

CREATIVE VIEWPOINT

REFLECTIONS

FROM A SISTER PLANET



Illustration: The Secret Planet by Gloria Sánchez



In a world of increased media fragmentation with advertisers vying for the attention of consumers across so many channels, creativity should always sit at the heart of every advertising strategy, writes **Phelim O'Leary**.

About 20 years ago Des Byrne, one of the founders of B&A (who sadly passed away a couple of months ago) was concluding a paper to a marketing and advertising conference when a hand was raised and the question was drily asked: 'Des, what do advertisers really want from advertising?' The answer was quick, and just as dry: 'More'.

Nothing much changes – at least on the surface. The same answer would probably suffice today, as it would to the frequent query of all market researchers: 'What do consumers really want?'

But a few moments of further consideration leads to the feeling that this is an unsatisfactory thought. It now feels unrealised, as if the simple one-word answer is the beginning of a conclusion, rather than the conclusion itself.

This is because so much has changed in two decades – to everything, not just advertising, and it may be of some interest to hear a researcher's view of some of the current dynamics of the advertising world in Ireland.

Leave aside for a moment the obvious subject of Digital and all of its implications. Let's return to the original question. 'What do advertisers want from advertising?'

I hazard to say credibility. They want to believe in it. They want to believe that it works. They want to believe that the good stuff works better (which of course implies that the bad stuff 'unworks').

There are a couple of issues within this that advertising agencies need to address. First, they will recognise that many contemporary head clients come from different disciplines and mindsets than those represented by advertising and marketing. Their ideas about 'evidence-based solutions', 'proof' and 'evidence of ad effectiveness' may be very different indeed than that of their agency.

Second, it brings into play a very necessary debate about budgets. Which brings us to honesty: advertising will not work if the budget for its ambitions is insufficient, and it needs a brave agency to broach this truth. This becomes even more relevant as budgets need to stretch in the digital age.

A useful way of steering into this thorny bush would be for the agency and client to not discuss the 'does it work?' question, but to concentrate on 'how it works?' instead.

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This is far more likely to foster agreement and harmony, on such dimensions as appropriate financial investment, media and creative strategy. 'How it works', by the way, appeals to scientists, accountants, engineers, technologists as much as the ad people.

In the past, advertising agencies could rely on very senior management in client organisations to have marketing backgrounds and for board members to have at least a working appreciation of the contribution of advertising to corporate objectives (this goes for the public sector as well). I doubt if this exists as strongly or as deeply anymore, and this can then create an unspoken-of hurdle for agencies in client relationships.

Here, also, there may be lurking another problem: is advertising as a career still as aspirational as it used to be? Recently, when we conducted focus groups with new graduates about careers, education, the professions etc, we noted that 'advertising' was notably absent from discussions. Is there any work being done on the image of advertising itself? Is it, for example, attractive to innovators? Can potential entrants grasp the kind of career paths that may be available. And, of course, there is the issue of remuneration: do people believe that working in the industry will be rewarding?

The subject of digital would require a thought paper in itself and many have been, and are, forthcoming. Suffice to say that it is the most electric of the various currents of advertising in Ireland today.

From a researcher's viewpoint, digital has spawned all sorts of other changes, to the extent that the theory of unintended consequences comes to mind.

Channels of communication to mass and niche audiences have fragmented, and the choices to advertisers shape up like a Chinese restaurant menu. So there now has to be digital. But isn't that different than social, with different levels of expertise needed? And what about TV (still

the biggest medium and maybe underestimated in terms of power?). Its role for big consumer brands should not be under-estimated. And then there's PR, and what about planning?

This kind of thought stream can go on and on and on. And, for an advertiser, it will eventually land back in budget territory, with hard and critical decisions to be made.

An upshot of digital and media fragmentation is fragmentation of communication services. An increase in the supply of specialist services in recent years shows little sign of slowing, with classic advertising agencies possibly feeling that an invasion of upstarts is eating their lunch. It is probably difficult for client companies to clearly see where advertising agencies end and public relations begins. Or where digital and TV blend. Or where the role of planning now optimally exists.

In this tangle, it is perhaps worth remembering the absolutely crucial and fundamental ingredient of creativity (and creatives) to advertising. Remove the creatives from advertising and all that's left is process. Advertising is where advertisers come to buy creativity, not just media opportunity. The role of creativity is crucial, and increasingly so, in this digitised (short attention) world. Great creative wins! Having the correct balance between long-term brand building and short-term tactics is so important to achieve the best return on marketing investment (ROMI -source 'The Long and the Short of It' Les Binet & Peter Field).

This brings me to a final thought. If it's all felt to be about 'communication' then the classic advertising agency has one major card to play: it's DNA is in the area of persuasion through creative thought and output. It is this, of course, which is the holy grail sought by advertisers.

Here too we might also well remember the words of David Ogilvy: "If it doesn't sell, it isn't creative". **IMJ Phelim O'Leary is a director of B&A.**