

## How to Create Compelling Adverts

The first thing to observe about advertising is that it can be really, really bad – and it often is. Much of it is still hopelessly rooted in archetypes that were established in the 1950s – when the first flush of mass-market consumerism hit the United States. Then, it made sense to show blissfully grinning housewives operating newfangled kitchen appliances, because these appliances really *new*. It was necessary to see these gadgets embedded within the façades of sparkling domesticity because the manufacturers had a certain amount of convincing to do; new product categories were being invented all the time.

That is not so much the case now. Since the first great consumer revolution, products have mostly experienced a steady evolution. Some products – like toothpaste, dishwasher tablets, and razors – have hardly evolved at all, but undergo instead successive cosmetic tweaks that, when combined with new packaging designs and ad campaigns, give the consumer the illusion of progress. Advertising of this nature washes over us all the time, and was the subject of a sketch by Mitchell & Webb, where we find the comedic duo in a board meeting, trying to figure out the next innovation in toothbrushes. Having already tried putting a kink in the handle, and angling the bristles, the team find themselves at a loss as to how they should progress. That is, until Robert Webb's character suggests they try convincing people to “brush their tongues”. David Mitchell retorts: “They're not gonna brush their tongues!” To which Robert Webb replies: “I think they will. I think that if we tell them to brush their tongues, they'll *brush their tongues*.”

Very often, as Webb expands upon in the sketch, there is spurious pseudo-science of one form or another used to back up the latest “innovation”. Shampoo advertising is particularly guilty of this. Computer generated visuals showing hair magically being repaired from “root to tip” while a bright female voice deploys vaguely scientific-sounding terms to the sound of synthesized

piano music, seems to be the preferred formula. Just like in politics, when the major players are all trying to sell the public essentially the same thing, the ad people must become increasingly devious in the way they move to exploit and manufacture slight differences. However, this style of advertising is quite transparently manipulative, as well as being unimaginative, old-fashioned, instantly forgettable, derivative, and smacking of desperation.

Not the greatest poster for your new product, in other words.

### **Avoiding cliché**

As is the case with any other creative endeavour, avoiding cliché ranks as number one on the list of things to avoid. Come up with something *original*. It doesn't matter what it is! Just as long as it's *original*. Think about it. What are the greatest adverts ever devised? They are the ones that are *memorable*. Originality means people will remember, and in the sphere of advertising, that is everything.

The drumming Cadbury's gorilla. The *Smash* robots. VW's *Singin' in the Rain* ad, promoting its new Golf GTi. They are quirky and imaginative, unconstrained by the kind of proven "formulas" beloved of cautious bean counters. They are enjoyable to watch *in and of themselves*, despite being adverts. As such, they can be considered very rare beasts indeed – but the existence of such ads proves it is at least possible for advertisers to transcend their unloved profession (if only for three minutes) if somebody on the team is blessed with a spark of inspiration.

Incidentally, the advert widely acknowledged to be the best of all time – Guinness's *Surfer* piece from 1998 – is perhaps also the most conceptually flawless, given that it married the Guinness strapline – "Good things come to those who wait" – with a sport that is not only cool, but with which waiting is a prerequisite. All of the other great, great Guinness adverts – like the racing

snails, and the stunningly conceived and executed reverse-evolution piece from 2006 – have riffed off that strapline. The decision to drop it in 2009, in favour of the infinitely more bland “Bring it to life”, coincided with less memorable ads, and falling revenues. My view is, the company lost sight of its brand identity, and it is paying the price.

The lesson is: think of a core message for the product, which is distinct, and which is inextricably linked to the product’s function. Then stick with it, do not tinker with it, and do not be swayed by fashions. Use it as the basis for your advertising, and hire the best creative minds to dream up your campaigns. This might not cost as much as you think, if you are willing to consider the wealth of talent within universities and colleges. I would say “think outside the box”, but that’s one of the worst clichés going.

You get the idea.

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