

Cannes Condensed, Paul Kemp-Robertson shares learnings from Cannes Lions 2023

After more than a decade of ‘purpose-lite’ work and worthy brand intentions, Cannes juries’ patience for campaigns that raise awareness without also driving action appeared to finally run out. This year’s top honours went to problem-solving pragmatists with an appetite for practical change and the tenacity to make it happen. Here, longer-term commitment triumphed over marketing’s usual fixation on short-term results.

Proactive pragmatism

Winners that solved specific problems – as opposed to just offering a platitudinous commentary on the challenging issues of the day – included UK supermarket chain Iceland. The retailer tackled the issue of food poverty head on, by launching *Food Club*, a system of interest-free microloans to help customers navigate the cost-of-living crisis. This ethical lending programme

won a Gold Lion in the Creative Commerce category. And Unilever's beauty brand Dove brand generated one billion impressions and 94% positive sentiment by taking a stand against unrealistic beauty standards by encouraging people to boycott TikTok's Bold Glamour filter. The #TurnYourBack campaign pushed back against the machine-learning gimmick, arguing that artificially enhanced imagery can be detrimental to women's self-worth. The campaign took the Media Grand Prix.

The Solar Impulse Foundation is a French environmental non-profit that advocates for innovative solutions for climate change. Adopting the action-oriented attitude of 'Why wait for new laws to pass, when we can write them?' the NGO turned 50 ecological innovations into draft laws that were pitched as Prêt a Voter – or 'ready-to-vote' – for the French Parliament. Three new laws have since been voted on, with nine others under review. This project won Gold Lions in Print & Publishing, Direct and Sustainable Development Goals.

Work shortlisted in the Glass category – known as The Lion for Change – featured projects that have sparked seven real-life law changes. The Jury president Tea Uglov summarised this year's shift to proactive pragmatism: 'That move from saying something must be done, to actually doing something, is a huge change in our industry. It's the move from awareness to action, and it's sustainable action. Laws don't end when your campaign ends.'

Artificial Intelligence

Global news headlines this year have fixated on the inexorable rise of AI. So, no surprise that it was an inescapable subject in Cannes too. Holding companies scrambled to show they were in front of the wave, by flagging up their partnerships with the world's hottest AI companies. Platforms, like Google and Meta, revealed new AI tools developed with marketers in mind. The impression I got is that everyone thinks AI is going to rapidly influence the industry, but no one can predict how it will play out: chaos or liberation? In a seminar, musician and entrepreneur Will.i.Am – touting his new productivity tool, FYI – urged creators to guard against the AI land grab by protecting ownership of their work. 'You need to own your likeness and your essence' he said: 'It's a human right. We can't give this up to tech...People should own their own stuff.'

The Metaverse

Despite the recent hype, it was more a case of *meh*-taverse at Lions. Yes, the Titanium Grand Prix-winning First Digital Nation campaign for the government of Tuvalu was technically a metaverse campaign, but the judges played this aspect down. 'It's not a technology idea, it's a problem-solving idea,' said the

Titanium jury president, David Droga. Trend forecasters were left with egg on their face, with Blockchain technologies, including NFTs, getting similarly short shrift.

Humans 1, Robots 0

Ultimately, people won out over the machines – for now. In a talk, entitled ‘Give Them a Punch in the Feels’ Adam&eveDDB’s CCO, Richard Brim, pointed out that ‘feeling’ is one of the most powerful tools humans possess. Quoting Maya Angelou (‘I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel’) and with tongue firmly in cheek, he said ‘AI can go f*** itself: it can’t feel like we can.’ McDonald’s USA’s chief marketing and customer experience officer, Tariq Hassan, echoed this sentiment, urging marketers to be more human: ‘Get closer to your fans. Find the soul of your brand in the soul of your customers.

Assuaging the industry’s fears that the cost-efficiency and machine-gun speed of AI-generated advertising will displace creative agencies, Apple’s VP of marketing communications, Tor Myhren, reassured a packed crowd that agencies ‘are forever’ – but only if they recognise their role as outside agitators whose value lies in challenging clients to see things from a fresh perspective. Havas’ recent investment in London hot-shop Uncommon Studio would appear to endorse this sentiment, with the Wall Street Journal opining that ‘the deal represents a bet that top marketing creative talent can outperform AI.’

So while AI and innovation featured heavily at Cannes this year, there wasn’t a deluge of brash tech-first campaigns. It seems our robot overlords are not going to subjugate us just yet. Instead, what came through in the winning work was a people-first focus on tech’s capacity to enable, enhance and support everything that makes us most human.

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He’s the co-author of The Contagious Commandments book, an advisor to the UK creative arts charity Create. His TED Talk on alternative currencies has been viewed 1.38M times.