

De-Standardization and De-Tabooing of processes

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In November of last year I wrote an article on the “Future of Advertising” and said it was indeed bright despite what my Gurus – Al Ries, “The Fall of Advertising ...” and Sergio Zyman, “The End of Advertising ...” may say. However, I proposed a 9-point plan for Advertising’s continued growth and one of the points was the need to De-standardise and De-taboo processes. This one point seems to have caught the fancy of your editor who has asked me to expand on it, leading me to spend, what would otherwise have been a lazy Saturday afternoon, at the Yatch Club elaborating on it and exercising my writing skills.

I have no doubt that Advertising began as an Art. It’s intrinsic power in increasing sales made it so popular with many businessmen wanting to use it and many wanting to make it their livelihood, that it led Claude Hopkins to write one of the earliest books on Advertising titled “Scientific Advertising”. Around the world we have spent most part of the second half of the 20th century trying to convince advertisers and ourselves that Advertising is a Science and therefore has a set of principles, rules, processes which must be followed in its creation, for the end product to work. All ideas are good and relevant, but only at a time and place. Too much of a good thing as we all know is always bad and that’s exactly what has happened to this idea The bit about “Science”. What started as a basic set of guidelines to ensure

that appropriate advertising would be created that would work for the advertiser with minimum amount of wastage, has ultimately led to the creation and laying down of pretty rigid processes, which over the years have got standardized and institutionalized.

What has not helped is that advertising all over the developed world, has emerged a very large industry contributing anywhere from 1% to 3% of the GDP and in developing countries is fast emerging as one. Add to that it's intrinsic attraction as a profession because of glamour, creativity and what not and you have millions of young people wanting to get into advertising. Businessmen and academics have been quick to notice this and capitalize on it by running stand-alone advertising courses or make advertising an important stream at business schools. Advertising, I submit can be effectively taught holistically only by practicing advertising people and not by professional teachers or academicians. In our country at best we have 10,000 employed in advertising agencies, of which only perhaps 1000 are involved in actual strategizing and creation of campaigns. How many of these 1000 can you expect to take an interest in teaching advertising? And yet we produce I suspect every year atleast 25000 students who have been taught advertising in a business school or at a specialized course! And some of them get into advertising with their set of theories, processes, rules and what not.

The formation of advertising networks in the early seventies and the acceleration of such agglomeration in the last 5-years leading to just 4 (WPP, IPG, Omnicom and Publicis) having a strangle hold on most of global advertising has not helped either. Each network finds it essential to

institutionalize processes in order to ensure quality and effectiveness, further compounding the problem.

In all such institutionalized processes, it is consumer research that forms a major element, both pre-creation and post creation. And most of it is paid research done through 3rd party research agencies. How much progress have we made in developing sophisticated research techniques to delve into the complex mind, to arrive at that all evasive consumer insight. Every time one does consumer research can one expect to come up with a good consumer insight on which to base a campaign?

Effective Advertising can be created by reading and knowing about other campaigns that worked and did not work and under what circumstances. The intellectual pursuit of distilling the learnings from such cases and putting together a rigid process with checks and balances, is tempting and sounds like panacea but is full of pitfalls!

As Corporations get larger and larger and the top boss or the board gets far removed from important advertising decisions, it is tempting to lay down a set of processes which should be followed, on the assumption that at end of the process you will get a reasonably effective advertising product. And when the top 5 companies in a category lay down a more-or-less similar process you can imagine the impact creation ability of the end product.

If the institutionalising of the process works for top management, it works for middle management too. Because when advertising does not work and more than often it does not, given the regimentation, the only enquiry is into whether the process was followed, and invariably it was, so at the end of an ineffective campaign, you have nobody to blame.

Perhaps, I am over simplifying, of course I am over generalizing, but only to make the point that Advertising is best left, to well rounded people with varied interests in life at both the clients' and agencies' end and those with strong views, conviction and above all a passion for the brand.

An often under estimated point is the important role a client plays in the development of outstanding and effective advertising. Generally speaking, most of the credit or blame in today's time goes to the agency. But enlightened clients know or should know that the same agency produces outstanding advertising for one client and not so for another and should inquire into the reasons thereof. We have also seen that with a change in a key advertising decision maker at a client's end, a substantial improvement or deterioration takes place of an advertiser's advertising standards. Procter & Gamble who generates more advertising around the world than most others and is probably more process driven than any other company spends considerable amount of time creating an enabling environment for the agency and as some of you may have read, a top delegation of 30 Procterites led no less by the Chief Marketing Officer attended the Cannes Lion Festival this year and they were the only people on the French Riviera who worked hard from morning to night, that week!

And if this true for the creation of advertising, it is equally true for identification of new products and various disciplines of the communication field, like Media and PR. I give below a few examples from my book for your reading pleasure and to provoke thought.

Cinthol Lime was launched in 1988 based on an elementary gap analysis and its advertising for the first time featured not one model but many, both boys and girls of young age and set to upbeat peppy music (each of these elements considered taboo atleast by conventional soap advertising standards) with the words, “Catch the lime fever”. The new brand variant went to achieve a 5.3% share in the premium market in the first month of launch and with the addition of few more variants each targeting a different audience (generally considered taboo) helped almost double Cinthol share. Earlier the use of male (again considered taboo) celebrities like Imran Khan, Vinod Khanna and Shahrukh Khan gave Cinthol a distinct position in the cluttered soap market, enough for it to survive and thrive at low ad spends.

The repositioning of Click (flavoured tobacco pouches) to attract both cigarette smokers and the down market and untouchable gutka user (again considered taboo) because of the fear of negatively impacting the image of the brand with copy highlighting “No need to spit” and “No staining of teeth” and some elementary thumbnail sketches on how to use the product (taboo again - too basic) resulted in a 20-fold increase in sales.

In the 8-year old media-specialist industry, also standardisation has stepped in, at a rapid pace in the last 2-3 years, and there is a crying need to de-taboo some of our beliefs. In today's CPRP driven media world BPL took the bold step of spending a small but sizeable amount of the television budget, not on 30/20/10 second commercials, but by creating a rotating BPL replay bug and extensively using it across channels over cricket telecasts of matches in India and abroad to find that at the end of the year more TV viewers recalled the BPL bug than the BPL ads and considered BPL's presence on cricket, only a shade below the Cola and Bike majors, whilst investments were at a far lower level. CPRP?

Confectionary manufacturer Perfetti with much lower arsenal has created lively animation encapsulating its brands' essence which in turn has enlivened cricket telecasts, marginally sacrificing CPRP but establishing brand propositions in an interesting and unique way.

Coke Popstars, if you view in a conventional way has been disappointing, but looked at holistically in terms of on-ground presence, activation of opportunity and promos across the Star Network and it looks like a profitable investment.

As the PR industry takes root and there is an army of young men and women pushing press releases to dismissive journalists, my mind goes to the front page photograph of an elephant stomping on fake products (FICCI's PR initiative on anti-fake products) or the front page photograph of the 4th generation of Godrej family of ages 7 and under, using brightly colour kid

furniture from the stodgy Godrej & Boyce, to the time when all P&G employees gathered in an open maidan to launch Whisper in Bombay or its press conference to launch a teenage product which chose a college running a PR course as its venue, thereby giving students a first hand feel, creating a buzz among the target audience and journalists a change of environ.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I am not against developing a scientific bent of mind. Infact one of my favourite definitions is that of Steven Leacock who says, "*Advertising is the science of arresting human intelligence long enough to get money from it*". But I believe this is to bring some form and structure to a process at a time when none existed or bring some method to the madness. But I believe we should not get carried away to the extent that we believe that we are scientists and become slaves to a rigid process or system in the hope that it will ensure effective advertising. Outstanding advertising has always been created by outstanding men with conviction, passion, a keen sense of observation and you need as many of such people at the client's end because remember you do not see all the advertising that is created. You only see that advertising which is approved by and paid for by the client.

As client corporations get larger and larger and agencies too get corporatised, the challenge before us is to not forget the basic ingredients essential to create good advertising and create an enabling environment at both the agency and client end, identify the kind of people best suited to create effective advertising and leave them alone to do the job.