

## OPINION

## For the love of creativity, award organisers must be more vigilant

*Multiple campaigns have been withdrawn from Cannes (again). TrinityP3's Darren Woolley argues that in the era of AI, all awards organisers need to look at their criteria and systems.*

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by [DARREN WOOLLEY](#)



When it comes to Cannes Lions, the stakes are high. Careers and creative reputations are on the line. No more so than what is considered the biggest, flashiest and most expensive advertising awards show of them all, the Cannes Lion International Festival of Creativity. An annual pilgrimage of the industry to the south of France to drink rosé and celebrate all things creative.

However, there is a dark underbelly to this celebration, driven by the demands of award success to bring home the trophy and the financial success for the organisers to deliver dividends to their shareholders. Cannes Lions is owned by Informa PLC, which acquired the previous owners, Ascential, for US\$1.6 billion (A\$2.4b) in 2024. As of June 30, 2025, the current share price is £8.14 (A\$17) per share, resulting in a market capitalisation of £10.56 billion (A\$22b).

So, each year, we have big business, big egos, and big reputations at stake on the French Riviera. Is it possible that we also get big controversies? This year, reports indicate that the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity has withdrawn three winning campaigns from DM9, including the Creative Data Grand Prix winner, after an investigation revealed the use of AI-manipulated footage in the "Efficient Way to Pay" campaign for Consul (see video below). The other two campaigns withdrawn were "Plastic Blood" for OKA Biotech and "Gold = Death" for Urihi Yanomami.



Another Brazilian agency, LePub São Paulo, is **under investigation** for what appears to be either inaccurate or faked elements within a campaign video.

This is not a new development, of course. Mumbrella has been reporting on Cannes award controversies **since 2010**, when a Grand Prix winner was disqualified at the last minute because it was discovered it had been entered previously and rejected.

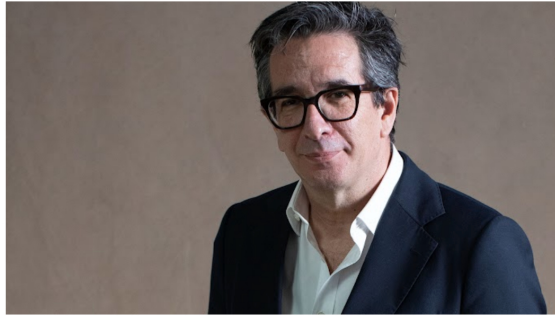
In 2014, local Sydney agencies **were accused** of entering scam ads into the awards, prompting Terry Savage, chairman of the Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity at the time, **to defend** the award show's reputation.

A year later, **a road safety entry** was withdrawn from competition after it was revealed that the entry's details had been deceptive.

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And a decade ago, a Brazilian agency that was forced to [hand back](#) a Bronze Lion was later awarded agency of the year at Cannes, leading Mumbrella at the time to [question](#), "Has the Lion finally eaten itself?



Darren Woolley

It appears there was an industry consensus that entering ads that were never signed off by the client, or never ran, or even ran once, just to qualify, is fair game. Back in 2016, Dave King spilled the beans in [an article](#) that claimed "jurors were not allowed to call out entries they felt may have been scam during the judging process at this year's Cannes Lions festival, and said organisers put pressure on his jury to elevate work".

But today we have entered a new era. The era of AI. Where almost anything you can imagine can be created, including a CNN broadcast news story, it appears, if reports are accurate. All this underhanded cheating impacts the credibility of the awards. Unless, of course, there is a straightforward and diligent process to detect and call out the cheats.

The Cannes Lions announced new measures designed to strengthen entry requirements and review processes for the AI age. But most of these focus on a code of conduct and a process to name and shame the cheats. Good initiatives. But why not have systems in place to detect cheaters before the entries are judged? Why not validate the bona fides up-front and either reject or ban serial offenders?

Surely the claim can't be that they can't afford it? Given the record year for entries, there's [some money](#) in the bank.

With entries to the Cannes Lions Awards ranging from €675 to €1825 and more (A\$1200-A\$3300), and 26,900 submissions this year, you would think it would be in their vested interests to perhaps invest in making the awards more robust and hopefully eliminate or at least minimise the bad publicity that follows the awards for the next ten years?

*Darren Woolley is the global CEO of marketing management consultancy [TrinityP3](#).*

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