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Chip off the old block is gold

Monty Arnhold | May 28, 2008

ONE of the most extravagantly produced Australian commercials in years recently went to air but, for Monty Arnhold, what is best about it is not its visually spectacular style.

It's that at its heart it has a wonderfully old fashioned principal at work.

The commercial is for a product that's been around for aeons, Old Gold chocolate. You might have seen it. It features a cast of thousands, re-creating a Mayan world of centuries past, where battles are fought over, yes, chocolate.

It tells the story of the discovery of the cacao bean, and how that led to chocolate becoming more valuable than gold in the ancient Mayan civilisation. Whether it's actually true or not is beside the point.

The commercial is unlikely to trouble an award jury - except possibly one judging the various crafts of film-making. But what I find admirable is that in an advertising world where the goal increasingly seems to be as obscure and cryptic as possible, this ad goes back to basics.

You might think that Old Gold needs no introduction. But every few years there's a new generation of Australians, and if you want to develop them as a market they need to be told what the brand stands for pretty much from scratch.

Whether it's a brand of chocolate or anything else, you have to have some sort of continuity in expressing the brand values.

Unfortunately, a lot of advertising today seems to assume that everybody knows the back story to a brand. It then goes on a quest to show just how far it can stray from the basic brand properties into incomprehensibility.

I take my hat off to whoever created this commercial for resisting the temptation to do something completely out of left field to show their peers in the ad industry how cool and clever they are.

In a similar vein, but completely different, is a commercial for Gatorade that was on our television screens about 10 years ago. For those old enough to remember that creativity was invented before last Tuesday, the ad was brilliantly constructed as a fake documentary about American football.

Like the Old Gold commercial which told the story of the discovery of chocolate, the Gatorade commercial told the story of the invention of an electrolyte sports drink in 1967 which enabled one of the competing teams - the Gators - to come out refreshed and replenished after half time and beat their opponents.

I have no idea if it was a true story but it was completely credible. The commercial actually came out quite a few years after the drink was already well established in Australia, but it felt like it should have been the spot that launched Gatorade in this country, if not the entire universe.

I guess the common link between these two ads is that the idea comes out of the product and expresses a core value of the brand, rather than being a superimposed marketing contrivance.

So it's not surprising that in both cases there's an inherent brand integrity that shines out of these individual communications.

They let you know about the genesis of the brand and where it fits in your personal universe.

If I could identify one truly bad trend in advertising in the 21st century it would be the loss of brand identity and brand integrity in the work. I wonder if they've been lost in the exodus of experienced people from today's advertising industry.

Example: recent Australian beer advertising.

In the quest to make it more contemporary, unfortunately brand integrity and brand property seem to have been all but sacrificed in the attempt to get quick laughs.

Now, I've enjoyed Carlton Draught's "Big Ad", "Flashbeer" and the latest "Skytroops" as much as anyone but can anybody just tell me what the campaign idea is? I'm struggling to find even the most tenuous of links between the various executions. The slogan, "Made from beer", isn't it.

Was the idea of "Skytroops" to produce an ad that was bigger than the "Big Ad"? If so, is the idea of what comes next for Carlton Draught to be even more extravagantly extravagant and expensively expensive than its predecessor?

Perhaps I'm being unduly critical of the modern creative product and the problem lies higher up in the chain, in the strategy department. It's a discussion worthy of greater space than I'm allocated in this column, as is a more thorough examination of the entire beer advertising genre.

Meanwhile, a breathless Australian ad industry waits to see what the next move will be for arguably Australia's most iconic beer brand VB, after it recently dumped its agency of 50-odd years and appointed the most excitedly anticipated start-up in decades. An agency which is yet to produce its first ad for any client!

It was what Sir Humphrey of Yes Minister fame might have described as "a brave decision".

Ever since the long-running John Mellion voiced "A hard-earned thirst" campaign was contemporised/bastardised/abandoned, VB has been a fragmented brand struggling to find a single-minded brand identity. The work has been amusing, but really, haven't the jokes been at the expense of the brand rather than in support of it?

Of course those old "matter of fact, I've got it now" commercials were ultimately more out of date than the mullets and mutton chops of the blue-singletted, pot-bellied refugees from the 70s who starred in them.

But in the rush to make VB relevant to the twentysomethings of the 21st century, the baby appears to have been thrown out with the bath water.

As a supremely wise and eminent member of Australia's creative community said to me recently: "There are 99 beers on the shelf, but there's only one beer you had to earn."

"A hard-earned thirst" is a brand property that's been completely lost in the fun of the last couple of years.

I wonder if VB's new agency will have the maturity to recognise that, and rise to the creative challenge of making that brand property relevant to today's world.

On the face of it, a simple enough task, but possibly very, very difficult. No pressure boys, no pressure.

Monty Arnhold is founder of A Second Opinion which offers unbiased creative appraisal of advertising ideas.

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