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Different, but missing the point.

Monty Arnhold | April 29, 2008

Ever since forming A Second Opinion I've been asked for my thoughts on a number of campaigns, but the one which comes up time and time again is the new offering from The Commonwealth Bank, 'Determined to be different'.

Right from the launch in which the first American commercial is unveiled to the Australian client, the campaign was greeted by an advertising industry lynch mob with torches ablaze.

I was initially a little more circumspect, suggesting both to myself and anyone who asked that the campaign be given a little time to develop before condemning its creators to eternal ridicule and its real client to eternal unemployment.

So my first reaction to the bank's new campaign was, like the mythical client reacting cautiously to the first screening of his new commercial, a diplomatic "..... er...interesting..."

The fact that the first commercial was an ad industry in-joke about client presentations was a little worrying, but I was prepared to see where it would go in later executions. Surely it was the beginning of a big campaign that would have many components and I counselled patience while we waited for events to unfold.

Incidentally, in the real world of advertising you would never present a final, filmed version of a concept that hadn't been the subject of a million meetings to discuss every aspect of the concept, particularly the campaign theme line.

Anyhow, I quite enjoyed the gags in the commercials, and the performances of the various clueless American agency guys in the various commercials, not to mention the speechless bewilderment of the Australian cricketers in the ads that followed the launch.

But what very quickly became apparent was that what was missing from the campaign is that it fundamentally fails to support the tagline 'Determined to be different' in any demonstrable way.

The real American agency which developed the campaign might have been determined to be different in the way bank advertising is done, but in the cold, hard light of day the campaign delivers absolutely nothing to the banking consumer.

Call me old-fashioned, but I think advertising should express a truth or benefit and do it either forcefully or charmingly. And if you make a claim, you'd better be able to back it up with evidence.

You don't need to be an advertising or marketing person to spot that in this case it's ultimately just another hollow, baseless claim.

Alternatively, in a sector where product parity is the order of the day, such as this one, you have to replace logic with some other method of attracting interest, and ultimately, business.

In the mid '80's the bank launched it's 'Which Bank?' campaign.

'Which Bank?' was a spectacularly memorable and, I imagine, successful campaign. The catchcry 'Which Bank?' became a synonym for The Commonwealth Bank. It went into the language.

The point though, is that in a crowded sector where the actual product varies very little from brand to brand, it was unmistakably linked correctly with The Commonwealth Bank.

'Which Bank?' is a classic case of what's known in advertising and marketing jargon as a brand property. A brand property is something that's surprisingly difficult to acquire, and once established is thrown away at the advertiser's peril.

Yet often when a new Marketing Director or Agency or creative team is appointed to the business, the temptation is to throw the baby out with the bathwater and start from scratch to show how clever they are.

We've seen it time and time again over the years, and particularly recently.

I can think of a couple of iconic Australian beer brands as immediate examples. But perhaps that's a topic for another day.

I'm not necessarily saying 'Which Bank' should be the bank's slogan forever and a day, but if you're going to dump a brand property, you'd better have an even better one to put in its place.

Finally, I think that when inevitably the bank is looking to find a replacement for this campaign, they'd be well advised, like the pretend client explaining to the agency as he kills a contrived game show concept for home-loans, that the message should simply be: get a second opinion.

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