

Debate focuses on binocular ads.

Monty Arnhold | June 25th, 2008

News that an Australian ad campaign for Olympus binoculars won a number of awards at the Cannes International Advertising Festival last week has ignited ferocious debate.

The ads not only won awards in the press advertising category, but in the poster section as well.

Each of the ads feature a profile shot of a person looking into a pair of binoculars, with the animal they are looking at literally perched on the other end of the binoculars. One features an echidna, another a black cockatoo or lorikeet, the third, a koala.

The idea, then, is 'It's as if things are so close, they're on the end of your nose.' But there are no words explaining this. No headline, no caption, just a tiny shot of a pair of binoculars and an Olympus logo in the top left hand corner of each ad.

An unkind person might say the branding is so small, you'd need a pair of binoculars to see it at all.

But on the face of it, these are seductively good ads, beautifully produced, uncluttered and visually striking.

They conform to the current fashion in print advertising, which is effectively wordless, with a big picture you might have to ponder for a few moments before you 'get it', and a client logo.

Being wordless, it transcends the language barriers which might inhibit its success at international award shows. And Cannes is the biggest international show of them all.

And that's where the many criticisms of this campaign start. The accusation is that these are 'scam ads'. That is, ads created with the express purpose of winning awards, rather than ads created to solve a real marketing problem.

The scam ad debate is not new. But it has erupted again as a result of the collection of Gold and Silver that this campaign has garnered.

Clues are the minuscule size of the logo, which many would regard as far too small for a real poster ('you'd need binoculars to see it'), and the fact that identical layouts won awards in both the poster and press categories.

Obviously, a magazine ad is quite a different beast to a billboard poster, the former able to be studied at arm's length by the reader, the latter having to communicate in a split second from a considerable distance.

The fact that nobody can recall seeing these ads either in magazines or on poster sites has only magnified the suspicion.

Of course, I don't know if these ads resulted from a genuine brief by Olympus to the agency, or whether they were an opportunistic 'initiative' by the creatives at the agency. I hope the accusers are wrong.

In some of the more audacious examples of scam ads, agency creatives have created what they believe is an award winner, have gone 'client-shopping' to find a client generous enough to run the ad, and booked cheap space in an obscure publication or, in the case of a scam TV ad, cheap airtime in the middle of the night in the Northern Territory, thus complying with the entry requirement that the ad must have made a media appearance.

In a famous scam case a few years ago, an ad for loudspeakers was shopped around to various speaker manufacturers with a different brand logo each time until one was persuaded to run the ad for their brand!

It was subsequently entered at Cannes, and, if my memory serves me, won the top prize, the Grand Prix.

I'm not saying the winning Olympus campaign pulled any of these tricks. But others have not been so reticent. One anonymous critic on an ad industry blog said this:

'These 'Cannes-style' ads are nothing more than demonstrations of the category proposition. They do nothing to create a point of difference between brands in the minds of consumers.

I don't knock the creatives. They are merely trying to win awards at Cannes. But it doesn't mean these are good ads. They don't build a brand. They don't create a sustainable and differentiated positioning.'

That blogger has put his or her finger on the real issue. However initially seductive the Olympus campaign is at a first viewing, it displays one of the hallmarks of the scam ad: it's generic to the category. In other words, there's nothing to separate the brand from its competitors, apart from the logo.

The problem with the scam ad is that it bypasses the usual processes of strategic development and in doing so perverts the reason advertising exists in the first place: To solve a business problem.

A good ad usually brings to life a proposition that only the product or brand being advertised can claim.

The only problem a scam ad solves, especially when it wins an award, is a lack of celebrity status for its creators. Awards bring great prestige both for the individuals concerned, and for their agency.

JWT, the agency behind the winning Olympus ads, has for as long as I've been involved in the advertising industry been regarded as a workmanlike but creatively uninspiring multinational which exists to service intractably conservative clients.

Over the past handful of years, the agency has been involved in an almost messianic quest to re-invent itself as a creative force, a task that has been described as akin to turning around an aircraft carrier in a space not much larger than an Olympic swimming pool.

Last year the agency put two exciting young Americans, described by industry bible Campaign Brief as 'the hottest CD team in the country' into the Creative Director role, and clearly 'The Yanks' have put their stamp on the agency. (Even more recently, they shocked the industry again by moving to rival Leo Burnett.)

I'm sure their brief would have been to turn JWT into an award winner, and on that score they've obviously succeeded spectacularly.

That the Chairman of the jury which conferred this campaign with a Gold Lion is also the Global Creative Director of JWT is possibly only an unfortunate co-incidence as far as conspiracy theorists are concerned.

As I said earlier, I have no idea whether the Olympus campaign was a scam, and I'm not suggesting it was. But others have. My point is a broader one; that the obsessive quest for awards, whether the entries were produced legitimately or not is doing lasting damage to the credibility of the advertising industry.

As one blogger observed when I launched my creative evaluation service ' So many creatives have got their own interests ahead of the client that it's genuinely damaging the industry, trying to win awards at all costs is now working against us.'

It's a phenomenon that, at the very least, deserves closer scrutiny.

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