

Sean Donovan on TBWA's outstanding year

 By [Jessica Tennant](#), issued by [TBWA](#)

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TBWA\Worldwide has been named Adweek's 2018 Global Agency of the Year based on the strength of its creative product.

David Griner, creative and innovation editor at *Adweek* says that each year, they look for an agency that's advancing creative excellence, championing diversity, strengthening its operations in key markets and developing new offerings that illustrate the value of a modern agency. "For 2018, TBWA\Worldwide was our selection committee's unanimous choice due to its outstanding work, client success and dynamic leadership around the world."



Sean Donovan

Sean Donovan, TBWA\South Africa Group CEO attests this success to the bold changes that the agency has made to the operating systems of the TBWA\Collective of agencies. "2018 has been a good year because of the hard work and strategic planning put into place in 2017.

"We've had a pretty decent year of recognition, especially against the goal we set ourselves in terms of international recognition. Much of this recognition speaks to creative awards, but it reflects much more than creative output only. It reflects the changes we have made to the operating systems of our agencies by innovating in the areas of data, social listening, content production, tech platforms, collaboration and, of course, talent."

Here, Donovan tells us that although 2018 has been a tough year – globally, locally, industry-wise – he believes that if you're a 'sunrise' person, you can thrive even in the toughest conditions...

How do you feel about TBWA\Worldwide being named Adweek's 2018 Global Agency of the Year?

Obviously delighted, it's a great achievement as it's an acknowledgement that the path we've been on, in terms of changes over the past three years, has been the right one.

Also gratifying is the fact that we can confidently say the team here in SA made a significant contribution to the collective assessment, innovating and producing work that ranked among TBWA's best.



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It also makes me happy for some of the veterans of the company that have been around during the less stellar days to know that they're at the top again.

■ **What do you love most about working at TBWA and your career in advertising?**

In terms of advertising in general, I love that no two days are the same and that you cannot confidently predict how your day is going to unfold when you get up in the morning.

“Advertising is a vocation. For those that like the pace, ambiguity and constant change, it's the best place in the world to spend your working hours. For those that crave certainty, it's probably the absolute worst.”

In terms of TBWA specifically, the sense of purpose and the appetite for innovation and change that has been fostered over the past few numbers are wonderful. What makes it unique is the wrapper that all this takes place within – there is a genuine sense of belonging and unity, a real team spirit, that unites all TBWA offices. We're an 11,000+ team made up of many genuine friendships.

■ **Tell us a bit about your experience in the industry; any other highlights you're particularly proud of?**

I've always loved good advertising. When I was a kid, there was a TV show that presented all the best ads from around the world. My brother and I absolutely loved it.

I didn't enter the industry through the traditional route. I studied architecture but decided that I didn't want to practice as an architect and, ironically now, ended up in the management consulting space.

“Whilst studying for an MBA, my marketing lecturer was an ex-agency guy, and the realisation that it was something I could do came from there. He warned me to stay well away from the agency world but I didn't listen. Fast forward to 2008 I started an agency called Openco – The Open Collaboration with a couple of partners. It was bought by TBWA and the rest is, as they say, history.”

Proudest moments? Too many to single out but I think what they all have in common is that they involve other people achieving what they didn't think was possible.

■ **Comment on 2018 specifically, and what you're looking most forward to next year?**

Game of Thrones!

In 2018 there has been plenty of harbingers of doom out there. It was certainly a tough year – globally, locally, industry-wise. And nothing shows major signs of changing in 2019. But we have a great phrase here at TBWA: Do you choose to be a sunrise or a sunset person? I firmly believe that if you have a positive attitude and a strong sense of personal accountability, you can thrive even in the toughest conditions.

And as TBWA we've had an outstanding year. We have topped the SA list at every international award show, we've been recognised as Regional Network of the Year at the Loeries, we're currently topping the Creative Circle rankings and now we've also been recognised as Global Agency of the Year.



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We're producing some of the best work we've ever created. We have the best talent bench of any agency group, we continue to make positive transformation strides, we've developed and launched some great tech platforms and we're having great fun.

■ **What's at the top of your to-do list?**

Anything that drives change. I'm violently uncomfortable with status quo, and always believe that if you're standing still, you're falling behind.

We will be launching a number of new initiatives and offerings in Q1 and Q2 2019, so they are definitely near the top of the list right now.

Personally, it's spending time with my family over the holidays.

■ **What are you currently reading/watching/listening to for work?**

Blinkist and 12min are apps that allow me to 'read' two books a day on a wide array of work relevant topics. I use them to listen to book summaries and note the key points and then decide if I need to read the long-form version. More often than not the summarised version allows you to assimilate the key points of the book and it's a great way to get broad exposure.

■ **Tell us something about yourself not generally known?**

I'm not a native English speaker. I grew up in a part of Ireland that still uses Gaeilge as its first language and it's my native language.

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