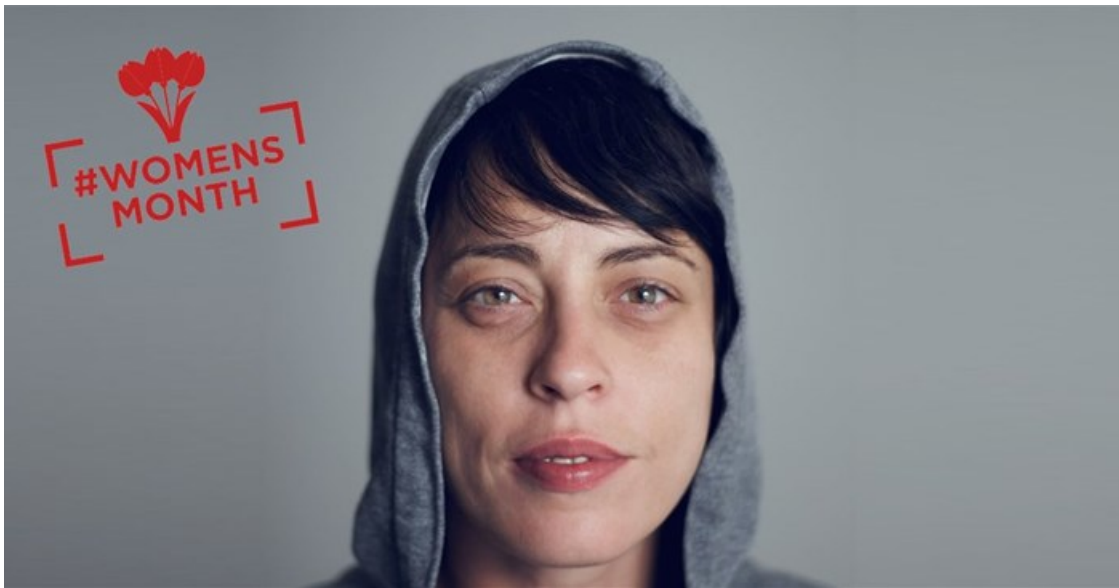


Steph van Niekerk; 'we should celebrate each woman's victories as if it were our own'

 By [Juanita Pienaar](#)

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Ranked as No.1 Creative Director and No.1 Copywriter in South Africa for 2019, and as the runner-up for Woman of the Year 2020, Steph van Niekerk is one of the country's top talents. Over the last 19 years, she's honed her skills as a copywriter at some of South Africa's best agencies. She's won nearly every local and international award, including several Gold Cannes Lions, SA's first (and still only) Gold One Show Pencil for TV and Cinema and the first Grand Prix at the Loerie Awards for a branded content series. Having had experience in both traditional and digital agencies, she believes in integrated platform-agnostic storytelling. She is known for work that is always moving, entertaining and insightful.



Steph van Niekerk, creative director at Grey/WPP Liquid.

Here Van Niekerk tells us why she still thinks it's the work that matters and why it's the work that will take you to where you want to be.

■ ***Please tell us more about yourself and what it is you do.***

Hello! I'm Steph, creative director at Grey/WPP Liquid where I'm currently looking after the Savanna and Scottish Leader accounts. This is my twentieth year in the industry (scream-face-emoji). It seems like just yesterday when I started out as a nervous little copywriter at Ogilvy Cape Town. Since then, I've been lucky enough to work with some of the greatest minds in advertising at the country's top agencies.

■ ***After everything you've achieved in your career, do you feel that you've done enough to represent women in the industry?***

I think I can honestly say that I am where I am today because of other women; women who saw my potential and talents and took the time to nurture them. Despite having all the awards in the world, it took me a really long time to believe that I was ready for a management role. I guess my focus has always been on the work itself. I still think the work is what matters. The work will take you to where you want to be. I am where I am today because of other women; women who saw my potential and talents and took the time to nurture them. Last year, we won two Grands Prix and seven golds at the Loeries in one night. I hope that I can inspire young female creatives by showing them that we can absolutely hold our own on the awards stage. So, when I work with young females, the focus is very much on honing their creative skills, as that is where all their confidence, self-belief and empowerment will come from. Fact.

■ **Do you think the advertising industry is still too male-dominated or is there significant change in transformation happening?**

You know, for a significant part of my career I've worked at places with very strong female leadership—women like Fran Luckin, Mariana O'Kelly and Bridget Johnson, so I just always assumed that it was the same everywhere else. It was only when I was a freelancer for a couple of years that I realised advertising was still very much male-dominated.



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This is particularly true on the global level, where women generally only make up a fraction of global creative councils. I think South Africa is actually ahead of our global peers, but we still have a long way to go.

“ A particular challenge is that our women are so good, they get poached by the internationals and emigrate. Some of our finest exports have been women. We need to do more to pull more women up to fill the voids. ”

■ **Do you think the future of advertising will benefit from more female leadership?**

Absolutely. The world needs people who can lead with empathy and strength. Women have a natural ability to empathise with employees on a human level and in our current reality, this is more important than ever.

■ **What are your personal tips on getting to the top in the advertising industry, specifically as a woman?**

Focus on the work. At the end of the day, no one can argue with or deny a job well done.

“ We do have to get better at selling ourselves, though. I'm always struck by how confident our male counterparts are in their abilities and ideas. I think this is something that is learnt at a very young age. You can ask a guy how his exam went, and he'll reply that he "ACED it!" Girls, on the other hand, will tend to be more doubtful—even if they had, in fact, aced it. I see this disparity of confidence play out every single day, and it does put us at a slight disadvantage. Because if we don't sell ourselves, no one will. ”

■ **What is your hope for the next or future generations of women in advertising/advertising industry?**

“ I think sometimes we mistake aggression for empowerment. This is a fallacy. My hope is that the younger generation will believe in themselves more, be confident in their abilities and take up their rightful place in the industry. I hope to see a generation of female leaders who are as kind as they are strong. ”

■ **What is your key message to fellow women in advertising this Women's Month?**

We can achieve so much more if we work with one another rather than against each other. I feel like sometimes the patriarchy keeps us down by pitting us against each other. We cannot allow this to happen. All the successful women I know are surrounded by other successful women. We should celebrate each woman's victories as if it were our own. Because in a way, they are.

Connect with Van Niekerk on [LinkedIn](#), and/or follow her on [Twitter](#). To stay up to date with news and updates, check out the [Grey Press Office](#) or visit Grey South Africa's [website](#).

ABOUT JUANITA PIENAAR

Juanita is the editor of the marketing & media portal on the Bizcommunity website. She is also a contributing writer.

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