

Native VML named Cannes' 'Entertainment Agency of the Year'

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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In the annual Cannes Lions Global Creativity Report, Native VML has been named the global 'Entertainment Agency of the Year' for 2017.

Here, Native VML CEO Jason Xenopoulos shares what this win means for the agency.

“ It is difficult to articulate just how important this win is for us. Being named 'Agency of the Year' in any category at Cannes Lions is an amazing honour, but to earn that privilege in the 'Entertainment' category catapults us to a whole new level. We are not a traditional advertising agency. We pride ourselves on creating content and experiences that make brands part of culture. Entertainment, by its very nature, is one of the most powerful ways to do that. ”



Jason Xenopoulos

■ Comment on the agency's involvement in Cannes this year.

2017 was a historic year for us at Cannes Lions on so many levels.

Firstly, I was personally honoured to be selected as a judge on the 'Entertainment Lions' jury (an amazing privilege in its own right). In addition, Ryan McManus (our ECD) was invited to judge the Young Director Award. We were also selected to present a keynote presentation about Africa's creative revolution on the main stage at the Entertainment Lions festival. The presentation was a great

success and Khuli Chana's live performance of our Absolut 'One Source' song received a standing ovation. And, as if that wasn't enough, our 'I am Muslim' campaign, which won a Gold Lion in 2016, was selected to be part of the 'Act Responsible' exhibition at Cannes this year (a public exhibition which showcased the world's best cause-related marketing).

But of course the highlight of this amazing week was walking away with 6 Lions (including a Gold) for our Absolut 'One Source' and HuffPost 'Stop the Cycle' campaigns. I was sure that nothing could top that experience, but being named 'Entertainment Agency of the Year' just has!



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■ Comment on the success of the Absolut 'One Source' campaign at Cannes.

Winning at Cannes is always an honour, but winning for a big piece of client work that has had such a profound impact on the performance and success of the brand is even more gratifying. It is proof that creativity drives business results. But what made winning at Cannes even more special this year was that we were lucky enough to have our clients and partners in Cannes with us to share the honour. Melanie Campbell and Charl Bassil from Pernod Ricard SA joined us on stage with Khuli Chana – an artist and friend with whom we are always proud to collaborate.



Native VML CEO Jason Xenopoulos and South African rapper Khuli Chana at the Sterling Sessions in Kansas City.

■ **What do you think made this campaign stand out from the rest?**

'One Source' was successful because it became a real, undiluted piece of popular culture. It's not an advert. It is a concept album, a song, a music video, a documentary series and more. The brand is seamlessly woven into the fabric of all these elements, but it is not overtly plastered on top of it. There is no product placement or gratuitous messaging. 'One Source' exists at the intersection between what is important to the artists, what is important to the audience and what is important to the brand. This symbiotic relationship was enabled by the exceptional relationship between Khuli Chana and Absolut. This was not a traditional endorsement deal. Absolut didn't partner with Khuli so that he could endorse the brand; we did it so that the brand could endorse him. As a result, 'One Source' wasn't just a commercial success for Absolut, it was a massive success for Khuli too (with the song and the album shooting to #1 on iTunes). Khuli has described his relationship with Absolut as "the best record deal ever".

As Native VML, we see this mutually beneficial outcome as a massive achievement on our part, and the realisation of a long-held vision for what branded entertainment can and should be. But over and above all of this, I believe that what made 'One Source' so successful was its depth of meaning. 'One Source' is not just a campaign or a song; it expresses an ideology, and I believe that the best advertising and the best entertainment always does.

■ **What other campaigns are you particularly proud of and why?**

There are many things that we have done as an agency that I am proud of, but the work that really resonates with me is the work that has made a tangible difference to people's lives.



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■ **Why do you think Native VML excelled in the 'Branded Entertainment' category specifically this year?**

At Native VML we are obsessed with producing 'work that lives in people's lives'. We don't want to interrupt people with 'ads' or steal their precious time. We want to make cool stuff that becomes a value-added part of their daily routine. The best way to do this is to create things that are useful and entertaining.

Both Ryan McManus and I have been involved in film and branded entertainment specifically for many years. I studied film and television at NYU and I began my career as a screenwriter and film director. Fifteen years ago I directed what was probably the first full-length feature film in the world to have been fully funded by a brand. So, while Native VML's portfolio

of skills and services is far broader than just entertainment, creating compelling entertainment properties that can stand on their own and compete in culture is very important to me personally and to us as a business.

▣ **What's next?**

We are always looking for new ways to add value – to our clients, to their customers and to the world around us. We are very, very ambitious, dangerously passionate and unstoppable in our determination to reach higher and further. We are firm believers in Michelangelo's famous philosophy that, "the greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short, but in setting our aim too low, and achieving our mark." May we always have more ideas than we can produce and may we always strive for goals that are beyond our reach!



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Jessica Tennant 21 Jun 2017



▣ **What are your thoughts on agencies participating in award shows, based on the Publicis Groupe's announcement at Cannes this year?**

It is very political at the moment and it is all about the money. Entering global shows like Cannes Lions is extremely costly (for the large networks and holding companies in particular). That said, shows like Cannes also undoubtedly help to make the work better. They celebrate creativity and that is vital. Not just for agencies and brands, but for the well-being of a world that is in desperate need of reinvention.

ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

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