

Meet young judge Simone Carter

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

21 Apr 2018

In the run-up to the 21st Prism Awards taking place on Sunday, 22 April, we chatted to this year's cohort of young judges about their fresh approach to the judging process.

In this series of interviews, we find out what they've learnt working alongside the cluster judges and what their young minds bring to the table.

"What has made judging even more exciting this year is for the second time, we invited young communication enthusiasts from across the country to participate in the judging process, and selected 11 of the coolest, brightest minds who brought some really fresh insight to the process," says judge and founder of the Prisms Young Judges initiative, Palesa Madumo, executive director of strategy at Vuma Reputation Management.



Simone Carter, lecturer in the Department of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg.

Here, our interview with Simone Carter, who works in the Department of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg, where she lectures first and second-year public relations and communication management diploma students...

 ***What does this recognition and opportunity mean to you?***

If there's anything that this recognition and opportunity has taught me, it's this:

“ *Life will humble you until you realise that there's a lot more left to learn.* ”

Five years ago, I found myself sitting in the Prism Awards ceremony whilst in my first PR job. Five years later, I now find myself judging the finalists – some of which I had even interviewed at a few years ago. Entering this initiative for the Prism Awards has forced me to reflect on my purpose and learning experiences over the last five years and the opportunity to judge has brought all of this together.

■ **Briefly tell us about your experience in the industry.**

I may not currently be practicing PR as I once was, but I currently use my learnings from my PR experience to empower others.

I've transitioned from practicing PR to lecturing PR and focusing on skills development within the space, in order to ensure that students are employable and empowered to be authentic, innovative, passionate PR professionals following their studies. Prior to lecturing, I worked in client service and gained PR and social media experience, where I worked on a total of 13 brands across various verticals, and mentored interns.

■ **Comment on the judging process.**

Wow! What an experience! I was fortunate to sit in with some of the industry's brightest professionals, judging the five 'Campaign of the Year' finalists. These finalists come in with their clients and present their work face-to-face to the panel, which can be incredibly nerve-racking.

After each client-agency presentation and Q&A, the panel would deliberate and after six hours of judging and debating, we finally had a winner! I consider myself incredibly lucky to have been given the opportunity to sit in this particular cluster.

■ **What has the response been to this year's entries?**

The feedback has been positive, with judges taking note of innovation within the space, client-agency synergy, and the fact that many brands are letting go of what they think they are supposed to be for their audiences. Many brands have played it safe when it comes to connecting with their audiences, and the fact that many brands aren't boxing themselves anymore and have taken harder, but more impactful routes to authentically connect with their audiences has definitely been noticed.

Well done to every entrant and their client for breaking traditional moulds and learning to let go.

■ **What makes the winning work stand out?**

Winning work is the combination of passion, innovative thinking, reflection and most importantly a clearly defined purpose. It's hard to compare campaigns where some had bigger budgets than others, or where some had more assistance in terms of inter-agency effort.

“ *What makes winning work stand out is whether it was constantly underpinned by a clearly defined purpose, which informed every interaction with their audiences, every client engagement, every research effort, every objective met.* ”

Clients and their agencies needed to understand their 'why' and to be able to clearly show (not just tell) that everything achieved was aligned to that.

■ **Prisa also introduced the Student Campaign of the Year in 2016. Why do you think it's important that students and**

the next generation of PR professionals are included in such initiatives?

Naturally, I am biased here. However, how else are students supposed to learn if they are not given the opportunity to apply what they have learnt and truly be acknowledged for it? This is the first step in an attempt to recognise our students for their efforts and give them a real taste of the industry.

“ There is only so much that mock learning activities can teach our budding PR stars and it's incredibly important that they are completing work that has the potential to actually be executed by real brands and is acknowledged for that. ”

The only way we can bring education and practice closer together is by including students into the worlds of the professionals – a real learning experience and potentially mutually beneficial partnerships amongst industry and education can be forged.

▣ What do you think young minds bring to the table?

In short, fresh perspective, energy and, most importantly, insight into the way that millennials perceive work being executed that may be aimed at them. Many brands target the youth, but do not immerse themselves in the world of their audiences enough to understand how their work is actually being perceived.

As much as the young judges have to learn from the senior judges, this experience is two-fold: the senior judges and entrants can learn from us too; overall judging panel and panellist transformation.

▣ What have you learnt working alongside the cluster judges?

I've learnt so much about leadership from working with my cluster judges and what it truly means to lead and have an informed voice. I've learnt what kind of questions to ask in order to gain valuable, meaningful insight from entrants in terms of true return on investment for their clients. I've learnt that I have a very long way to go and that in itself drives me.

“ I've definitely become more open-minded and open to unlearning some of my previously held viewpoints, and I've learnt that we're all human and pushing ourselves to learn, title and experience aside. ”

“The only thing to fear is fear itself” – an inspirational comment made from one of the senior judges, and what an impact that comment had on me. By nature, I am incredibly introverted and the only path to growth has really been to face fear and step into situations that have challenged me and put me out of my comfort zone. In line with this, brands have had to start adopting that very same mindset if they truly want to resonate with their audiences.

▣ Comment on the past, present and future state of PR.

The future is bright and somewhat uncertain, let's just say that. However, that uncertainty is where the magic is.

PR professionals and practice cannot be boxed anymore. Brands and professionals are completely redefining PR, perhaps even to a point where as judges we had to think about what exactly constitutes modern-day PR in the first place.

Gone are the days where brands would throw information to their target audiences and simply align with personalities who fit within the ideal brand vision.

“ Professionals have started to focus on leading conversations that matter. They're focusing on the 'how' versus the 'what'. There's an emphasis on practicing as strategic advisors and living the brand experience in order to do just that, and

they're learning to listen and let go. ”

Today, target audiences are driving brand conversations (as opposed to brands pushing this), and with that freedom comes authentic engagements and audiences who are empowered to organically practice brand advocacy over time. Building mutually-beneficial relationships with target audiences to the point where your brand becomes audience-driven and built by brand advocates.

That right there is the future for authentic professional practice.

■ **What would the title of Prisms Young Judge for the 2018 awards mean to you?**

This experience has been absolutely incredible and being a Prisms young judge is something that will always be close to my heart, because it reminded me of my purpose.

My passion lies in building others, and I believe that I have a responsibility to empower myself and use my voice not only for myself, but for the others that I represent based on the space that I currently find myself in. My goal coming into the process as a young judge was to use my learnings to bring academia and professional practice closer together, but I've learnt more about myself than I ever could have imagined.

As amazing as the publicity has been, what I've appreciated the most has been the opportunity to have access to so many great minds along the way.

“ Understanding how other industry professionals think has been an amazing learning which I'm incredibly grateful for. ”

Great brands and initiatives are led by even greater minds behind them and this learning in itself will allow me to filter those insights back into my work and has shaped my thinking for the long term.

Even as an educator, everything is learning and this title has made me realise the importance of never losing the passion to learn, unlearn, grow and expand my thinking.

■ **What are you most looking forward to in terms of this year's Awards?**

Simply said, after the past five years, I'm looking forward to sitting in and attending the awards again. Now with a different mindset and from a different perspective as a young judge – the culmination of humbling lessons, uncertainty, patience, perseverance and true introspection that allowed me the opportunity to come back.

Awarding an agency with a Prism Award and knowing that your judging efforts and advice may assist an agency and client to increase their competitiveness is something special.

Great industry work is led by the passionate people behind them, and I'm looking forward to seeing the people behind the brands being acknowledged for that. What good is building a brand if you don't build the people behind it!

As mentioned, the Awards take place this Sunday, 22 April. Follow us on [Twitter](#) for live updates on the night and visit our [Prism Awards special section](#) for other related content and of course all the winners following the announcement. Here's the link to our other [social media](#) pages, as well as the Prism Awards' [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) accounts.

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