



the new, new thing



But what is it, exactly? That's the question bugging interactive creative agencies, as they struggle to define their own identities and develop their niche within the advertising field.

By Anthony Vagnoni

In the ad world today, mainstream agencies are struggling to reinvent, redefine, and reposition themselves. Witness how many now insist they're not agencies at all, but rather "idea" companies. Their interactive advertising counterparts are going through a similar process, though it's also significantly different. For these shops, the problem isn't so much insisting that they're no longer the kind of companies we always thought they were—it's that many of us never really knew what they were in the first place.

Veteran observers of the interactive ad scene still get a little stymied by the diversity of what these companies do, and by their efforts to identify and brand themselves. For Cathy Taylor, contributing editor at *Adweek* and the former interactive editor of *Advertising Age*, one major challenge in covering the beat is that it defies easy categorization. "Even after all these years," Taylor says with a sigh, "there isn't one business model for these shops. We keep trying to lump them together, but they don't fit. They're all over the map."

Taylor would know. She was one of the early advertising and marketing journalists assigned to cover the exploding—and then imploding—world of interactive ad agencies. What's impressed her most about trying to fit these square pegs into round holes is how quickly the pegboard changes, and how hard it is for even the top

Previous spread: Illustration for Nike's Football Asia-Pacific site, which Nike turned into an outdoor ad. Agency: AKQA, San Francisco; art director: Daniel Varon; designer: Akira Takahashi; interaction designer: Tom Rohrer; illustrators: David Foldvari, Akira Takahashi; design director: Neil Robinson; executive producer: Charlie Taylor. This page, below: Screen from Sharp's Aquos site. Design firm: R/GA, New York; art director: Adam Jackson;

designers: Piper Darley, Matt Lawrence, Kingsley Harris, Salah Mason, Yogi Naraine, William Wong. Bottom: Screens from Target's site. Design firm: R/GA; creative directors: Kris Kiger, Nick Law, Ted Metcalfe; art directors: Andrew Clark, Sarah Golding. Facing page: Screen from Nokia's Nseries site. Design firm: R/GA; creative director: Winston Thomas; designers: Ian Spalter, Takafumi Yamaguchi, Nina Schlechtriem, Nadege DeCastro.





players to define precisely who they are and what they do.

Traditionally, ad agencies that became household names did so because we were so familiar with their work. It's different for interactive agencies undergoing constant transformation. "The idea of building a consistent brand identity is almost impossible for these

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guys, because of the pace of technological change," Taylor says. Their profiles—and the basic roster of what they're good at—shift with clients' needs and user preferences.

Robert Greenberg knows about negotiating these slopes. "We've already made the transition that traditional agencies have yet to make," says the chairman and chief creative officer of R/GA, New York, explaining how his company has moved entirely into the interactive media world from the more traditional (and seemingly doomed) land of traditional film or TV communications. "As I recall when we were doing it," he adds, almost as an afterthought, "it was really horrendous."

In these post-crash boom times, the interactive advertising world is simply bursting at the seams, with annual-spending percentage increases into the healthy double digits. For companies like R/GA and others, it's happy days. But for those now making the transition from old-school to new—or companies such as the Barbarian Group, forging new models on their own—the process of educating potential clients, adjusting their talent pools, enticing new clients, and maintaining the creative quality of their work is daunting.

R/GA, founded in 1977, has undergone a triple-play metamorphosis: Initially a traditional film-based visual effects company, it became an all-digital film and TV studio, then an interactive ad agency. Greenberg has observed these transformational changes occurring in nine-year cycles, and he says he intends to devote the next cycle to building a new agency model: a full-service shop centered on interactive technology and interactive media. He's already headed in that direction, as R/GA is now producing not just client Web sites and rich media communications, but also print work and even commercials (which will most likely be seen online, not on cable or broadcast TV). "It's a true media-agnostic, multichannel model," he says.

Why did R/GA make this transition? Greenberg says there are several reasons, all of which carry lessons for those trying to pull off the same feat. "We came from a legacy of collaboration, stemming from our days as a production company," he says. "We also had a legacy of integrating creative and technology, as well as working across media, such as print, feature film, and television." His company, he notes, still lives in two worlds: Many ad-industry insiders still associate his shop with Clio-winning TV spots and Hollywood feature titles. But the tattooed staffers who hang out in front of his building on Manhattan's West 39th Street probably have no idea that there used

This page, below left: Benjamin Palmer. Photo by Mike Rubenstein.

Right, above: Screen from site for Gillette, produced by the Barbarian Group. Agency: Digitas; creative director: Thomas Celentano/Digitas; lead designer: Chad Portas/Digitas.

Right, below: Screen from site for Discover Card, produced by the Barbarian Group. Agency: Goodby, Silverstein & Partners; art director: Aaron Dietz/Goodby; designer: Devon Sharkey/Goodby; creative director: Keith Anderson/Goodby, associate creative

director: Will McGinness/Goodby. Bottom: Screen from Burger King's Subservient Chicken site, produced by the Barbarian Group. Agency: Crispin Porter + Bogusky, Miami; creative directors: Alex Bogusky, Andrew Keller, Jeff Benjamin, Rob Reilly/CPB; art director: Mark Taylor/CPB; illustrator: Pres Rodriguez/CPB.

Facing page: Screen from KangaROOS site, produced and designed by the Barbarian Group. Agency: TOUCH, Boston; creative direction: TOUCH; art direction: TOUCH, The Barbarian Group; illustrator: Misato Nagare.





to be a gigantic motion-control rig where their tiny cubes now sit.

If a company like Greenberg's—named *Adweek's* Interactive Agency of the Year several times running—still has to point out to industry veterans that it no longer sends out its portfolio on videocassettes, you can only imagine the struggle that younger interactive

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shops find in defining themselves. Consider the Barbarian Group in Boston, quite possibly a textbook case, whose Web site states: "We're not the interactive version of an ad agency, but we're also not exactly the interactive version of a production company. We're kind of like hiring a director and a production company and a vfx company, with some great creative/art direction thrown in."

This mix of capabilities has brought work from such top-flight ad agencies as Goodby, Silverstein & Partners; Wieden+Kennedy; and Arnold. But it's been Barbarian's work for Burger King (and its agency, Crispin Porter + Bogusky) that's put it on the map: namely, the brand's hilarious, offbeat Subservient

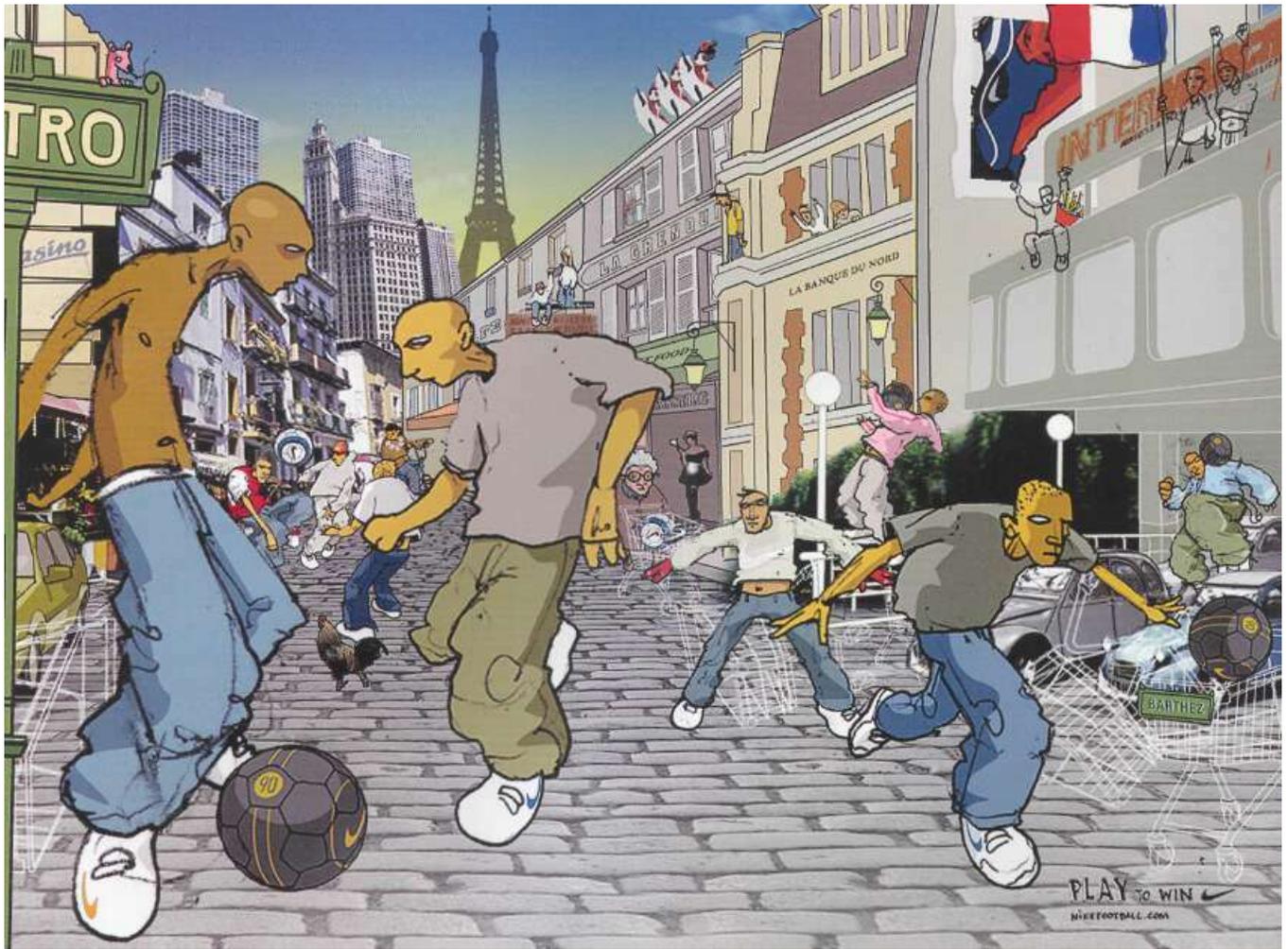
Chicken Web site, a promotion that sent them to rostrum after rostrum to claim awards this year.

It hasn't been an easy stardom to achieve: Barbarian was formed in early 2002 by four guys in Boston, several of them veterans of traditional agencies, with the goal of working in the interactive space. Barbarian's first success came from two car accounts, Volkswagen (for Arnold) and Saturn (for Goodby), both early adapters to interactive's advantages in offering consumers reams of product information.

The Barbarians do a little site design and construction, they create strategy, and they produce all the elements for Web campaigns. But they don't handle accounts directly for advertisers, nor do they oversee back-end site maintenance. The result has been repeated cases of mistaken identity. "We ended up getting offered a mix of good projects and really awful ones," says Benjamin Palmer, president and cofounder. Barbarian is still hardly a household name in the ad world, but the group turned the corner when lower-interest consumer brands started mounting more ambitious and creative Web campaigns, such as BK's Subservient Chicken. "It's a totally different kind of fun that you can have when the site doesn't have to be a brochure," Palmer says.

In Barbarian's early days, fending off the wrong kind of assignments was more of a problem, Palmer says, than explaining to potential clients what it was Barbarian did. By being selective in what it took on, and building up credentials with mainstream agencies like Wieden+Kennedy (for which it produced a Nike ACG site), the company managed to let its work and relationships define it. The more Barbarian worked with traditional agencies, Palmer says, the more those agencies recognized its capabilities.

"Once they started to see us as a creative resource, it was wonderful," Palmer says. "People treat us with respect now. They understand



Facing page: Cover and interior spread from *Made in AKQA* book, designed and published by AKQA in 2004.
 This page, top: Illustration for Nike's Football Asia-Pacific site, which Nike turned into an outdoor ad. Agency: AKQA; art director: Daniel Varon; design director: Neil Robinson; designer: Akira Takahashi; interaction designer: Tom Rohrer; illustrators: David Foldvari,

Akira Takahashi; executive producer: Charlie Taylor.
 Bottom left: Online ad for Vitaminwater. Agency: AKQA; senior art director: Brendan Dibona; designers: Michael Powell, Dave Prukop, Rick Rulgencio.
 Bottom right: Palm Treo site. Agency: AKQA; creative directors: Bob Pullum, Adam Lau; designer: Kirk Kepley.