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Cool coffee, give us a break

Monty Arnhold | June 04, 2008

IN a brave relaunch of the Riva brand, the universally accepted notion that coffee gives you a boost is finally acknowledged.

It's a new commercial from a brand that's tried a variety of approaches since its launch into the Australian instant coffee market a few years ago.

The scenario is simple enough. A young guy drinks the coffee and then we hear his thoughts as a rapid-fire stream of consciousness voice-over that doesn't pause for breath, prattling on about everything and nothing as he goes about his morning. There's no doubt about it, this guy is wired!

I like the fact that someone has finally decided to admit that coffee is a stimulant. Strategically, it's hardly a eureka moment but one that other instant coffees have inexplicably been shy to explore.

Something to do with admitting caffeine is a drug, perhaps?

One unkind critic on the ad industry's Campaign Brief blog joked that it was as if the bloke in the ad had snorted a line of cocaine.

It certainly makes a change from those long moments of soulful, satisfied contemplation that seem to be mandatory in instant coffee ads.

Indeed, instant coffee advertising has been plagued for years by predictable, cliché-riddled nonsense, as instant coffee desperately tries to convince you it's the same as real espresso.

Another anonymous Campaign Brief blogger, responding to one who was critical of the new commercial wrote a marvelously cynical send-up script for the perfect instant coffee commercial in a world where the Riva client hadn't been courageous enough to approve the new commercial.

It's frighteningly similar to a lot of commercials we've all seen before, and I reproduce it for your amusement, word for word: `We open on a busy street scene where everyone is drinking Riva coffee, in specially branded mugs - all held with the logo facing camera - savouring every sip of the rich, smooth flavour - which they comment on regularly so the audience (or focus group) can be completely sure about what it tastes like.

"One young man might say: `Hmmm, this Riva coffee is absolutely scrumptious. It's rich, smooth and creamy all at the same time. I wonder how they manage to make instant taste so good?' He turns to the woman standing next to him, also drinking Riva coffee, who suddenly looks surprised and says: `Wow! You read my mind.'

"They smile at each other and keep drinking. Out of nowhere, another Riva drinker walks past with a steaming cup of coffee in one hand, and a pack in the other.

"He holds the pack out to the original Riva drinker and says with a knowing wink: `And it is going to make you look sooo cool if you keep one in your cupboard.'

"The guy takes the pack and looks confidently at the girl next to him, knowing now that by owning a pack, and thus looking cool, his chances of shagging her have just improved dramatically.

"She reaches out and holds his hand to reaffirm this (just in case the connotated meaning is missed

in research). As they begin to walk down the busy street full of Riva drinkers hand-in-hand, they continue to flirt with each other, sharing tidbits of information about `who Riva is in the first place.

"At this point they embrace, bonded by their knowledge and love of Riva, knowing that what they share will last forever on the strength of their coffee."

In another attempt to avoid the standard cliches of coffee advertising so brilliantly satirised in that anonymous rant, the market leader, Nescafe, also recently launched its latest campaign.

The aim, according to the PR blurb accompanying the launch was to reveal a simple, hidden truth about the coffee bean: It's a natural source of antioxidants. So the creative idea was to use "real people with hidden truths".

Unfortunately there was no other connection to coffee or the antioxidant proposition except for a graphic in the dying moments of each ad directing the viewer to a web address, hiddentruths.com.

This demonstrates that from a strategic point of view there are many ways into an advertising problem, whether it's instant coffee or any other generic product where there's essentially no difference between competitive brands.

So of course, you have to contrive a difference.

The Nescafe campaign featuring uninteresting people with even more uninteresting secrets is obscure at best, but pretentious and incomprehensible at worst. The two-minute versions on the website were excruciating.

If I could say anything good about the Nescafe campaign is that at least they had a go at being different. They started from a promising strategic point. The antioxidant proposition may have been plausible if it had been handled skillfully.

But in execution, it was a decaf soy latte sort of idea pitched at instant coffee drinkers, and as such, fundamentally and spectacularly misdirected. My guess is that the campaign was pulled within a week or two because I haven't seen it since.

It's no wonder that so many clients are suspicious of "creativity" and wary of putting squillions of dollars behind campaigns that they instinctively feel are wrong, but are cajoled into running lest they appear uncool or gutless.

The ones who get burnt rarely come back for another scalding, and seek refuge in bland, invisible advertising. That's because frankly, in my experience whilst many clients can recognise an idea that won't rock the boat, very few clients can distinguish between a good creative idea and a bad creative idea.

So it's even more commendable that Riva have chanced their arm with their new commercial. Because it's not the first time the brand has tried to avoid the formulaic and predictable. You have to give them credit for trying yet again.

If my memory serves me correctly, Riva launched in Australia with a strategic approach that the product was made from 100 per cent Brazilian coffee beans. So we were treated to creative that featured moody, sultry Brazilians being, well, moody and sultry.

Their recently abandoned return to format advertising featuring the dancer/performer Rhonda Burchmore was presumably some form of recuperation from yet another creative experiment.

It featured four weirdos with shopping trolleys doing a choreographed dance routine at a supermarket checkout. Remember it?

This was so pretentious it ached for a parody and The Chaser obliged in a memorable segment on

their TV show.

If Riva's latest flirtation with caffeine-fuelled creativity backfires, my guess is that it'll be back to something like: "We open on a busy street scene where everyone is drinking Riva coffee, in specially branded mugs - all held with the logo facing camera - savoring every sip of the rich, smooth flavour - which they comment on regularly so the audience (or focus group) can be completely sure about what it tastes like.'

Etc etc etc.

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