Brand Awards – chasing the glory factor.

by Lisa Witepski

Awards. The word alone is enough to give us a little thrill, loaded as it is with the promise of kudos, congratulations and that all important blue ribbon. An award is the quickest way to separate your brand from that of your competitor – or is it? With the increasing prevalence of commercially-based rankings and awards, a number of South African marketers have started pondering their worth. Are awards truly a recognition of merit, or a scantly disguised get-rich-quick scheme?

It would be callous – not to mention a little brutal – to say that the certificates adorning so many corporate walls are little more than fancily embossed cash receipts. And in many cases, they're not: a lot of hard work goes into award entries, and in some cases, the costs levied on entrants are justifiable administration expenses.

But awards should be about more than glory – they would also serve as a reliable source of information, identifying the very best performers. They would furthermore give participating companies feedback, so that they can see what they're doing right and where they stand compared to competitors.

Does South Africa’s awards industry achieve these aims – and if it does why, then, does it worry so many marketers?

In the words of marketing consultant Chris Moerdyk, “Awards have spiralled completely out of control. They’ve lost all relevance to the consumer. The only value they hold is for the people who have created them.”

Exceptions to the rule

Of course, bona fide surveys do exist, based on tried and tested research. There’s no way these can be lumped into the same category as those which include participants only if they have agreed to pay for that inclusion – and yes, according to industry players, a number of such vehicles do exist.

“Superbrands is a case in point,” claims Ken Preston of Affinity Publishing, publishers of Brands & Branding – a volume which, it must be noted, competes with Superbrands.

“The promoters or publishers may present themselves as independent arbiters on branding, claiming that those selected are a researched elite of ‘super’ brands, but I believe that their motivation does not differ from any publisher trying to sell a double page spread in a book.”


“However,” he says “unlike with some competitive offerings, only a small group of brands that have been rated as superior (out of some 3500 brands) by an independent panel of marketing and communications specialists, are invited to participate in our book and to bear the Superbrands seal, denoting branding excellence.

He confirms that there is a cost for participating in the Superbrands programme - which includes a DPS in the publication, receiving copies of the book for their own distribution and being able to display the seal on promotional material: “just as there is a cost to being featured in Leading Hotels of the World or to sporting the ISO or even Proudly South African insignia,” Goddard says.

Companies that receive Superbrands status but choose not to participate in the programme, are none-the-less allowed to state publicly that they received Superbrand status – but they may not use the seal.

We do not purport to be a book for or about consumers’ views nor to use the most scientific or exhaustive methods. We are expressly about those brands that experts in the branding industry believe are superior, based on the criteria of market dominance, longevity, goodwill, customer loyalty and overall market acceptance. Must we dismiss or question the merits of industry accolades such as the Nobel Prize, the Cannes Film Festival Palm d’Or, the Academy Awards, the NY One Club Show Art Directors Award, the London Awards and, closer to home, the Loeries and the SAMAs? Or should we insist excellence in any of those specialist fields be judged by the public at large?

“Superbrands has been in business since 1994 and currently operates in 80 countries. Globally, we are a well-established supplier to the world’s leading brands, and we put a huge amount of effort into showcasing the success stories of the world’s strongest brands and the opinions of the world’s leading branding experts, many of whom write for our books and serve on our independent brand councils. Our pedigree and our product speak volumes about the credibility and international acceptance of our methodology.

Goddard advises that the second South African edition of Superbrands is currently being put to bed and will be launched in November this year.
The *Journal of Marketing* would like to point out in the interests of transparency that acting editor Jeremy Maggs did sit on the most recent Superbrands’ council and co-hosted the first awards dinner.

Goddard’s explanation does little to set Preston’s mind at rest: “What about the companies that are approached with the exciting news that they have been ‘voted’ one of South Africa’s Superbrands, but decline to pay for the honour, and are therefore not included in the book, or awarded the seal?

The next thing they know, their competitors are claiming to be a Superbrand, even advertising this fact on billboards. As for the effectiveness of the independent panel – each member is expected to assess hundreds of brands according to a number of criteria without any supporting research.

No one has time to do this properly, so I would question the validity of the process. Members of the ‘Council’ never get to see the final rankings, which avoids them asking why so few of the brands at the top of the list make it to Superbrands’ ‘status’.

I’m sure they were as surprised as we were when the first book came out, featuring Bukhara, the Mercury, Legal Wise, Primi Piatti and the Scorpions as South African Superbrands – but not Pick’n Pay, the Sunday Times, Tastic Rice or Castle Lager.”

Preston’s reservations appear to be borne out by a number of questionable accolades handed out in the past few years: he cites the example of SAA, which was voted South Africa’s most trusted brand following a broad based telephonic survey – “a strange choice, when you consider that a significant percentage of South Africans have never flown and therefore have never experienced the brand.”

Preston maintains that the ‘grey areas’ surrounding Superbrands cast such surveys in a deceptive light – and it concerns him further that industry players support such vehicles, either because they do not realise that they are being led, or because they are not averse to a little ambiguity.

He also believes that payment is, once more, an issue at TopCo, where a ranking of the top 500 companies may well be provided, but it is only those that shell out for advertising that are profiled in TopCo’s books. He is, furthermore, concerned that TopCo’s ‘independent’ panel of judges include a number of the company’s own management team.

Both PMR.africa and Top Co react strongly to the allegations. Johan Hattingh, CEO of PMR.africa, defends the company’s research process.
explaining it thus: “The awards are based on a research process where a sample of respondents will rate the companies and the institutions. The questionnaires are not pre-coded and the respondents are not prompted.

We do not pay the respondents to answer the questionnaires.

PMR does not select the highest rated or any rated company; the companies are mentioned and rated by the respondents – in other words, the respondents must first mention the name of a company, and then rate that company on specific attributes.

We conduct telephonic as well as face-to-face interviews, and the ratings are based on the perceptions of the respondents. It is very expensive to conduct the surveys, and quite a process.

“With every industry survey that PMR conducts, a research report and PowerPoint presentation is available. Mr. Preston’s statement is based on ignorance.

The questionnaires that we use are always available. Nobody can “enter” for a PMR award or “apply” for an award. The awards go to the highest rated companies regardless of advertising support in the PMR magazine.

“The purpose of the awards is to celebrate excellence, and to create a unique marketing tool. Through the awards we want to acknowledge and set a benchmark that others aspire to. PMR also creates an opportunity for companies and institutions whereby a team or division can be recognised for their hard work.

After all, there is a successful team behind each successful and highly rated company and institution. The ratings and awards are also indicators of a company’s competencies.

And through the research and attribute ratings we generate competitive and business intelligence. We also conduct commissioned research for clients, the same as done by Markinor.”

TopCo’s response? “Our awards programme and our publishing activities are completely separate. It’s therefore difficult to understand these allegations, because we are upfront about the fact that the companies featured in our book are those that have elected to advertise with us,” says editor Colin Bower.

“For our awards programmes, we do not undertake surveys of any sort,” Bower continues. “We solicit entries, and review and evaluate the information presented.

For our publications – which are entirely separate from our awards – we do survey companies from a variety of points-of-view, and publish the results.

As far as I am aware, there have been few, if any, serious complaints from any of the hundreds if not thousands of companies whose ranking we have presented in our published lists, and advertise in our publications entirely at their own discretion. The results of our survey are not affected by anyone’s adspend with us.”

He sheds further light on both the publishing and awards programmes: “We advertise for companies that believe they are leaders in their field to be judged by us.

We then research those companies according to a set of certain criteria, which are assessed by a panel of judges including several senior members of the private sector, highly ranked officers from the academic world, members of our own staff and an auditor.

For example, this year’s panel for the Top Women Awards includes Dorette van Ede, academic director, UNISA School of Business Leadership; Mmabatho Matiwane, Head: Gender & Women’s Empowerment Unit, Department of Trade & Industry; Sibongile Sambo, MD, SRS Aviation; Yolanda Cuba, Deputy CEO, Mvelaphanda Group; Juliet Newell, anchor presenter, Summit TV and The Home Channel; award auditor Wise-man Mthimkhulu of Sizwe Ntsaluba accounting firm; Ilse Fourie, Associate Publisher, Top Women in Business and Government and myself.”

Bower candidly admits that “in terms of research, we aren’t trying to compete with the likes of the CSIR”, but adds that since joining the company, he has invested great effort in tightening processes to make them more credible. For example, quantitative and qualitative information is separated, and all data is rigorously checked against a matrix.

Smoke and mirrors

While other critics of awards are less vociferous than Preston, they still have their concerns. Moerdyk, for example, reveals that aspects of awards processes that perturb him include the fact that so many worthy entities are excluded from the judging process, simply because they have not entered.

“You can’t judge the best if you’re judging only a small selection,” he points out. “I’ve also been on enough judging panels to see the difference that can be made with a little lobbying on behalf of competitors.

“Any panel that is at all related to the industry on which it is passing judgement is already biased,” he continues.

“The only truly objective panel would be one that had absolutely no connection to the awards, and spent hours and hours researching their topic so as to be unpartisan.”

Other industry players feel that some surveys operate by holding would-be participants to ransom. Players may not actually want to be involved in the ranking process, but they’re aware that if they don’t, they’ll be conspicuous by their absence.

That’s why marketers feel that awards, as with any other commercial activity, must adhere to the principals of good business: openness, accountability and honesty.

While the free market must reign, people must be able to make informed choices: and that means it’s vital to lay bare the processes associated with each award, else they may be mislead into believing a product is superior when it’s not.

Then again, some marketers believe that consumers are bombarded with so much puffery and self-aggrandisement on the part of marketers that they’re used to taking claims with a pinch of salt.

Are awards all bad, then? Not according to Moerdyk, who maintains that the back patting and congratulations that accompany a certificate can be immensely motivating for staff members.

“But,” he continues, “eventually, the matter may be taken out of marketers’ hands, as consumer protection legislation becomes more rigorous.

We’ve seen the laws clamp down on the type of information manufacturers can put on their products, and I wouldn’t be surprised if those laws get tough on the claims they can make, too.”