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Ramsay's brand uses dose of salt

Monty Arnhold | May 21, 2008

LOOK at the kerfuffle over the salty tongue of TV chef Gordon Ramsay through marketing eyes and you see a well-defined example of brand essence, writes Monty Arnhold.

Ramsay clearly understands the essence of his brand, as his reaction to the controversy unapologetically demonstrated in last weekend's The Weekend Australian Magazine:

"I mean f#@k me, it's industry language. Like I said to David Gyngell at Nine, `You're the f#@king broadcaster, you put it out at 8.30, and if a chef calls me a c*#t, that's not my issue. And secondly, if you're not happy with it, switch the f#@king thing over."

Whoever had to produce a poster to advertise a series of Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares DVDs recently must have intrinsically understood what brand essence is, and cut straight to the chase.

"F*%kin' Ramsay on DVD" screamed the headline on one of those smallish guerrilla posters on the wall of a construction site as I drove past.

Says it all really. Brutal simplicity, readable at a glance from a moving car, captures the essence of Ramsay's schtick and communicates the marketing message in four words.

Four words in a poster is brilliant, but another cracker I saw recently on a huge billboard did its magic in only three: "Bingle your car."

You could have read it from the moon. The logo explained that the advertiser was a dedicated online car insurance company called bingle.com.au.

Yep, simple, straightforward, great branding and a chuckle. All in three words and a logo.

I love it when an ad manages to weave the message and the brand into an indivisible, inseparable fabric. Both of the above-mentioned posters did it.

Bewilderingly perhaps, you don't often see a good poster. But why not?

Perhaps it's because brand essence is first and foremost a difficult thing to define and, secondly, to express in a witty or interesting way.

Because of the need for absolute brevity, a poster is often a true test of how successfully and succinctly the brand essence has been captured and expressed.

The challenge of refining and reducing a message to an expression of utter simplicity would have been top of mind in the audience of the advertising industry's creative training course AWARD School on the evening I was lecturing on the subject of posters some years ago.

At the completion of my prepared lecture, one of the students inquired if there were any other types of posters apart from the standard media billboard, bus shelter etc.

Fortunately, I was able to think of the following rather lateral example. I had recently acquired a dog for the very first time and had begun walking it every morning. But I hadn't yet mastered the

dog-owner's etiquette of keeping it on a leash in public.

Every morning as I hiked through the hilly streets of Balgowlah Heights in Sydney, a motorcycle - the same motorcycle - would approach from behind and ride noisily past us.

Taking the sound as an invitation, my dog, a fabulously fast and athletic whippet, would turn into a Ferrari and chase the source of his displeasure up the street, forcing the poor rider to fend off the dog's snarling jaws with a sturdy left boot as he attempted to out-accelerate it.

One morning, having eventually decided to do the right thing and attach dear Freddy to a leash, I could hear the roar of the motorbike approaching.

In the split-second the rider had to notice that the dog was restrained and wouldn't chase him, he yelled as he roared past "About bloody time".

The quest to refine and define takes many forms. I once worked for an agency whose strategic process involved peeling away the layers of an eye-wateringly complicated diagram called the Brand Onion to reveal the brand essence.

Of course many attempts have been made to introduce science into the arts of strategy, marketing and advertising, but some are more credible than others.

"Less is more" is one well-known way of articulating the need for simplicity. But there's another one that's my favourite.

The retiring chairman of what was then Australia's largest agency, expressed the dilemma brilliantly as a throwaway line over lunch. He was responding to my observation that many clients fall into the trap of trying to crowbar too much information into an ad.

"Yeah advertising is a process of subtraction. The trouble is, most people think it's a process of addition."

Somebody should put that on a f*%king huge poster.

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