

Entering the realm of the hypothetical

Monty Arnhold | July 2nd, 2008

The Cannes International Advertising Festival may have ended, but debate continues as to whether or not Australia's print winners at Cannes were scams – fake ads produced merely to win awards - with some creatives expressing the view that even if they were, that's fair enough because the name of the game is winning awards by any means, and we might as well accept it.

When you think about advertising's place in the universe, some might say it's a bit ironic that the ad industry would be taking any sort of moral high ground in the first place.

But putting aside the issue of creating an advertisement purely for entry into an award show, there's another activity gaining momentum amongst agencies which has the potential to further erode the credibility of the advertising industry.

Quite apart from the regular order of business in agencies, scam or real, it seems they will now drop what ever they're doing at the drop of a hat to participate in the latest media craze: the hypothetical.

One example we see each week at the moment is on ABC TV's The Gruen Transfer, where two agencies pitch imaginary ideas to sell an un-sellable product.

So far we've seen campaigns for whale meat, Baghdad tourism, The Australian Democrats and plastic bags.

The advertising hypothetical is not a new thing. But it has never enjoyed such prevalence.

It's certainly entertaining, but when it gets mistaken for the real thing, the world starts getting a bit surreal.

Last week's reports that the Democrats were actually negotiating with EuroRSCG to use the commercial for them which won the Pitch segment of The Gruen Transfer brought a absurdly comical perspective to the whole phenomenon.

I wonder if the advertising industry is its own worst enemy when, in an attempt to show how clever it is, is so compliant in offering quickly conceived solutions to every challenge thrown its way.

Perhaps agencies that participate in hypotheticals see them as a harmless opportunity to showcase their wares and get their own brand out there into the bargain.

As I opened The Sunday Age last weekend there was yet another example.

Three agencies had happily supplied imaginary campaigns for Australian tourism, hot on the heels of reports that Prime Minister Kevin Rudd had finally articulated what we've all known about the spectacularly flawed 'Where the bloody hell are you?' campaign; that it was "an absolute rolled-gold disaster".

The timing of this latest creative challenge in a newspaper is surely not coincidental. It's strongly tipped that the announcement of the appointment of Tourism Australia's new ad agency will in fact be made this week.

However, it's likely that the two agencies competing for this big-spending piece of business will have put a lot of energy into developing the strategic thought behind their proposals, quite apart from the strenuous efforts that I imagine will have been put into getting the creative expression of that strategy just right.

Not that there's any guarantee that the work which wins this or any other pitch will ever see the light of day. Or that the work which loses a pitch won't get a run at a later date.

This is where things take a decidedly bizarre turn.

It's a curious but well-known practice by some clients in a competitive pitch situation to simply discard the winning creative campaign of the agency they appoint, seeing it as little more than the by-product of an assessment process designed to test the agency's resources; to examine how the agency team works with each other, and to see what sort of chemistry exists between the senior managements of both agency and client. Not to mention the financial and remuneration arrangements between them.

Certainly while I was working in agencies it often seemed that the pitching agencies were not privy to the real marketing issues of the prospective client and furthermore, data apparently regarded as commercial-in-confidence was deliberately withheld.

Curiously, this is information which is regarded as too important to be released to a prospective partner during the strange courtship ritual which must precede the appointment of a successful suitor.

So in many cases a pitch is largely educated guesswork on the part of the agency, but presented nevertheless with carefully rehearsed, professional sincerity.

It's actually quite a degrading process, but one which most agencies seem to regard as a necessary evil if they're to line up on the starting grid.

But with agencies' oft-demonstrated willingness to throw creative ideas into the furnace with a minimum of consideration, they

shouldn't be surprised that they will be called upon to provide these sacrificial offerings time and time again, and often for free.

That's right; in most cases, agencies fund their pitches themselves, and are not paid or reimbursed for the considerable expenses in both time and materials that are racked up in most cases?

Yet few agencies refuse to pitch.

One I'm aware of which recently entered the Australian market having built up almost mythical respect for its creative product in the USA will, I understand, not pitch unless they're paid for it.

One notorious pitch in which I was involved in the early nineties was reputed to have cost the agency in the region of \$500,000. I worked for the incumbent – the agency which held the business at the time.

One entire floor of the North Sydney skyscraper the agency occupied was re-decorated in the livery of the client, so as to transform it into a replica of one of their outlets.

Where normally the creative ideas would have been presented as artist's drawings assembled as a storyboard, for this pitch the agency put its hand deeply into its own pocket to have a number of commercials professionally filmed and presented as ready-to-go, finished ads.

There had been rumours that the client had already made up their mind to move the account to a rival agency prior to any presentation, but we threw everything at the pitch regardless, presumably in an effort to demonstrate our dedication to the client's business after a series of unfortunate 'mishaps'.

There was a lot riding on it: the account was worth a lot of money

Of course, as suspected, the other agency was appointed, the loser fired a lot of people (including myself) to cope with the substantial loss of business, and life eventually settled down to 'normal'.

But imagine my surprise a few months later when I was watching television at home and 'my' commercial came on screen.

Yes, the winning agency was running the work of the losing one, which has to be one of the biggest no-no's imaginable.

The commercial had been re-edited so that our campaign theme was neatly removed, but there it was, the finished commercial I had written and the agency had filmed and presented, but with a different slogan by a different agency!

Putting aside the moral and ethical issues behind such an occurrence, it's perhaps worth reflecting on this: in a move which predates the current epidemic of agencies offering free concepts, the currency of creativity was possibly considered of such low value by the client, it was effectively worthless.

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