

Shattering agency standards with NOT NORM

 By [Leigh Andrews](#)

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WPP's smallest agency is making a name for itself with global and local recognition alike and a Gold Bookmark for online video production its most recent trophy shelf addition. Here's why you need to take note of NOT NORM.

"It's really nice to add a [Gold Bookmark](#) to our Gold Global Cristal for our first entry into local awards," says Kathryn Sharfman, MD at NOT NORM.

That's especially true when you realise their Gold Annual Global Cristal in film was the agency's first global award – and that both of these accolades were for NOT NORM's 'Learn It Young. Remember It Forever' work for Scouts South Africa, shot and produced by Velocity Films. It beat out more fancied South African campaigns to take the top global prize and while entering awards is a costly exercise for a small agency, it's certainly proving effective for NOT NORM. But then, they're not your average start-up. If you're not one of the 3.45 million people who viewed the work in just three months, play the video embedded below:

Little wonder Sharfman calls this her agency highlight: "Watching our first piece of film become the most viewed South African commercial on YouTube... The piece of work for the Scouts has now been viewed over 4.3 million times since September last year."

Rob Stokes, CEO of the Quirk Group – NOT NORM's parent company – goes so far as to call it 'an agency to watch' based on the global and local creative assignments they've won in the past year. In that short lifespan successful pitches have been won in tandem with Quirk London, including a pan-African project for Tigo Cellular and a retainer client in the [Tranquini relaxation drink](#) based out of Austria, won in a four-way pitch against the likes of Mother in London. So they're now the global lead agency for all Tranquini communications across 19 countries, and locally picked up the integrated account for KAUAI.

They're clearly an integrated creative agency for the digital age, especially as they believe that experience is a shortcut to success.

Quirky working relationships

Interesting when you consider that NOT NORM was originally set up as a conflict offering that has developed in parallel: So they do work with Quirk agencies where skills beyond digital are required, and use the considerable technical resources of Quirk for the benefit of NOT NORM's clients. They're completely ideas focused, and this relationship with Quirk allows them direct access to best in class technology and development, but they're equally comfortable developing for traditional media. Little wonder then that Sharfman says: "Right now, every day is different; between making big budget commercials to promotional materials and, yes, websites and accompanying content."

Then there's the link to WPP, the world leader in advertising and marketing services. Sharfman says being the smallest agency in the WPP group is a bit of fun, really. "When we started out we were only four or five people. From a practical point of view it means that our clients are able to get the hands on approach and attention of a small business, with access to larger machines should they need them. This is particularly helpful when it comes to production and media planning or foreign market insights."



NOT NORMs MD, Kathryn Sharfman and ECD, Gavin Whitfield

The team covers the broad range of advertising skills from art and copy to digital design, development and UX as well as client management and strategy and can produce quality in-house video for their retained clients. These broad skills, experience and of course that direct access to specialist support means they actually offer clients who can't afford the big global agency names a single, integrated partner. This allows them to be more flexible with their budgets and doesn't push them into a single channel approach, based on what they can afford.

And as they've come from diverse agency backgrounds and each had frustrations in their previous work lives, it's little wonder the NOT NORM team wanted a clean slate to try and do things differently, such as hiring fewer, more experienced people with multiple skill sets – not the industry norm, for sure, and hence the agency name.

Industry insight: Moving forward in time and space

While they think the local standard of advertising work is pretty good Sharfman admits they're "not overly obsessed with it, to be honest", as they'll personally only enter work they think is of international standard. "Quite frankly, we can't afford to speculatively enter with the current exchange rate," she explains.

Gavin Whitfield, NOT NORM ECD adds that design is of massive importance in SA, and that its importance is going to become greater and greater. That's something they're focusing on developing. "As the available marketing real estate becomes more and more cluttered, the name of the game becomes visibility rather than cognitive messaging. South Africa is blessed with strong designers and we think this is the one area where South Africa can really drive its own aesthetic."

Looking further into the crystal ball, Sharfman says last year was all about building the Not Norm team and proving their hypotheses. This year they're going to continue in the same vein, but with the confidence that they're geared to successfully take on more clients.

That's going to stand them in good stead, especially with a lot of "smaller shops" predicted to open in SA in the coming months, with two or three notable additions to the SA agency roster at the end of last year already, all with ties to more stable global groups. Sharfman says these kinds of 'start-ups' – Not Norm included - have a good chance of challenging the bigger players as they have the stability and inbuilt infrastructure from day one.

To find out more about NOT NORM, visit notnorm.agency or follow their [Twitter feed](#).

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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