative rankings and creative energy never dwindled. I learned a lot about being positive and using creativity as a tool for setting people's sights on the future.

■ ***Speaking of the future, you took your son up onto the Loeries stage with you – is the family looking forward to the big move?***

Yes my eldest son, Jacob, had a great time with me at the Loeries. I arrived late on that last awards night, the film awards night. I snuck him in and we found seats at the front. We had been doing quite well up until that point, but then we started winning golds. I told him I was going on stage to collect the award, and then I went up for another one. When I got back from the second one, he said to me, "Dad, if you win another one, can I come up with you"? Thinking all the golds were given out and it was just grands prix statues left and that we wouldn't take one of those, I said sure. And then we did win a grand prix statue and he said, "I'm coming with you", and I said, "Cool, Let's go!"



#Loeries2017: Graham Lang on Y&R's collaborative year of firsts

Leigh Andrews 1 Sep 2017



Last week I was at his school and his principal told me Jacob wanted to go up on stage – he obviously caught the bug at the Loeries – and he announced to the entire school that he's moving to Toronto and he's very excited about it. That's the great thing about kids. The twins are going to be five in December and Jacob is nine now. Moving when they're young is easier than in their teens, when they're settled with friends. We're all up for the adventure come end-November. I officially start mid-December, so we all need to be in Toronto in the middle of the winter. It's a great city; I was fortunate to look at opportunities in New York and Paris at a couple of options over the last few months. I think Toronto has the best work life balance; it's 50 minutes from New York and five-and-a-half hours from LA, three hours from Miami – nice and central.

Nothing could ever compare to South Africa or Cape Town, but I also think that to be given the opportunity to travel and go on adventures is when you learn the most about yourself, and travel is the best form of education. Being able to pick up

what you do and to apply that somewhere else is amazing to me. I've worked with teams in Shanghai, Melbourne, and New York – it takes about five minutes before you're settled in to talking about the work. There's a familiarity. So to be given the opportunity to apply what you do and your experience somewhere else, I get super excited about that. I've moved around – I was at Jupiter for nine years and Saatchi London for five years, I've been at Y&R now since 2008 – so I don't believe in moving all the time, but I do believe in finding work where you interact with lots of different cultures.

■ ***Exciting for sure. This past weekend's event for the Johannesburg Zoo, devised by Y&R SA, is certainly interesting too. How did it go, 'celebrating older persons with Insta-grans and animal photobombs'?***

Johannesburg Zoo wanted to celebrate International Day of Older Persons on 1 October 2017 with an event that could bring generations together. People from all walks of life were invited to bring their favourite older person to 'walk, snap and post' pictures at designated hotspots at the zoo with help from a Selfie Walking Stick, a device that combines a cane and a selfie stick. Images were then uploaded to social media platforms via the #JoburgZoo and #SelfiesWithSeniors hashtags, and a lucky winner will receive the ultimate prize – a lifetime pass to the beautiful park.

“ Joburg Zoo is celebrating Older Persons Day by inviting the elderly to become 'Insta-Grans' [#Repost #icymi](https://t.co/lcvFLX1Z6c) <https://t.co/lcvFLX1Z6c> — Good Things Guy (@GoodThingsGuy) [September 29, 2017](#) ”

It was great fun and they had a bumper day at the zoo through this Y&R Johannesburg campaign. Broadcasters and journalists came down and got involved. The selfie walking sticks worked brilliantly, no hitches there – everyone seemed to have a great time. It doesn't matter how old you are, that's the cool thing, it doesn't matter if you're a millennial or an OAP, we all look at a baby rhino and go 'Aah, awesome.' If you don't, I don't think you have a heart beating inside you.

■ ***From zoo animals to creative animals, I'm rubbing my hands in anticipation over this one – please share a few insights into the SA creative industry. What do we need to change; what aspects do we need to work on to make it more diverse, inclusive and exciting for future entrants?***

The SA ad industry is very healthy, we do like to beat ourselves up quite a bit and there's that notion of not being as good as the States or Europe. But if you think about how exportable South African creatives are, we must be doing something right. It's incredible how many South Africans are all over the world, working in big network agencies, working in niche and more digitally savvy agencies – I think that's a real feather in the cap for this industry, that we're able to grow talent that can go work anywhere in the world. It's never lost on me just how many South Africans are out there, just like the Brazilians that migrated to every hot shop in London and New York and Europe, now it's South Africans that are dotted all over the globe.

So I think we have to stop beating ourselves up. Obviously we do have our issues, but I look at the work that comes out of South Africa and it generally punches way above its weight division. One area where we are struggling is with clients, they need to trust their partners a bit more. Look at those great clients like Airbnb and Burger King and Coca-Cola, who have spoken at Cannes Lions, local clients should take a couple of pages out of their book, because the one thing those great clients do is to really treat their agencies like partners. They are never sceptical of the agency's creative ambitions. They figure out how to harness it and use it. It's not a case of "Oh you want to do that campaign to win an award or make a famous ad for PR".

The best clients, like Burger King's talk on 'how to not suck' was awesome, as they seem more [award-hungry](#) than any of their agencies, they were saying you can do a campaign but we won't submit unless it has 2bn impressions. Don't play games here, you need to make it fuc#ing awesome".

In doing so, they raised a challenge to their agencies instead of being sceptical. So clients need to figure out how to meet the challenges of agencies' creative expectations, harness it, use it and push it.

There are a lot of issues around diversity in the industry. I've sat on the Creative Circle's Exco since returning to SA, and there have been some amazing initiatives to push the agenda forward. But we are not there yet. We need to keep banging the drum on figuring out how to broaden and open up the creative industries to more people. The message is always there

that we need to transform, now we need to take action. Since my return, I've tried to tap into the diversity within the industry and production environment, with directors and creatives on both sides of the fence, to find a way of weaving those culturally relevant and significant issues into the work we're doing, and it has paid off. I've learned a lot, given opportunity, and received great success. That's the way agencies and creative directors can actually take that step – diversity starts with you, as a leader of your agency or studio to start giving opportunities to people who can look at things differently and from a more uniquely South African perspective. That's been an interesting thing.

■ ***Well, we wish you the best of luck going forward and are sure you will remain a headline item for us, especially if you do return!***

Right now, I am really excited to be part of something new. New is good. New clients, new partners, new brands and of course, new challenges. But I'm up for it and will give it all I've got. It is not lost on me what I am leaving behind. Y&R is a powerful agency and has a brilliant creative culture. I owe so much to Y&R, but it's time to pass on the baton. I am pleased to see us winning some digital business, I have been pushing to put a more future-focused lens on the way we work. I hope Y&R SA will go on to even greater heights and that they will keep pushing and will keep building to keep [resisting the usual](#).

Lots to look forward to locally still, in Lang's wake. We'll follow his career trajectory [on Twitter](#). You can also [click here](#) for a reminder of the Lang-related news we've run.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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