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SCREEN



The NSW PICAs: towards a fairer system? – James Cryer

Monday, 05 November 2012

By Print21

After Offset Alpine topped the award haul at last week's NSW PICAs and won the gong for NSW Printer of the Year, James Cryer, long-time industry gadfly and founder of JDA Print Recruitment, shares his thoughts about how the awards should adapt to the modern era to become fairer for everyone.

Comedienne Julia Morris held the audience in thrall with her edgy humour at last Friday's NSW Printing Industries Craftsmanship Awards. She skated around politically incorrect topics with the grace and style of a ballerina and took great delight in making technical terms such as "iimp-bound" seem positively pornographic.

The take-home lesson for us in the industry, however, was her ability to be self-critical – even of the saggy bits – and for us to put ourselves under the microscope with equal candour.

The print awards, in all their marvellous manifestations, are almost a replay of those of the 1970s with their preponderance of offset categories, their over-representation of the magazines/catalogues categories and their token nods to just a few 'digital' categories.

This imbalance became apparent when Offset Alpine walked away with 18 awards on the night, including NSW Printer of the Year.

Now, before anyone accuses me of knocking Offset Alpine, I should point out that it was born in my own family printing company's premises in Dulwich Hill in the late 1990s and I've valued my 'twin souls' connection with the company's sales and marketing director Garth Hackett ever since.

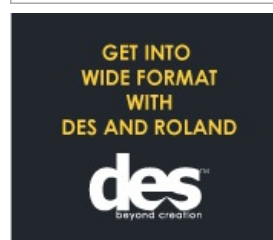
Furthermore, I've previously described the company as 'the darling' of the print industry and a business, which seems to give off a warm inner glow – to which Garth famously responded: "no, that at was the Christmas party of 1993."

Imbalance in the awards

I clearly have no beef with Offset Alpine – it is a fabulous company (hello Craig!). It is simply taking advantage of a flawed awards system. It'd be like inviting Ian Thorpe along to a sporting match only to find six out of the ten sports are swimming. He wins each swimming event – and then, because he won most events he's crowned sportsman of the year.

To be fair, Offset Alpine, having just purchased the latest state-of-the-art KBAs, could reasonably be expected to produce award winning work – would it not? So how does that stack up against the underlying spirit of the awards program, which is to recognise craft. There's not too much 'craft' in the modern printing press!

However, putting that to one side, the other issue which niggles away at the heart of these awards is this: maybe it's the company which tosses in most entries – on the balance of probabilities – which wins most awards?



Cost of entry too cheap

Aren't we also 'selling the farm' at such low entry prices? While the value of print awards is a mixed blessing, if cleverly marketed they can be worth 'gold' to an enterprising printer. I have the sneaking suspicion (hard to prove, I know) that some companies look upon winning a few awards, much like sports fishing or pig hunting – let's give it a fling – if we chuck in enough entries (at virtually no real cost) – we might bag a few trophies!

If the prestige of winning a gong is still huge, why not price it accordingly? At the very least there should be a much bigger differential between the entry fee for PIAA-members and non-members!

How do you judge "best"?

Getting back to the notion of who should be printer of the year, it's just too simplistic to award it to the firm who wins the most gongs (even though that has a certain intrinsic appeal). The criteria should be a little more demanding – even multi-dimensional.

Surely it should include reference to the firm's business, environmental and innovative processes? Surely it should recognise success in creating new business or market opportunities?

By these standards companies like Carbon8, or Evolve Print or Prografica, or maybe even Momentum – all of which are doing marvellous things to help put print back on the map.

Perhaps a better measure of Printer of the Year would be to divide the number of gongs won by the number of employees? That has a far better ring of fairness to it – and may throw up some interesting outcomes!

Or maybe you could base it on the age of the press that printed the job – just like they handicap modern yachts to give the old gaffers a go!

Towards a fairer system

Simply basing the Printer of the Year Award on the basis of the number of gongs won, also reinforces the perception that 'big is beautiful' and only those companies with the resources to employ a QC manager, an OH&S manager and even an environmental manager, are in the running for gold.

Surely, as part of any revision process, one obvious solution is to reduce the number of categories from over 30 to about half that (get rid of '1, 2 and 3 colour', and 'Leaflets' for example. What can be so hard about printing leaflets – isn't that what we do? – and have a Small, Medium and Large section in each group.

That way, you'd at least spread the joy over a broader cross-section of entrants and create the sense that everyone's competing like against like.

It would also make sense to adopt a similar three-tiered entry fee, similar to the way the PIAA charges its fees, based on the number of employees – as to charge the same price to a company with 100 people as one with 10 staff, is to effectively over-charge the small guy ten times what the larger company pays! If it's good enough for the PIAA surely it must at least be worth considering.

I think Julia would approve.

The industry can't afford to lose talent such as Joan Grace
[.http://t.co/DuGDpXtwbC](http://t.co/DuGDpXtwbC)

Colin Longbottom heads towards the exit Good man Colin, hope your saddlebags are well loaded for the sunset ride.<http://t.co/d5oamorf2X>

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