

Hall of Famer Alistair King on the industry's current seismic shift towards a more inclusive creative future

 By [Leigh Andrews](#)

24 Aug 2019

This year's Loeries Hall of Fame inductee is... Alistair King, founding creative partner of King James Group!



Alistair King, newest addition to the Loeries Hall of Fame.

King also holds the accolade as first-ever SA creative to feature in my long-running #BehindtheSelfie feature.



#BehindtheSelfie with... Alistair King

Leigh Andrews 14 Jan 2015



In this exclusive interview, he lets us in on his favourite piece of work from his 'absolute *jo!*' of a career so far, how he gets out of creative ruts, and what he's doing to bolster the industry's creative future...

■ ***Congratulations on your Hall of Fame honour. You join the likes of the late [Tony Koenderman](#), shining star [Nunu Ntshingila](#), legend [Nathan Reddy](#) and production master [Greg Gray](#). Why is this such an important accolade to you and your career so far (we know you're nowhere near done yet!)?***

I don't think I have ever dared to think I'd been honoured with this award. It feels like the ultimate accolade to me, and I'm thrilled that it comes at a time that I am still so active. It most definitely feels like a landmark event in my career.

■ ***Love that. What specific piece of work is your favourite from your career so far, and which proved to be the most challenging to bring to life?***

If I absolutely had to pick one it would have to be Allan Gray 'Beautiful'. It transformed our agency and set a whole new creative standard for King James.

There was no stopping us after that ad and I think it officially recalibrated our expectation of ourselves as an agency.

Our most challenging job was more recently on Sanlam's 'Conversations with yourself'.

It's was massively ambitious project – a hugely technical series of online films with another 462 communication elements that all had to work together – most definitely the most integrated campaign in our history done to an insane timeline.

I think I almost killed my team.

■ ***We're glad you didn't! In fact, you've also introduced the likes of WhatsApp soapies in SA, and taken financial advertising out of the gloom of 'grudge purchase' to truly fascinating infotainment, like with the One Rand Man series. Talk us through the importance of bravery in clients cracking through the 'same old formula' model and trying something truly new.***

When I think back on all of our best pieces of work, many of them were less about bravery and more about trust. On more than one occasion, the client was not fully sold on the idea and it required massive amounts of persuasion on our part and massive leaps of faith on theirs.



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Our clients often had to overcome overwhelming doubt, and so I will never forget those clients that valued our opinion ahead of the own.

■ ***You've also proven that independent local agencies can hold their own when you won the three-way pitch to manage AB InBev's global brands in South Africa. What are you most proud of, in terms of King James Group changing the local advertising landscape?***

I think we need to remember the many great independents that changed the landscape before us, before they themselves became multinationals.



King James Group drinks in their global win

Leigh Andrews 21 Apr 2017



Herdboys, Rightford Searle-Tripp and Makin. Hunt Lascaris, Bull Calvert Pace, Jupiter Drawing Room.

“Independents have always been very competitive and we, and a few others, simply strive to continue that legacy – time will tell what each of our paths are.”

But all things considered, I think our work has been, in a number of instances, iconic and that is something I will always be proud of.

■ ***With good reason. Linked to that, your client Mariska Oosthuizen, head of brand group marketing for Sanlam, was jury president of this year's Loeries' 'Shared Value, Service Design and Effective Creativity' categories. Why is this an important aspect for award shows to celebrate?***

We work very closely with Mariska and have experienced incredible success, and the occasional failure, with the work we've made together. But if you genuinely believe as I do, as many do, that effectiveness is very closely correlated to creativity, you can always tell whether a piece of work is going to move the dial for the client or not.



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Jessica Tennant 23 Aug 2018



Most creatives judge awards with effectiveness in mind, but it's good to have empirical evidence backing it. And it's great to have marketers endorsing that correlation.

■ ***You also spoke at Red & Yellow's Digital Agency Showcase about the importance of being inspired by others and not missing an opportunity as an agency. Why is it important to get jealous of others' ideas and excellent creative out there and not just shrug it off? How does the industry benefit?***

I have a simple philosophy – create the best work in the category for your client. I find it keeps your goals very sharp and has the added benefit of raising the standard of the category.

“ *If you think creatives are competitive, try marketers. They also want to have the best ad out there in the marketplace. But I do try not to stare at our competitors and the work they do.* ”

Good work is worth respect and it does up your personal game, but it can also be distracting. I try to focus our energy on our clients' brand rivalries rather than our own, which is why I don't obsess about awards too much. I like winning them but I certainly don't hunt for them.



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Leigh Andrews 21 May 2019



Within the walls of King James, I work very hard to maintain pressure on every job.

I want every job to feel important and I want everyone to see creative opportunity on it, which is why we tend to gravitate to brands that aren't necessarily pre-loaded with creative glory.

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Two old bullets up to no good.

A post shared by [Alistair John King \(@alistairjohnking\)](#) on Jun 6, 2019 at 1:47am PDT

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a marketing sense.

“ I keep reminding my teams ‘You’re one idea away from fame’. The idea is your responsibility, not the brand’s. It’s simply a matter of ambition, initiative and effort. It’s not necessarily the most relaxing philosophy to have in life, but it definitely keeps us striving for absolute excellence. ”

■ **That’s for sure. Let’s get personal now! What motivates you on a daily basis, and what do you do when you feel stuck in a creative rut?**

I still write and conceptualise ads on a daily basis and I think that helps me remain creatively fit. It also helps me remain sane.

“ Frolicking in my own imagination is literally the best therapy I know. It’s total and absolute escape for me. ”

I have found that the only way to get out of a creative rut is to just sit and write and draw and doodle and create and create and create some more.

“



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Don't do it. Don't do it. Don't do it. Crap, I did it.

A post shared by [Alistair John King \(@alistairjohnking\)](#) on Mar 10, 2019 at 12:49am PST

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■ ***I must confess, I [do the same](#). What's the best advice you've ever received – personal or career-wise – who was it from and why did it stick with you?***

Geoff Grylls, my ex-father-in-law (but current friend) once said to [cofounder] James [King] and I, “Never leave a good party to go somewhere where you might have a good party.”



#YPOEdge: James Barty on brand humanity and doing good business, beyond ticking the 'CSI box'

Leigh Andrews 14 Mar 2019



It proved to be invaluable advice, despite James and I having strayed from it once or twice.

■ ***You've certainly stayed the course as the original loyal royal purple bloods. Let's switch tracks to a passion of mine, and a fitting discussion point as August is Women's Month – please comment on the role of females in the creative industry and the need for better representation not only on gender but also across a race, culture, and experience level.***

I think our industry is undergoing a seismic shift as we speak. I've been very involved with the next generation of creatives (and copywriters in particular) and the future is decidedly female.



Don't self-impose a glass ceiling on your integrated marketing creativity!

Leigh Andrews 10 Aug 2015



I'm not sure if this is a result of a concerted effort or whether creative careers are simply looking more appealing, but there is no doubt in my mind that women will soon fill the top creative roles.

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She's wearing takkies. A kindred spirit.

A post shared by [Alistair John King \(@alistairjohnking\)](#) on May 9, 2018 at 3:03am PDT



...be a part of that transformation.

■ ***I still have so many questions, but let's end with some inspiration for the rest of the industry. You're seen as a mentor to many in the industry for your candid ways, and you clearly want to boost the youth through initiatives like Cognitive's talent incubator, your own 'You Have a Way With Words' project and the ACA and Creative Circle's bursaries. How can others get involved in eradicating the current copywriter deficit and encouraging youth to consider a creative career?***

I think it's fascinating that we, the masters of marketing communication, have done such a poor job of marketing what we do as a career prospect.

So, I think we have to make a concerted effort to showcase that and explain what an essential critical and creative skill copywriting is to the marketing process. That's my goal as I round the bend into the home stretch of my career – it's a long stretch, though. I want to share with as many young people as possible what an absolute *joy* this career has given me. I really do believe the world needs more creatively-spirited people.

That we do. This sentiment alone is the reason why Alistair King is an inspiration to so many, and a truly worthy inductee to the Loeries Hall of Fame! Follow [him](#) and [King James Group](#) on Twitter. Loeries Creative Week Durban took place from 22 to 24 August 2019, but keep an eye on the Loeries' [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) feeds as well as our [Loeries' special section](#) for all the latest updates.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

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