

How advertising works ... or doesn't

JOHN BEVINS

A presentation by John Bevins in response to address by Liz McFall (Open University, UK) on 27 April 2010 at the Australian Centre For Public Communication, University of Technology, Sydney.

(Talk starts with a videoclip of Steve Ballmer, Microsoft CEO, doing a manic onstage skipdance at a Microsoft staff seminar. The hyperperformance climaxes with him screaming "I LOVE THIS COM ... PAN ... EEEEE" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wvsboPUjrGc>).

Screaming I love this company may make for a powerful company. But whispering this company loves you is what makes for a powerful brand. I'd like to tell you how I came to that view. And how I came to the seemingly contradictory – but corresponding – view that advertising doesn't build brands, a somewhat heretical stance for an adman. I also want to directly address, from my experience, the topic of this event – *How advertising works... or doesn't*. And along the way, do my best to respond to some of the points raised by Dr Elizabeth McFall, in a manner that might meet the hope of the Australian Centre for Public Communication "that this event would help develop a better understanding of the ways that advertising affects contemporary life." Experience has taught me that it can have a profound effect because it is such a powerful tool. I have seen this especially in the area of Social Marketing, that form of advertising used and abused – at times respected but mostly neglected – by Governments of all persuasions.

I was an adman for a long time. I started way back in 1963 BC. The BC stood for Bryce Courtenay who was a young Creative Director at the time at Hansen-Rubensohn-McCann-Erickson, the Australian office of the Madison Avenue multinational. Bryce was like a flamboyant Don Draper from the *Mad Men*. I was more like Peggy Olsen in the clip Liz McFall showed, except I was a despatch boy rather than a secretary like Peggy. Indeed, I used to sneak past Bryce's secretary to put notes under his door.

Like Peggy, I wanted keenly to become a copywriter. Eventually my campaign worked, and I found myself – like Peggy – in a big office with my own typewriter. My office was not as glamorous as hers, and I shared it with another copywriter – Bryan Westwood who became a fine artist, but not before he had written, "Turn grass into lawn with a Victa".

The first ad I ever got published I was very proud of, and the astonishing effect it on the market speaks to this day to the title of this talk. It was for Sweetex artificial sweeteners. Nothing saccharine about it, though: it featured a portly man in his armchair having a cup of coffee. Behind him, armed with the Sweetex pack, was his wife... about to slip him, surreptitiously, not a Mickey Finn but a make-you-thin tablet. In big, bold, condensed type – the fashion of the day – was the headline: LET HIM HAVE IT. When the ad had appeared my copy chief came in beaming, as I still recall, and smoking one of his trademark cigars. Larger than life, Arthur Hankin was a man who signed his name Hank in a starburst. He slapped the *Women's Weekly* down on my desk and congratulated me on the astonishing

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research result for my first ad. Back then, the Starch method was used to score an ad and rank it relative to all the others in the issue. “Congratulations”, Hank said, declaring that my ad had achieved the lowest Starch score he had ever seen.

I had a lot to learn if I was to ever successfully transfer values from one realm to another; to successfully engage in what, thanks to Dr McFall, I now realise was “improper disposition” — the combining of the noble with the mundane. That insight, by Dr. Samuel Johnson, was so far ahead of its time. While I’d not heard of it before hearing Liz McFall’s address, I had long been impressed by another of Dr Johnson’s pre-First Fleet observations: “Promise, large promise, is the soul of an advertisement”. The key word – it is repeated for emphasis – would appear to be promise.

Mind you, advertising had done pretty well ignoring Dr Johnson’s advice long after he offered it. Over a century ago, John E Powers, said to be the father of copywriting, stated that advertising was simply news. Don’t sell, just tell. Tell the news. Tell the truth. And if the truth isn’t tellable, Powers said, fix it so it is. But then along came an ex-Canadian Mountie, a relatively unknown copywriter John E. Kennedy. In 1905 he persuaded the secretary of A. L. Thomas, head of the giant Lord & Thomas agency, to give her boss a note:

I am in the saloon downstairs, and I can tell you what advertising is. I know that you don’t know. It will mean much to me to have you know what it is and it will mean much to you. If you wish to know what advertising is, send the word “Yes” down by messenger.
John E. Kennedy

In his autobiography, pioneer adman Albert Lasker recounted how that meeting with Kennedy went:

I said I thought I knew what advertising was – news – just exactly as the old sailors and astronomers thought the world was flat, and thinking the world was flat, they had worked up a system whereby they had quite a world. But Columbus came along and showed them the world was round. And that is what Kennedy showed me.

He said, ‘No, news is a technique of presentation, but advertising is a very simple thing. I can give it to you in three words.’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘I am hungry. What are those three words?’

He said, ‘*Salesmanship in Print*’.

Lasker would become famous with those three words. He became the adman who got women smoking with his line, “Reach for a lucky instead of a sweet”, and was later to remark, “I am the most superficial man in the world and yet I am the dean of advertising”. He turned to psychotherapy in order to, he said, get the hate out of him that advertising had put here, and – eventually transformed – did more for public health than ever did as an adman for public communication. He was a key founder the American Cancer Society.

Kennedy’s three words, salesmanship in print, resonated with me too when I read them. Creative work that works was a mini motto of mine, meaning I wasn’t interested in dull work that works (as it can if you throw enough money at it) or creative work that fails (as much of it does when it just sets out to win awards).

Kennedy’s three words seemed to echo Dr. Johnson’s nine.

But there was another Johnson – a contemporary Johnson who with his guitar and his voice, and his partner Morris, was to turn Australian advertising on its head. When I was a young Creative Director at Ogilvy & Mather we had pitched for the Tooheys account. But we had lost to Mojo, a brand new agency, a new brand agency. I was driving over the Spit Bridge one morning listening to the radio when I heard Alan Johnson’s voice. The campaign had just broken. Stuck in traffic I glanced into the rear vision mirror and watched two blokes in ute miming what I was hearing. They were listening to the same station and singing along. I knew I was witnessing a phenomenon.

It *is* easy to assume that ‘promise’ is the key word in Dr. Johnson’s phrase. After all, it’s repeated. (And as Mo and Jo famously said, often, “you’ll be sweet, sweet, sweet if you repeat, repeat, repeat”). But I think the key word in “promise, large promise, is the soul of an advertisement is *soul*. Interestingly, Mo and Jo were just two blokes rather than a multinational conglomerate. And yet they were producing the most effective advertising Australia had ever seen. Jo, with his fingers simultaneously on the guitar strings and the nation’s pulse, was creating advertising history. At that time I became a freelancer working out the back room of my home. I was given two briefs from my old agency, Ogilvy & Mather. One was for a sheep dip. The other was for P&O.

Structure no longer a stricture, as a freelancer I was free. This freedom led to discovery, for me, of the Holy Grail of Copywriting.

Has anyone in the audience ever dipped sheep? The old way? For a hundred years or so, up until this product that we were to advertise had been invented, sheep had been dipped by dunking them in a trough filled with an arsenical solution. It was backbreaking work, but effective. Wool saturated with arsenic is a hostile home to lice. But Coopers Animal Health had come up with a radical new product. Now all you had to do was walk through a pen of freshly shorn sheep and spray a red stripe down their bald backs. The active ingredient would then migrate around each sheep’s body and provide protection against lice. The problem was: what woolgrower in his right mind would believe this? It sounded too good to be true and the stakes too high if it didn’t work. Having lousy sheep didn’t get you just financial strife, it got you into sociological strife. It got you ostracised.

As you can imagine, the brief came in the form of a tome. But I never felt the need to open it. Because the client looked at me and said, with a twinkle in his eye, said, “it’s all about empathy”. I didn’t know at the time but he had handed me the Holy Grail of Copywriting. This meant meeting with woolgrowers, shaking their soft lanolin-rich hands, which belied their toughness. One cocky, with worn-down incisors, cheekily told our young Canadian producer how he got them. “No!” she said, shocked. “How else”, he asked her, “do you castrate a young ram when holding both its hind legs? Empathy meant seeing the world through their eyes, but not just by looking up a sheep’s khyber.

They are romantics too.

It was about understanding the stigma of lousy sheep in the community plus the love-hate relationship cockies have with those creatures. Inspired by those insights, and by Mojo and Banjo Patterson, I wrote a ballad that was the track for a long television commercial.

The ballad went like this:

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There's nothing a pathetic,
As a mob of lousy sheep,
That's why Billy Cooper,
Gave us powder dip.

And we must've mustered millions,
And millions in our days,
And cursed and plunged the bludgers,
And showered 'em with sprays.

There was no other way you see,
We couldn't live without them,
But this year when we shear 'em,
This year we're gonna Clout 'em.

It then built into a rousing chorus of the kind fashionable back then in the late 1970s:

This year when we shear 'em,
This year we're gonna Clout 'em
This year when we shear 'em,
This year we're gonna Clout 'em.

The theory was simple: don't get advertising to sell, get the market to yell ... its approval. The results rocked me. So much Clout was sold, the client reported, that it was their most successful new product launch in rural history.

The other brief my old agency had given me as a freelancer was for P&O. Sales were bad and the account was rocky. I had been party to that as the creative director. I had gone along with the research, which had proven what the most effective promise – promise, large promise – was. Using a proprietary Big Yes/Big No quantitative technique, O&M had shown repeatedly that the most persuasive promise you could make was that a P&O cruise is an all-inclusive holiday – your travel, accommodation, meals and entertainment are all included in the one fare. It was a lollypop step of faith therefore to advertise that fact in newspapers, especially as we had an amiable Account Director who didn't believe in television advertising for such a rational proposition. It was a dramatic display of how advertising doesn't work: ships came into Sydney Harbour every two weeks half empty and went out the next day half empty. Perhaps, if the promise of promises wasn't working, cruising had become an anachronism in a jet-setting world. I decided to write something from the heart, something empathetic. I knew from the work I had done some years earlier on anti-smoking that anxiety in Australian society had reached epidemic proportions (Social researcher Hugh Mackay was to explain why this was so in many of his writings). People were worried sick about being worried sick. What better antidote to anxiety than a P&O cruise? Smiling white-coated officers greet you as you step aboard. In a world without newspapers and phones, you are lulled into a sense of real security. These were floating asylums for the sane. They offered more than escape. They offered evacuation – if you were lucky enough to get aboard. It might be hard to turn a cruise ship around, but this demonstrated how easily advertising could turn a cruise ship company around. It was an almost-overnight success, and changed the fortunes of P&O.

Does anyone remember blank cassette tapes? TDK was a highly regarded brand whose

advertising had been rational, and aimed at audiophiles. I was briefed in that freelance period to do a mass market TV commercial. It seemed to me that while TDK were selling blank cassettes, the market was buying a ticket. A ticket to an experience. That experience was an emotionally moving one. And physically moving: you feet start tapping, your fingers start snapping, your hands start clapping, your arms start flapping. TDK does amazing things to your system. Enter “*TDK does amazing things to my system.*”

Clearly, to me anyway, looking back, I *had* been given the Holy Grail of Copywriting. Engraved on it, by Arthur Stacey no less, was Empathy on one side and Eternity on the other. Empathy will always be what communication is about.

Suddenly, amid all my insecurities, I had the confidence to start my own advertising agency. Imagine a map of the world with dozens of red dots. That map gives you a good idea on the John Bevins Empire. All the red dots show where we never had an office. It’s by no means a complete representation. Can you see the one blue dot? It shows where we *did* have an office – Sydney. It was our head office ... our only office. There, not for the administration of a global network, there just for our clients.

It’s tempting to argue that the best creative work stems from a single source more consistently than from a complex structure like Sterling Cooper – Mojo showed that, those two writers were in effect a single source combining even their names into one entity. And my own work became really effective once I found solitude. But, of course, I didn’t find my Holy Grail, it was given to me. And I was reliant on an agency and clients to give me the briefs. And on countless talents – musical, graphic and cinematographic – to turn my hummed thoughts into polished productions.

And my own agency, with partners Ray Black and Ian McDonald, taught me that – to reference Liz McFall – as you go about blending the culture-like bits with the economy-like bits, and negotiate those shifting networks of organizational and institutional relations – amid this *agencement* of advertising – there are really only two things you can influence. The agency culture and the agency’s ads.

As sure as I stand here, an agency without soul cannot create advertising with soul.

I want to single out just one campaign from those 28 years, for its coincidence and as a reminder that advertising can be effective. Advertising can enrich or impoverish – to paraphrase the management guru Theodore Levitt (he was talking about work). My experience is if you focus only on the former, you sleep better at night two ways. The other way is the results you get for you clients.

The campaign I want to discuss was for the Medical Benefits Fund of Australia. We had won the account and set about figuring out how we advertise the brand. The CEO, brilliantly, had forbidden us to canvas new members. Advertise only to the existing membership, he said. I’d seen a *Sixty Minutes* episode with Debbie Byrne interviewing, or rather cross-examining, Health Minister Neil Blewett about the Government’s failure to provide a screening mammogram programme. If testicular cancer were the number one killer of men, she’d said to him, you’d screen for that. But MBF had such a facility. A screening mammogram clinic for members in Sydney Square run by Dr Joan Kroll. I went to visit her. She was very busy but showed me around, and then took me to her office for a chat. In the course of it she mentioned a lecture given by a Professor Baum of the Reyne Institute in London. She said he had a slide of an old master that depicted breast cancer before it had been discovered by

medicine.

I called Professor Baum in London and he told me the painting was Bathsheba, by Rembrandt. It became the basis of a 30-second TV and long-copy print campaign that ran in *The Women's Weekly*.

Sweetex? How it was researched using the Starch survey? Well, coincidentally that technique was brought back briefly in the early nineties when my agency had done that campaign for MBF. 'Bathsheba' proved to be one of the highest scoring ads in the issue and disproves the need to have a big logo, or a brand name in the headline, or to steer clear of long copy (the ad enjoyed astonishingly high readership), or even to put a promise in the headline. It does prove, I submit, *the need for an ad to have a soul*. Visits to the clinic were up 800% on the previous year.

I declared at the outset my heretical belief that advertising doesn't build brands. Advertising might build brand awareness but brand awareness is not the brand. What builds brands are relationships. The strongest relationship builder is the product or service itself. Then you have the salespeople, and customer relations people. It's through these people that relationships are most effectively built. Ah, but it's with advertising that relationships can be most *efficiently* built — where Efficiency equals Effectiveness divided by Cost. Advertising builds relationships most efficiently and it is relationships that build brands.

Product advertising explains the product to me. Brand advertising explains me to me. Most brand advertising focuses on what people think about the brand. Good brand advertising focuses on what people feel about the brand. But the best advertising focuses on what the brand makes people feel about themselves.

So how does today's advertising affect contemporary life today? It's very hard to say. Advertising changes society gradually. Often you can only tell its effect by looking into the future. Studying the past is easier than studying the future. A better question might be how does *yesterday's* advertising affect contemporary life today. Has it left a legacy? Is that legacy good or bad? And from that question to then ask how might today's advertising affect contemporary life *tomorrow*?

I want to give three more quick examples to remind us just how powerful the effect of advertising can be. How it can change the world, providing there are advertisers visionary enough to see that and gutsy enough to let it.

One such client in 1979 was the NSW Department of Health. It is fair to say that had an ad like this not run – against all the odds – a revolution may not have begun. Tobacco interests were determined to stop it. A more determined bureaucracy beat them with a soggy, tar-oozing sponge,

Another such client in 1982 was Peter Cox, Minister for Transport. He gave me the best brief any client has ever given me. Nine words. "I want to get the blood off the roads". He said them full of personal conviction and not an iota of political ambition. *How will you go when you sit for the test? Will you be under '05' or under arrest?* was the result.

And thirdly, the word "microsleep", which became a part of the vernacular. The RTA told us was that the ad that first introduced Australians to this term was also their most successful road safety commercial.

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Advertising can sow the seeds of a better society. Or it can leave the fields fallow through neglect, or even help create the kind of society we'd not want our grandkids to live in. It's our choice.

Thank you.