

Above, left: in Turkey, Omo overtook the competition on the attribute score of 'keeps whites really white'. Centre: in Vietnam, Omo's message chimes with the

The alchemy

Unilever unified its regional soap powder brands around a single proposition, that 'Dirt is Good' – an idea that resonated with mums around the world and grew global revenue by 750% in a decade

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In 2003, a Brazilian laundry detergent launched a new advertising campaign. Five years later, and 10,000 miles away, the government of Vietnam introduced a change to the academic curriculum, mandating recess time for children during the school day.

The connection, of course, is the idea that 'Dirt is Good', and the recognition that there's value for children in being able to play freely. But how did an advertising idea help to create a global laundry brand that would end up

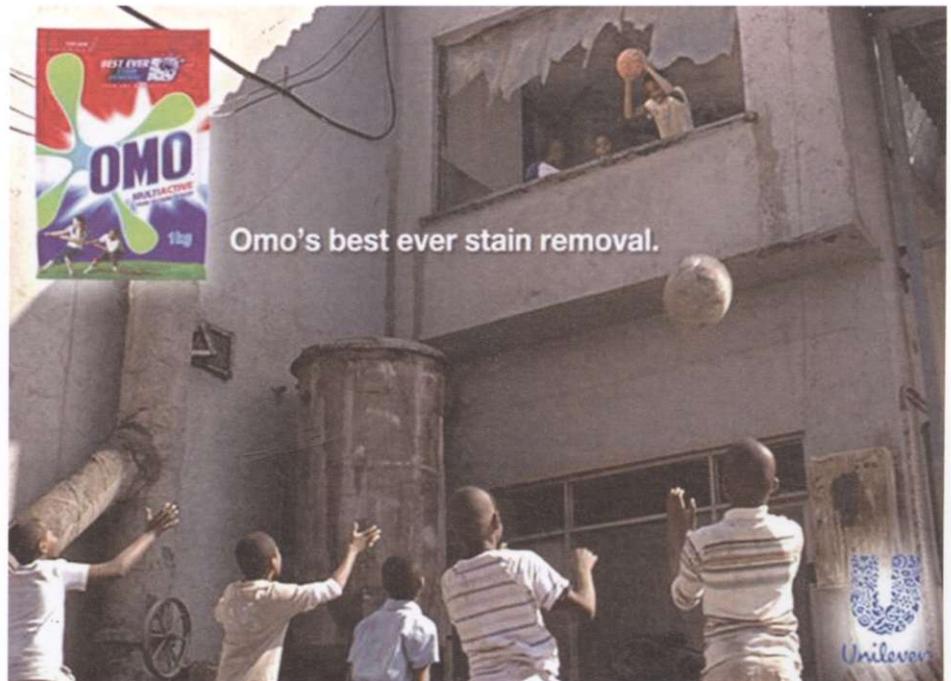
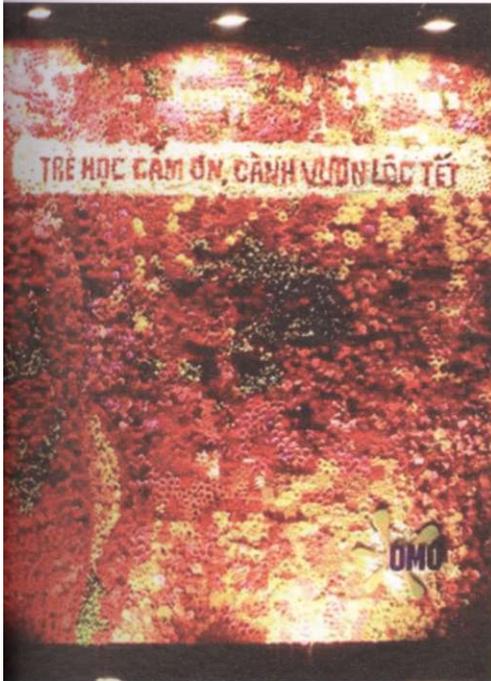
influencing education policy on the other side of the world? There's more than one answer.

The first is sheer corporate will. The desire to create a truly global brand from a collection of over 40 different brands across the world, all with their own packaging, positionings and advertising claims: Omo in South America, Africa, Brazil, the Middle East and China; Surf in India; Skip in France; Breeze in Thailand; Persil in the UK; Ala in Argentina; and Rinso in Indonesia. For the purpose of this article, we will refer to them all as Omo.

Second is the value of the idea itself. 'Dirt is Good' has unified those names into a single brand idea. By understanding and codifying the

'High Value Idea', we are now able to inform the development of the brand and innovations globally - from its growth in the most established markets to its expansion into the latest white spaces.

But finally, and most importantly, there is the rigour with which the idea has been leveraged. Having a great idea is one thing, unlocking the global value of what you've got is another. The greatest value extracted from 'Dirt is Good' stems from how it has been deployed between markets. The success of 'Dirt is Good' has come by finding a way to consistently take the core potential of a global idea and, rather than



government's aim to ensure children have time to play. Right: a South African commercial shows children retrieving footballs from an abandoned building

of dirt

CHALLENGE AND OBJECTIVES

spread it according to its lowest common denominator, to magnify it by each of the cultures into which it has been introduced.

Discovering quite how good dirt could be was not instant. It took many steps from the brand team. The foundation of the idea was first voiced in a Lowe Canada campaign for Sunlight: 'Go Ahead, Get Dirty,' the brand extolled. Sunlight was so good, it argued, that you could enjoy the best of what getting dirty had to offer without any fear of difficulty in getting rid of the stains left behind afterwards. That confidence in the product is what sustains the core of the 'Dirt is Good' strategy still.

The second element of the formula was established in South America in the early 2000s. Cleaning children's clothes was nothing new, and if we just celebrated the enjoyment of getting dirty, the brand would never have made the breakthrough it did. Instead, a Lowe campaign for Omo in Brazil began to establish the idea that there is some deeper benefit to

be had from getting dirty. With the tagline 'There's no learning without stains', Omo started to show how getting dirty is an integral part of children's development - be it in painting a picture or baking a cake.

The final element - freedom - linked the first two and the formula for 'Dirt is Good' was established: the cleaning power of Omo gives mothers the freedom to let their children get dirty so that they, in turn, are free to experience life and develop.

This is illustrated in the 2003 TV campaign that Lowe created for Brazil, and was later rolled out across many geographies. While we watch a group of children creating a huge image of a whale on a beach, the copy explains: 'Kids think differently about getting their clothes dirty. From today, Omo invites you to do the same. Because what you see here isn't kids' creating dirty clothes. It's simply kids... creating. That's why, at Omo, we believe dirt is good.'

Recognition of the potential of 'Dirt is Good' came much more quickly. At a business level, the idea helped to solve a fundamental problem: the threat of commoditisation. As in many markets, detergent products have long been almost indistinguishable to consumers, but worse still, detergent brands were almost exclusively talking the same language. Detergent advertising had become a tit-for-tat battle of molecules and cut-away demonstrations, all showing the magnified actions of micro-particles, deeply penetrating fibres and lifting away stains. And all promising the 'best ever results', 'whiter than white', 'side by side', 'close-up', 'even against the window'. The fact that dirt and stains are the enemy was an unquestioned truth passed down through generations of advertising. As a 1950s ad for Salvo's Dirt Bomb ('The ultimate weapon in the war against dirt') put it: 'What has dirt ever done for you?'

Loving and embracing dirt, and not keeping it at arm's length, was radically different. While every other brand demonised dirt, along came a detergent brand that said something completely the opposite. It immediately gave the brand distinction and differentiation in the marketplace.

For any consumer, brand loyalty starts



'Dirt is Good' has unified Omo's variety of local brand names worldwide, such as Breeze in Thailand (above)

with fundamental conviction in the superiority of the product. But how can you advertise that when everybody is saying the same thing? The first key advantage of 'Dirt is Good' was the ability it gave us to communicate the most functional benefits of a detergent in a new way. Using the context of an engaging and motivating shared belief simply helps the functional claims stand out.

This advantage cannot be understated. Functional credentials are not a quantity you can depend on as a bankable constant. In every country, the laundry market is an active one, driven by high advertising spend and a constant stream of competitive product news and announcements. In this arena, to stand still is to go backwards.

Here, 'Dirt is Good' gives the brand an unfair advantage. Functional messages are carried by the drama of the story itself. In effect, 'Dirt is Good' executions act as a series of extreme torture tests for the brand, as children, in interacting with their world, subject their clothes to the most difficult cleaning challenges.

The stones have been constructed to make powerful cleaning claims so even traditional hallmark proofs of cleaning efficacy; dried in food stains, oil, mud and ink - are

all given new freshness and interest by a heart-warming story. In Turkey, for example, Omo overtook the competition for the first time on the attribute score of being best at 'keeps whites really white', following an execution which showed a group of children who set out to play volleyball but find that their court has disappeared under a blanket of snow. Undeterred, they set about clearing the snow from the field and get their white kits thoroughly filthy in the process, proving that when children show the determination to get a task done, then dirt is good.

In South Asia, it allowed us to communicate successfully that Surf Excel is superior to any other powder at removing stains in areas of hard water. When Surf Excel developed a formulation to effectively turn hard water soft, we used a local insight to build a 'Dirt is Good' cleaning story. Monsoon in India brings a small respite for mum as she can use the softer rainwater, which lathers better. So, a young boy gets dirty collecting a bucket of rainwater for his mother to ease her hardship. As a result, Surf Excel's reputation on stain removal took a huge leap. In the small towns, where hard water is such an issue, Surf Excel had always been seen as a good premium brand, but in just one quarter after

the launch of this advertising, its differentiation on stain removal jumped significantly – a move rarely seen in the category.

INSIGHT AND STRATEGY

Belief in the brand's cleaning credentials may provide the foundation of the consumer's loyalty, but this is only the beginning of why 'Dirt is Good' is such a powerful strategy. Beyond simply finding a new language to talk about stains and cleaning, the philosophy of 'Dirt is Good' encourages mothers to take the brand to their hearts. In what is typically a low interest category, 'Dirt is Good' raises the stakes. Omo is not simply a brand that has something to say about getting rid of dried-in ketchup; it is a brand that has something to say about how you raise your children.

But 'Dirt is Good' is not an easy idea. It is unorthodox, counter-intuitive and provocative. Of course, therein lies its competitive strength. But if we couldn't encourage local audiences to engage with it instinctively, and to recognise it in their own experience, then we would always fail to unlock its true potential. And often our starting place was far from dirt being good. In many parts of Asia, Latin America and Africa, dirt is disease, squalor and death. It is poverty and failure. And in countries where even the poorest schoolboy gets sent off in a white shirt and shorts every morning, dirt is, at the very least, a clear sign of a mum who doesn't care.

So how exactly is dirt good here? In many markets we justified getting dirty by showing how it could be instrumental in developing creativity, curiosity, free thinking, sociability or teamwork – areas that are naturally associated with outdoor or 'dirty' play. Every piece of research confirmed the basic global appeal of children being free, to not only enjoy their childhood but also to learn by their own experience; to make their own mistakes, and to learn by physically enjoying the world around them.

But although every mother instinctively knew that these experiences are fundamentally rewarding for children, for many it was difficult to see the real gain for their children from 'making pictures of whales on beaches'. There had to be a more immediate outcome than childhood freedom – one that she could wholeheartedly endorse. So we began to explore smaller, more intimate human insights.

THE CAMPAIGN

Our advertising executions portrayed 'getting dirty' in an engaging and charming way. In India, we launched 'Dirt is Good' with an execution where a little boy gets dirty by 'punishing' a muddy puddle that has dirtied his sister. In Turkey, where economic uncertainty has haunted a generation, we have told stories of strength and self-reliance. One memorable execution shows a boy standing in for his injured father towards the closing moments of a game of football. It's wet and dark and the little boy fails to score, but the fact that he had the courage to step up to the game was enough. In Africa and some parts of Latin America, consumers loved a communication that showed children overcoming their fear and getting their own ball back from a spooky derelict building (and a dozen more left by other children), getting really stained and dirty in the process.

And this leads to the final leg of this case-the passion with which it has been implemented. "When we started five years back, I thought we had one of Unilever's biggest marketing opportunities in our hands," recalls global brand vice-president Aline Santos. "But actually, it was one of Unilever's biggest leadership challenges. To change the positioning of a huge and important brand is extremely demanding and not always fun. We had to design several activities to engage and convince the teams around the world."

She remembers when 250 of the 'Dirt is Good' team got together for the first time in a stewardship in South Africa. The ultimate objective was to find a way to unlock the true global potential of the brand.

Dubbed the 'DIG team' (short for Dirt Is Good), this team and the passion behind the beliefs in the brand idea, has driven us to develop work which has strengthened brand loyalty both there and across the globe. The passion for 'Dirt is Good' has become infectious across teams and channels galore. Whether you look at the work happening in the digital space, at the point of sale, on the streets, while demonstrating the product - it all unifies against one high value idea. Even in markets dominated by TV advertising, this is an idea which has been pursued throughout communities. From the Kala Goda children's festival in Mumbai to new play parks in



Ads in Brazil established the idea that there was a deeper benefit for children in getting dirty

Thailand, 'Dirt is Good' has made itself present in the schools and streets and malls of the developing world – the new war front for most marketers.

RESULTS

The Omo brand has grown revenues at a compound annual growth rate of 8% over the past four years. Total brand revenue has grown from \$400m to \$3bn in ten years. Omo is present in 64 countries and is the brand leader in the developing world. One in five families globally use the brand, with more than seven million washes every half hour.

CONCLUSION

Dirt is good for the planet, too. Unilever is committed to substantially reducing its impact on the environment through delivering better cleaning in a simpler format for the consumer, saving significant amounts of water, packaging, transportation and fuel through initiatives such as compaction and reformulation. Omo took the lead role in communicating this to consumers across Africa and Turkey in a mission to save water for the children. The campaign has won numerous external awards

and recognition at awards festivals - Cannes, One Show, Clio, Crystal awards in Turkey and numerous Effies for marketing effectiveness

It's easy to talk about the 'power of an idea' and it is beguiling to think of an idea so compelling that it spreads irresistibly. But the power of 'Dirt is Good' comes not just from the intellectual 'stickiness' of the nugget itself, but from the rigour with which it has been developed - sticking to the competitive core of cleaning credentials, and the insights in which it is grounded - making it relevant to others in widely differing situations. Not least, its power comes from the passion with which it has been championed by Unilever and its communications partners.

At one end, of course, it was great to be the agency at the beginning of the journey with Unilever, but even better to be part of a team that has grown the brand to what it is. As a result, Omo has won a loyal following from millions of consumers the world over, who all value a detergent that they can trust, and the freedom to let their children get dirty.