

The Art of Branded Entertainment according to VML's Xenopoulos

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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As part of the 2017 Cannes Lions Branded Entertainment jury, Jason Xenopoulos, VML global chief vision officer and EMEA CCO (currently on the Titanium Lions jury), took the opportunity to co-author a book called *The Art of Branded Entertainment*, edited by jury president PJ Pereira.

The book is a compilation of essays contributed by 15 of the jurors, thus making this the first ever Cannes Lions jury to have published a book about their Cannes judging experiences and their perspectives on what makes compelling entertainment content.



Jason Xenopoulos | [Twitter](#)

I interviewed Xenopoulos to find out more about this collaboration, how he perceives the art of branded entertainment and what he thinks makes winning work in 2018...

Comment on your collaboration with the Cannes Lions 2017 Entertainment jury headed up by president PJ Pereira on your book, *The Art of Branded Entertainment*.

Being part of the 2017 Cannes Lions Branded Entertainment jury was an absolute pleasure and a true privilege. Participating in any Cannes jury is an incredible experience but this one was particularly special.

The jury was made up of 20 men and women with diverse cultural and professional backgrounds – from North America, South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. But, even more importantly, they were drawn from across the advertising and marketing ecosystem. There were CMOs from big brands and CCOs from big agencies, heads of mega-media conglomerates and founders of small niche companies. There were production company executives and branded entertainment specialists.

Together we had a combined knowledge of almost every aspect of the media industry from sports marketing and online gaming to reality television and big global brand marketing. And, in addition, we were led by one of the industry's most respected creative leaders – PJ Pereira, the co-founder and creative chairman of Pereira O'Dell. Under PJ's clear but humble guidance, our jury of 20 displayed a generosity and willingness to listen and collaborate that made the entire experience dizzyingly insightful.

The richness of our conversations triggered the idea to combine our diverse perspectives into a book on the art of branded entertainment. PJ floated the idea with us all soon after the festival and there was quick agreement to give it a shot. To be honest, it was a pretty insane idea.

“ Writing a book is no small undertaking but to attempt to co-author a book between 20 people across 5 continents and to go from idea to release in less than a year is pure madness. ”

But we did it. Driven by naïve courage and buoyed by our inspiring time together, we set up a Google doc and began to work towards our goal.

Unfortunately, several jurors were forced to pull-out along the way for various reasons, but the 15 remaining authors carried their voices with us into the final text. It wasn't all smooth sailing. By January this year, we were pretty convinced that it wasn't going to happen. We had loads of good content but there were some gaping holes and no publisher. But, through sheer will and the collective passion and determination of the group, we managed to pull through, filling the holes, securing a publisher and ensuring the book's release before Cannes 2019. Making us the first Cannes Lions jury in history to have published a book about our experiences in the room.



Cannes Lions Entertainment Jury 2017 presents: *The Art of Branded Entertainment*

VML South Africa 12 Jun 2018



📌 In your opinion, what is the most effective way to create compelling branded content?

You have to find a way to marry the brand with the content in a seamless way. One of my contributions in the book is an essay that I co-authored with Pelle Sjoenell (BBH's Worldwide CCO), called *From Product Placement to Idea Placement*. In this essay, Pelle and I demonstrate how successful branded entertainment properties have succeeded by building a brand idea into the core of the content rather than simply pasting a logo on top of it. This level of integration is vital in order to ensure that one does justice to both the brand and the entertainment that is being produced.



#CannesLions2018: "Drink thirstily from this creative oasis of inspiration" - Jason Xenopoulos

Leigh Andrews 7 Jun 2018



■ **What does the connected consumer experience look like today, from your point of view?**

Before the world became hyper-connected, consumers experienced brands in a totally different way. Pre-internet and social media, someone might have seen a great TV ad and thought, 'Wow, I love this brand!' and that ad could have then formed a defining part of their perception of the brand.

Unbeknownst to them, someone in another country might have had a terrible in-store experience, while several others might have read scathing articles about the brand's questionable manufacturing practices. But the first consumer would probably be oblivious to these events and his or her experience of the brand would still be defined by that one great ad.

Today, all of those separate experiences are connected. Each person's individual moments of contact with a brand instantly become part of a web of interrelated experiences that combine to create a single, collective image of that brand – both for the individual and for the group as a whole.

To make matters worse, in this hyper-connected environment consumers are accustomed to getting what they want, when, where and how they want it. So, in order to ensure a positive brand experience, marketers must now strive to transform their brands across this entire connected consumer experience.

- **Why is re-imagining this so important to VML?**

Only 'connected brands' will thrive in a hyper-connected world. While many brands may have begun to transform certain elements of their interaction with customers, the connected nature of the world we live in demands that brands transform all touchpoints because one's experience of the brand is ultimately a sum total of all those separate experiences.

- **What are the driving forces behind this?**

In order to create connected brands, we need to ensure that every point of contact between the brand and the customer adds value – not just to the brand but to the customer and ideally to the wider world as well.

We believe that the best way to create these 'inspiring connections' is to ensure that every touchpoint is compelling, useful and/or entertaining. Achieving this requires a combination of creativity and technology – an intersection that is ultimately at the core of everything we do.

- **How does VML get this right?**

Everything we do at VML is anchored by inspiring connections. It's our purpose as a company. We believe that everything in the world is fundamentally connected and that it's our job as marketers (and as human beings) to uncover and create the inspiring connections that draw us together. This includes bringing brands closer to customers, customers closer to communities and communities closer to the wider world. Our tools and methodologies are designed to help us uncover and create inspiring connections but what's truly distinctive about us is the way our philosophy of inspiring connections permeates every aspect of our company culture.

■ **Comment on your judging for the Titanium Lions.**

Judging at Cannes Lions has been a long-time dream of mine. So, to get the opportunity to do it two years in a row feels quite unbelievable. Last year I was privileged to judge the branded entertainment category – a category that is very close to my heart considering that I started my career as a screenwriter and feature film director. But this year I have been given an even greater honour – to be part of the Titanium Lions jury!

Titanium is the category beyond all categories. It rewards work that defies categorisation; work that shines a light on the future of branded communications. Judging Titanium has given me the opportunity to spend a week with the smartest people in our industry talking about some of the best work of the year. I'm like a kid in a candy store!



■ What were you most looking forward to at Cannes Festival of Creativity this year?

So much. Judging is obviously a highlight and to officially launch our book, which was done at a signing event on Tuesday, 19 June. I was also looking forward to seeing all my colleagues and friends from the VML network worldwide. The greatest highlight of all would be to we win something, but no one should ever take that for granted at Cannes!

■ Speaking of award shows, comment on your most recent wins at The One Show and D&AD.

Both One Show and D&AD are extremely prestigious international shows and really tough places to earn any metal. D&AD, in particular, is a legendarily tough nut to crack, so I am delighted with the multiple Pencils (from both One Show and D&AD) that we brought home.



VML South Africa wins big at D&AD and One Show

VML South Africa 16 May 2018



■ What do you think made your Huffpost 'Stop the Cycle' and Absolut 'One Source' campaigns stand out?

I think both pieces, while worlds apart in many ways share a similar belief in the need to create communication that is compelling, useful and entertaining. Both [Absolut 'One Source'](#) and ['Stop The Cycle'](#) are driven by strong ideologies and are designed to make the world a better place, not just to build brands or sell products.



One Source Live: Festival of Africa's Creative Revolution

VML South Africa 25 Apr 2018



#NewCampaign: Stop the Cycle

25 May 2017



■ In general, what do you think makes winning work in 2018?

Brands can no longer simply buy a presence in culture, they have to have a purpose in culture. This is the only way to earn the attention of consumers who are no longer willing to be interrupted by advertising.

The book is available worldwide as a special digital pre-release and in paperback on select bookshelves in the UK, and will be available at retailers worldwide on 4 October 2018.

ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

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