

Andy Fackrell, joint executive creative director of 180 Amsterdam, who has created campaigns including Kicking It and Last Man Standing for adidas and also, during a previous life at Wieden + Kennedy Amsterdam, awards-laden Nike spots including Tag, says sporting clients are notoriously tough to impress: "The guys running the businesses have seen so much good shit in their time. They've seen all the presentations and there has been so much good stuff, you're really not expecting them to be wowed that easily." But it's not all bad news, he adds: "Sport is so multi-faceted, there's so much in it, so much drama, that you can always find a new angle."

Looking back at the sports advertising featured on shots since the reels began in 1990, an obvious front-runner emerges. While adidas and other brands snap closely at Nike's heels every now and then, the sporting giant's dominance of the athletic advertising landscape is undeniable. Nike is the only brand to have won Advertiser of the Year at Cannes twice, confirming its heavyweight standing in the industry.

"Nike as a company has always been first at things," says Norman. "First with technology, the first to sponsor athletes. I think from Dan Wieden down through the company we've always taken that spirit and have solved advertising problems with that same approach. I think it's getting harder because technology is moving so fast and also sport has changed as well. I think it's kind of in a bottleneck right now with what will be the next big thing. Everyone's already into the web and things like that, but the spirit of innovation is still what fuels the fire for most of them."

Nike was also the first to use sports stars in their ad campaigns, a tactic that seems beyond obvious now. "Coca-Cola had done a few things with sports people but Nike was the first sports brand to really take that on. Michael Jordan was the first big one, obviously," says Norman. "It's important to recognise that the celebrities were always used from a sports performance platform, it was never about just using a celebrity for celebrity's sake. They were definitely the godfathers of that."

As posh as the technology involved in making the products might be, Nike has never dwelled on anything too techie in its ad campaigns. "It's one

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of the most technically inventive companies in the world, but we never communicate that. We always try to pull out the human story as much as we can," says Norman, citing Nike Before as one of his favourites. The spot, which scored gold in Cannes, shows athletes warming up before their competitions. "I really liked that, it talked about the essence of athleticism, highlighting the rituals they go through. You see them doing these really ugly warm up movements and the things they do to get loose and psych themselves up. It wasn't glamorous, it made them seem really human." Human is a word often used to explain the success of ad campaigns, and if you're looking for human truth, sport is dripping with it. Passion for a team, love of the game, the frustration of losing or the glory of victory are feelings universally understood by ninety nine per cent of the planet's population. Viewers at home connect with these ideas easily and more and more advertisers are taking advantage of that, whether the brand is sports-related or not. Some of these work better than others, as ever the idea needs to be based on something true to the brand. It's all about integrity, says Fackrell: "Some brands use sport to connect and it just doesn't feel right because it's not really relevant."

Some of the best-loved sports advertising have been for sports media clients, like Fox Sports, who cleaned up with their Regional campaign in 2000. The spots, showing far-flung fictional sports reports, were not only popular with the industry, they were also among the first campaigns to spread virally round the world's email inboxes in a monster nod of approval from the public. Other spots that still send gales of laughter round the shots office years after their first viewing include 2001's Sky Television Fish and Chips spot from DDB New Zealand, which showed a sports fan going to desperate lengths to avoid finding out the result of a game he hasn't watched yet. Also, from the same year, the glorious Utah and San Antonio spots for Fox Sports NBA from Cliff Freeman & Partners, New York, which showed two basketball fans glorying in their knowledge of the game, confident that they could whup the professional's asses, given half a chance. These ads will never stop being funny because anyone who has ever watched a game of pretty much anything will see themselves or someone they know within them and know that they're truer than Budweiser. Speaking of which, the same applies to the enormous success of the beer brand's 2000 Whassup campaign, which was also a smash hit online when the public identified so deeply with the concept of "watching the game, havin' a Bud" and er, yelling down the phone at your mates.

As exposure to TV advertising becomes more of a choice than a given thanks to technology-driven changes in viewing habits, these deeply felt connections with consumers can only become increasingly useful. Virals only work if viewers find the work entertaining enough to be worth sending on. Anything sports-related may have a bit of a head start where a lot of people are concerned, thanks to the ravenous interest much of the population has in anything involving a scorecard, and well-observed human truths like those found in the best sports advertising will also be enormously helpful. As Nike and adidas prepare huge campaigns for the World Cup, both are investing heavily in digital ideas. And rightly so, if the top sports advertising wants to keep up its reputation for fresh thinking.

"I think as an agency we're definitely more focused on the digital arena and Nike are as well," says Norman. "They definitely have their eyes on the internet and want to do more things there. It's going to change things. You hear all this speculation about advertising being dead but it's not, it's just changing mediums." Right now the agency is working on a Nike project that's almost exclusively web-based, he says. "I think it's the first time we've had a campaign like that, although they've been more into that in the States for a while," he adds. "I definitely think that's where it's going."

180's high profile campaigns for adidas like Kicking It, which saw David Beckham and Jonny Wilkinson chatting together during a session while training each other in their own sport, have drawn huge attention from the press and public, but can a web-based campaign draw the same interest from sports fans? Absolutely, says Fackrell.

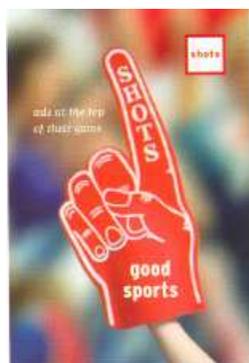
"Everyone is trying to create these online communities so they can spend less on TV. It's definitely happening. It'll be a big part of the mix for most brands. I think you'll even see in a few months time some of the campaigns coming out from the big brands will just be running digitally." The World Cup this year is set to be a great test for the newer advertising mediums, he says.

"There's going to be a lot of material that's not traditional and that is traditional and it's exciting to see how that will all be perceived. I'm really excited about what we've done and excited to get it on air. Adidas is definitely investing in the World Cup, as you'd expect with it being in Germany, the home market. It's not like you want to get steamrollered by a bunch of Americans."

You'd think it was June already. Let the competition commence.

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