

Gillian Rightford - Preparing the ACA for the future



By [Danette Breitenbach](#)

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Recently appointed interim executive director for the Association for Communication and Advertising (ACA) Gillian Rightford brings a vast experience and knowledge of the industry to the position.



Image supplied. Gillian Rightford talks about her role as interim executive director for the Association for Communication and Advertising

Apart from having previously sat on the ACA board, she has served on numerous industry judging panels, including the AdFocus Awards and Effies juries, and has lectured widely on the industry at institutions including the University of Cape Town (UCT), Red & Yellow and Stellenbosch Design Academy.

As she says, “I have viewed the industry from every angle and have knowledge on both the marketers’ and the agencies’ side.”

Her role as Interim executive director, says the ACA in a statement - which assured stakeholders of a smooth transition, following the departure of Mathe Okaba, who stepped down as CEO in December 2023 after five years of leading the organisation - is to establish stability by embedding its recently approved strategy throughout the organisation.

“A bold and exciting strategy was approved last year, and it is the vision of what the organisation wants to be and how it will get there. For that to happen the strategy needs to be implemented now. It is my job to get it up and running,” explains Rightford.

The ACA also runs a substantial number of industry-specific projects, managed and headed by Board members, that require oversight to run smoothly and deliver on objectives.



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The Effies

One of these is the Effie Awards South Africa programme, and this process is already underway.

“There are a million moving parts from the call for judges and entries (which are happening as we speak). We are also working with the agencies to grow the registration for the Effies.”

Many other projects fall under the ambit of the ACA, such as its mentorship programme and its internship project.

“It is through its programmes and projects that the ACA adds value to its existing members. In the strategy, the ACA looks at how it does this, how it can find new members and what steps need to be taken to achieve that.”



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A resource and voice for the industry

She adds that the ACA serves as a resource and voice for the industry, and therefore needs to address the challenges and issues the industry faces.

Rightford says talent attraction and retention, and development of skills and capabilities relevant to the industry are two of the most pressing issues.

“I have seen the gap that exists between bringing young people into the industry and the industry finding suitable graduates. Too often, companies, marketers and agencies say they cannot find talent. So how do we put these two together.”

However, the biggest issue - and this is worldwide, she adds – is remuneration. “The payment model in agencies, where people are asked to do more for less, is a big issue.”

Another current issue is the pitch model. “Pitches impact agencies enormously as they are very resource-heavy. While

there are guidelines for pitches, they are mostly not followed. It is a bit of a wild west world out there.”



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Adding value to the industry

Currently, Rightford and the ACA are working on a 100-day plan that is task-based.

“I would like to bed down the strategy and make it as strong as possible. I want to be able to hand over an organisation that is not only financially sound but delivers value to its members, its ecosystem, and the industry at large.

She emphasises that it is not just about the members, it is also about the industry at large, and that is why collaboration is so important.

“There is a need for collaboration between all the different industry bodies. Collaborating more is a stated strategic objective and one I would like to fulfil as it is something I am deeply passionate about.”

Rightford says she expects to be in the role for about seven months, but this could be dependent on when the Effies will take place. It could be the case that even if a permanent CEO is appointed, she says, it might make sense for her to keep an eye on the event.



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New CEO

Part of the responsibility in her role as interim executive director is to find a new ACA CEO – or as she says, “a unicorn”.

Talking about the search for a CEO, she says she would like to scope out the job description. “There is a current job description, but I want to make sure of it - and then find a unicorn.”

The ACA will follow good governance rules to find and appoint a new CEO.

Rightford will also involve the member agencies in sourcing recommendations for the position. “The ad approach is one way, but the best people come from word of mouth.”

ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.

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