A Coonawarra winemaker, when asked what was wrong with the show system, replied ‘Marketing and PR people.’ The same winemaker, when asked what could be done about it, came back with a simple reply—’shoot them!’

Whilst shooting the messenger may be one of the more controversial methods of fixing the show system, the author would be surprised if it were not one of the most popular.

It seemed that everything was fine, until Wolf Blass turned up. The show system was turning out good wines, medals were being awarded to nice wines, and everybody was toddling along quite nicely. It must be noted that at this time there were no listed wine companies, no export markets, no Vision 2025, no Wine Australia and no complaints about the show system. This changed when Wolfgang Blass won three Jimmy Watson trophies in a row. Suddenly wine was in the papers. It had become something that the mainstream media could get interested in. There was a sense of anticipation about who might win next year. The noisy little German went on to build an empire based on the foundations of winning those awards to what is now a multi billion dollar business. Damn publicity!

This paper does not explain whether the Jimmy Watson trophy should be awarded to a finished wine, or if a wine should have to win a medal at a local show before entering the capital city show. Nor does it explain how to convince agricultural societies that any of these may be a good idea. What this paper intends to explain are a couple of things about publicity and shows.

Stuart Gregor claims ‘gold medals work—they sell wine.’ In an increasingly competitive marketplace, with 20,000 plus labels on the market, any point of differentiation is a good thing. Gregor spoke with marketing directors of major wine companies to find they universally agreed that gold medals work, particularly on wines in the $8–$15 price brackets. Apparently any colour medal works on wines below $10.

The public’s understanding of show medals

The public realises that a gold is a gold, but may not know the difference between a gold from Griffith or Adelaide, if indeed there is a difference. A gold medal does make a wine better than one without a medal at the same price. People know that a gold medal means a wine has come first in something. In swimming, they appreciate that for Ian Thorpe, winning gold in the Olympics is better than winning gold at the Pan Pacifics.

At the moment, people take a gold medal on face value, but they do sometimes wonder how a cheap wine can win so many gold medals.

‘Where can the consumer find out whether Ljubljana is better than Rutherglen or that the International Wine Challenge is more authoritative than the International Wine and Spirit Competition?’ questions Gregor. Many people within the industry find it hard to decipher these shows, let alone the consumer.

Gregor suggests a wine consumer group be set up to answer these questions, not only on gold medals but on many issues, from additives to different regions and how to read wine labels. He warns ‘as consumers become more savvy, and as the consumer and information generation grows up—we cannot continue to pull the wool over their eyes.’

The Australian consumer, wine shows and publicity

Australians love to hear of Aussie triumphs overseas. The ‘Aussie wine beats the world’ is a favourite of news editors and readers across the country. International medals should be proudly displayed and press releases sent to news desks across Australia.

Despite the best intentions of publicists and marketers the only trophy with real resonance in the domestic show circuit is the Jimmy Watson. The average consumer does not know that this trophy is for an unfinished wine, and in Gregor’s opinion ‘no-one would notice if this detail were changed.’ He believes the criteria for the Jimmy Watson should be changed, for while the average consumer is ignorant of the details of the trophy, consumer interest is growing. With this growth comes cynicism and an increase in attention from consumer watchdogs. It would only take one Four Corners program or one Choice magazine article on ‘The Deceit of Australia’s Greatest Wine Prize’ to cast a shadow across the entire industry.

While most exhibitors are honest and most wines are finished as they are entered, there is a degree of transparency. As an industry, Australia has led the world in truth of labelling and should not be left open to exposure via the shortcomings of allowing unfinished wines to win Australia’s most important wine trophy.

The Australian wine industry is currently seen as the golden child—an industry of which most Australians are terrifically proud. This trust must not be abused, but further enhanced.

Conclusion

The Stuart Gregor Plan for the Jimmy Watson Trophy

Aim: For Australians to drink 25 litres of wine per capita.
To do this, wine needs to be made sexier, more relevant, more contemporary, more Gen-X! As a publicist, Gregor believes we should also make more out of our wine shows.

The best way to do this is to generate more mainstream publicity. When Wolf Blass won the Jimmy Watson in 1999, Gregor took the trophy (actually a replica) along to a Christmas lunch attended by many members of the mainstream media. He poured them the Jimmy Watson winning wine from the trophy. ‘You’d have thought it was the Claret
Jug itself,’ he later said. A well-known Melbourne sports journalist still recalls the moment and considers it a highlight of his life. For people interested in wine this is akin to a punter drinking from the Melbourne Cup, or an Essendon fan sipping beer from the premiership trophy. When Punters Corner won the trophy last year its owners declared it was ‘better than winning a Group One.

Gregor suggests the industry should leverage the Jimmy Watson and turn it into something big—bigger than it currently is. He believes that it must be given both credibility and a lot of publicity.

**Method: Make the Jimmy Watson public property.**
More should be made of the finalists before the announcement of the winner, incorporating a people’s or stewards’ choice.

The packers’ choice in the Archibald Prize is usually for the painting that actually looks like someone, rather than the often-abstract winner. Australians love an argument, love competition and love an event where a roughie can get up against the superstars.

A ‘taste off’ of the final wines in the public eye
‘The Montgomery Trophy or the Tucker Seabrook can be the WS Cox Plate of the wine world but the Jimmy Watson must be the Melbourne Cup,’ says Gregor. ‘The tasting could be in Bourke Street Mall with Bert Newton as master of ceremonies; the public would hear that James Hird thinks the Punters Corner will win but Naomi Robson quite likes the Cape Mentelle because of the pretty label.’ Stuart says ‘it’s all about bringing wine to the people.’

The Jimmy Watson presentation night made the biggest and best party of the year
Celebrities would be clamouring to be seen there. Ray Martin could do the hosting; it should be like the Brownlow, with a live cross to the Football Show.

Compulsory tastings of the Jimmy Watson winner around the country after the Melbourne Wine Show
The winner would have the opportunity to showcase their wine to thousands of adoring Australians every year. Retailers would grasp the opportunity to have the tasting in their store.

To be the very core of Australian society, people need to be able to bet on it, or at least vote on it (Big Brother being the most recent example of this obsession). The Jimmy Watson Trophy needs to be to the wine industry what the Archibald Prize is to the art world. Gregor questions ‘whether the art industry likes the Archibald.’ Not unlike the Jimmy Watson, many question its credibility, and few ‘industry’ people actually believe the Archibald winner is the single best painting of the year. Edmund Capon, when asked what he thought of the Archibald, claimed it to be ‘the best thing that happens to art every year.’ There is controversy, everyone disagrees, the judges are idiots, the paintings are hideous and only designed for show, but the Archibald Prize does put art on television and the front pages of Australian newspapers every year. Art may be a more visual form than wine, but Gregor contends there is a more latent interest in wine than art in mainstream Australia. The fact that the public may never get to buy the winning wine is not an issue as ‘they aren’t likely to own an Archibald winner either.’

**Result: Huge media exposure → increased wine consumption**
‘The name of the Jimmy Watson wine would be on everybody’s lips. The winner should get more publicity than they could ever imagine—radio, television, newspapers—and they should sell out of all their stock and make lots of money,’ says Gregor.

Wine should be seen as sexy and fun, not full of serious old men. People should dream that one day they might get to taste a Jimmy Watson winner, or perhaps even get together in their idyllic vineyard and form a syndicate to have a go at it themselves.