

Don't be cool for cool's sake



Why do dogs lick their balls? Because they can.

I've always liked that joke, although as I write this column it has a certain irony. Freddie, our Shetland Sheepdog puppy, lying very uncomfortably in the corner of my office, has just been neutered. So now, even if he wants to, he can't. But the original joke still holds some relevance to the point I want to make in this, my final column for *Admap*.

In 1963, J. Walter Thompson advertising veteran James Webb Young wrote, in *How to Become an Advertising Man*, "The true Advertising Man ... is he who has the knowledge, skills, experience and insights to advise advertisers how best to use advertising to accomplish their objectives."

If we can interpret the word 'advertising' to include all the forms of marketing communication now available to us, this definition of a job well done remains pertinent almost fifty years on. Good agencies have always worked closely with clients to set the right objectives, and have then taken responsibility for defining and navigating the best route to achieving them.

I'd be surprised if that doesn't seem blindingly obvious to most of the readers of this magazine, whose interests and professional reputations revolve around the pursuit of effectiveness. Unfortunately, as I look around the industry, I fear that not enough work is created that way.

The first problem is that too often the objectives that are being pursued are the wrong ones. With the accountability mindset that inevitably accompanies any economic downturn, too many senior clients and agencies are more concerned with survival than achievement, and decisions tend to be made in the pursuit of efficiency rather than effectiveness. With the average longevity of a CMO now even shorter than that of a football manager, it's perhaps not surprising that many choices are made on the basis of their measurability, rather than their ability to move the business forward.

I recently heard a senior policeman defending the reduced numbers of officers on the beat in the UK on the grounds that, when there were more officers on the street, there were fewer arrests. Against an objective of

making more arrests, the statistics proved that his officers were doing a very fine job. What he didn't seem to understand was that, with more officers on the street, there were fewer arrests because they acted as a deterrent to crime. Which is the better objective? I'd say less crime, but it's harder to measure crimes that *might* have been committed than it is to measure arrests.

Thus, efficiency triumphs over effectiveness, and, if my own clients are in any way representative of the wider picture, the disease afflicts our business just as much as it afflicts our so-called crime fighters.

The second problem, which brings me back to antisocial canine habits, is that, regardless of the validity of the objectives, agencies seem more obsessed than ever with recommending the newest, coolest forms of communication. If it's digital, if it furthers the cause of social networking, and if it allows us to 'start a movement', we recommend it.

This year in Australia and beyond, everyone has been talking about the 'Best Job in the World' campaign for Tourism Queensland. Against certain (measurable) objectives it was a great success, with massive PR coverage, 34,000 applications for the job, and numerous top-shelf creative awards to its name. But I have yet to see any evidence that it positively influenced the numbers of tourists visiting Queensland, which is the client's entire reason for being.

The unfortunate postscript to 'The Best Job in the World' is that the winner of the competition to be caretaker on Hamilton Island, Ben Southall, was stung by a potentially lethal Irukandji jellyfish during his last week on the job in December. Fortunately, he survived, but the world's media gleefully reported his symptoms of fever, headache, lower-back pain, chest tightness and high-blood pressure, and noted that other tourists had died from similar stings in the not-too-distant past. I don't know about you, but I won't be booking my tickets to Queensland any time soon.

Publicity? Word-of-mouth? Buzz? Be careful what you ask for, as my grandmother used to say. It might be new, it might be cool, but just because you can, it doesn't necessarily mean that you should.

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