

Winners panned at Cannes

Monty Arnhold | June 18th 2008

This week, the ad-world converges on Cannes for the annual pilgrimage of excess otherwise known as the Cannes International Advertising Festival.

A week of partying will culminate in the presentation of what has become the ad industry's ultimate award show, the Cannes Lions.

One fortunate and talented pair flying there on free business class tickets are the winners of a competition amongst adfolk to create 'an idea that would have a ripple effect across the world. Any idea, as long as it has the potential to make a difference in the world on some level.'

The winning entry, by a very talented Perth based Creative Director and his partner, beat 670 entries from around the world.

They created a campaign called 'Green Unltd', which I would attempt to summarise as a big, simple idea that allows everyone on the planet to do something about the environment.

The entry explained itself in the following terms:

"It is no coincidence that some of the world's largest corporations are responsible for the state of our planet. What if we created a new company? A super sized organization larger than anything the world has ever known. What if this company had billions of employees around the globe who each had an incredibly important job to do but never got paid a cent for doing it? What if that job was to effect climate change and save the Planet?"

Ok, you get the idea. Everyone of us does little things in our everyday lives to use less of the planet's resources.

Nice.

When the announcement of the prize was made on the ad industry's favourite website, The Campaign Brief blog, the comments began to flow.

Initially, as you'd expect for such a big, audacious idea, they were complimentary.

But as is customary with this blog, it wasn't long before the positive comments took a decidedly nasty and nit-picking left turn.

99 per cent of comments on the site are usually anonymous, so there's no holding back. Depending on your sensibilities, this is either highly offensive or highly entertaining!

Unfortunately the creators of the winning entry had neglected to proof-read the version they'd posted, so some bloggers took them to task for their poor grammar, something that had raised my eyebrows on my first reading of the entry.

To some other bloggers, this nit-picking seemed a tad petty, given the bigger picture and the apparent nobility of it.

Thus began a slugfest between two disciplines which usually combine to work as a team to create the ads; writers, known for their ability to conceive ideas and string words together, and art directors, more often concerned with the visual appeal of an ad and frequently ridiculed for their illiteracy.

This shot obviously came from an art director:

‘Maybe if you dickhead writers were a little more concerned with coming up with great ideas instead of fine tooth combing for punctuation and syntax errors you might be in the same position as these guys.’

And this, I’m guessing:

‘Me grammar got bitten by a hyphen. She’s still in a comma.’

But the writers hit back, and the following was one of the more erudite responses:

‘In some agencies, it’s okay not to give a shit about grammar.

The rest of us have to though.

This shouldn’t be a major surprise. The ad industry doesn’t give a fuck about copy.

People in the industry who care greatly about copy are a rarity. If you care about copy you will invariably be written-off (no pun intended) by wankers like 5:19pm as some git in a bow-tie who likes having over-intellectualised debates about the ethos and the place of semi-colons.

If you put love into copy, you won’t win friends with the cool kids in advertising. You will however be able to take pride in the fact you’re doing your job properly.

Hope this doesn’t upset you 5:19pm and distract you from another of your maaaaaaaaaaaaaarvellous viiiiiiii iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiisual ideas.’

Eventually, however, the debate turned to more serious matters, and the eye-pokingly obvious irony that the winners of the contest would be travelling to Cannes on a gas-guzzling, carbon-belching Jumbo to pick up their prize.

It was time for someone to state the obvious, and they did:

‘This whole thing is pathetic.

I am sick and tired of our industry pretending we have something worthwhile to say on the environment. We don’t. As an industry, we have done more to promote the mindless plundering of our planet than just about anyone else. We are the ones who have spent decades convincing people they need new cars, new clothes, new furniture, bigger TVs etc. etc. Let’s give up on these useless conscience-cleansing exercises and accept that we are a corrupt, destructive enterprise that has played a massive role in the process of environmental destruction.’

But then the mood darkened even further, with the discussion centring on the very essence of capitalism itself. Unkind critics of advertising have, in the past described advertising as ‘a pimple on the arse of capitalism’ and the mood on the blog degenerated to one of utter cynicism amongst its own practitioners.

One blogger, defending the winning entry wrote:

‘All they’re doing is trying to empower us ‘people’ to be part of an organization that can take on the corporations we hate...

Which evoked this response:

‘What’s this ‘taking on corporations we hate’ crap. Every one of them has a marketing department and that’s who we work for! Sure, everyone can do their bit, but a lot of what we do is tokenism and motivated by awards, ego and recognition’.

Meanwhile in Cannes, the winners – and thousands of other fortunate souls - are soaking up the Mediterranean sun, the millionaire lifestyle and the atmosphere of the world’s largest advertising festival –along with an almost obscene cornucopia of food, wine and beer.

Without the protective anonymity of the blog, there’s likely to be a mood of back-slapping generosity and bonhomie that’s a million miles away from the conversation amongst those left behind to mind the shop.

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