

The transcript of the presentation made by Thayalan Bartlett at JWT's Knowledge Series Program on the 5<sup>th</sup> November 2008 at the Galle Face Hotel, Colombo.

## **“The Idea Vs The Marketing Man”**

Unknown to many the topic of advertising draws a huge amount of interest and it can spark-off a debate with people who are even remotely connected to the business in least expected situations. My most recent experience was at an army check point when I identified myself as an advertising professional. As advertising people we are constantly challenged by a daunting question. Why don't we produce advertising that is exciting and engaging?

From the research analysis, you will note that there is a polarisation of views of what the consumer expects and what we assume the consumer is looking for. This disparity is the mother of all communication disasters that advertising faces in Sri Lanka.

What struck me most at the focus group sessions was that these consumers have little exposure to the world as we know it, but they are the most informed and highly aspirational people I have come across. They are more evolved than the consumers we know as “the semi-urban and rural consumers”.

They are upto date and more evolved to deal with the issues of today than we are- In today's depressed economy the consumer is looking for ways to thrive and overcome their daily challenges. But marketers and advertisers misunderstand that to be that he wants to survive. We are always trying hard to think for him, instead of thinking ahead of him. This is just one of several gaps that exist between the marketer and the consumer. He is thinking “thrive” but we are thinking “survive”.

Brands have been given profound intellectual descriptions but let me describe it simply: A product is like a journey that ends at the next station- It's manufactured to fulfill a need. Whereas brands are like a journey that never ends - At every station, a few passengers get out and new ones get in. There is greater want and anticipation of the next stop. Brands make consumers to be hopeful of their destination. The creation of anticipation is good advertising. Consumers are looking for experiences and fulfillment is only a hygiene factor. So why is advertising working against us and not for us? There are many aspects to this but I have distilled this down to 4 barriers that prevent us from communicating with our consumers.

1. Talking down to consumers.
2. The consumer phobia

3. Category traps.
4. Advertising realism.

## **Talking down to consumers**

The manufacturer and the consumer are linked by a language. It's a language that decodes the science of a product and talks to the consumer one-on-one in an interesting and vivid way. This is the language of creative ideas. What we are not conscious about is that there are many others who are propositioning the consumer from within and outside the category. Keeping the brand salient in the consumer's mind amidst the barrage of these messages is the combined responsibility of the marketer and advertiser. In the past we used "frequency" to dominate the consumer's mind to the point it became inefficient. Today there is one tool we regard with disregard and that is the power of ideas through the method of great story telling.

What also struck me in the focus group are the consumer's ability to comprehend and their appreciation for advertising that interacts with them rather than instructs them. In semi-urban and rural Sri Lanka as night falls their homes are turned into a family cinema hall for the lack of entertainment in their little villages and towns. If your advertising idea fails to engage and entertain them your brand fails in his living room. From the research conclusions that you see, you know what that standard is? As I speak most of our ads are failing the test. Why? That is because we are talking down to the consumer. We attach a lot of importance to "insights" but the tone of our communications undermines the insight rather than cooperates with it.

Almost all of them lead mundane and routine lives and they fulfill aspirations through brand experiences. Brands take them to the places they want to go- whether they want to feel like a film star because they use Lux or to be seen as an astute and progressive investor by banking with HSBC. The worst thing we could do is to continuously press the replay button and replay their real life to them which is the common failing of our communications.

## **The consumer phobia.**

At advertising meetings we spend a lot of time talking about the rural consumer. Our decision on most advertising is based on the assumption that the consumer is a basic individual with a lack of understanding. I have been at meetings where clients have literally referred to them as "dumb and don't understand ideas". One of the senior marketers on this panel referred to them as dumb! They believe it might be beyond

their comprehension but from the findings shared today we know they are not intellectually infertile.

The economic state of the country has not empowered them monetarily and their external manifestation is not in sync with their internal transformation. The internal transformation is their hunger and desire to progress. As marketers we judge the average consumer by the assessment of his outward prosperity. This isn't much! But what we need to speak to is his internal transformation - the soul. The sheer pursuance of private media channels like the MTVs, Sirasas and Deranas and many others are astutely playing to the emotional state of consumers. They give them hope, anticipation and aspiration at every stop. Whereas most local brands don't give them the hope and anticipation they desire. Their aspirations are stirred within and raring to go but are masked by their outward appearance that has not changed. This misleads us to believe that he is "basic" whereas he has great vision, great comprehension and greater aspirations. Whilst we use brands to strive for share and profitability we must first use it as a key to unlock these aspirations so that consumers can connect with it.

As consumers they want to be entertained, engaged and challenged and that is why they have preference for ads from more evolved markets (like the ones we researched) than ads from our own markets.

I believe the "consumer phobia" we have is the lack of our knowledge of the consumer. It's just unfortunate that we sit in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and have the audacity to assume that the rural consumer has not progressed with us. As marketers we must stop talking to the outer body and start addressing the inner soul.

## **Category traps**

As marketing and advertising people it's time that we come to terms with the truth. With the pace of technology that is contributing to an ever shrinking globe, information is traveling faster than before. From design to product delivery, it is likely that your competitor will out pace you.... unless you have masterminded the biggest brand innovation there is simply no USP. Parity is one of the biggest threats to brands in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and a complacent marketer has no place in this era. I am sighting two assumptions that are taking place as I speak:

1) 90% of marketers in this auditorium are having trouble with volume and margin erosion. When we decide to play the numbers game, our competitors start playing it too and the ultimate victor is the consumer who is the better player of numbers and beats us at our own game.

2) Research companies are the busiest in downtimes as they are dealing with many questions as to why brands are under performing. Obviously advertising is one such question they seek answers to. The advertising was mandated by the marketer with rational, safe cues and they are now seeking validation if it is right and if it is connecting with consumers.

Please do not assume that I am not interested in numbers. it's an integral part of your business, my business and all our businesses. But as we look at numbers we must also focus on the responsibility of building value with our consumers. Advertising is not the only aspect in building value but in a parity market compounded with a troubled economy there is too much attention on how much price we can cut and not on how much value we can build. The "idea" becomes one of the most important aspects that build value and you must get it right with your consumer.

Most marketers like to think that their products are Value-for-Money (VFM). VFM in their book- is good price for good quality. Today what the consumer really means by VFM is - meet my quality at a justifiable price, which really translates to Money-for-Value. And that value in most instances is the value added by advertising in a parity market. As an example the difference between shoes in the high performance sports category like Nike, Addidas and Reebok (all of which are equal in quality) is the value they add to create differentiation. They start with an advertising idea and transform it consistently right down to the retail experience they create.

I believe the starting point for ideation even if you have a reasonable claim for a USP, is to assume that you don't have one. In a parity market the consumer is aware of what the product is going to deliver and has rationally evaluated to enter the category. Once he is within the category he is looking for unique, popular, likeable and modern experiences. What he is uncertain is which brand delivers that. In situations like this, the emotional state of brands will need to take full responsibility to connect with the emotional state of consumers.

As advertising people we constantly meet clients from various categories day-after-day who give us brief-after-brief. For the lack of a differentiator the essence of most service category briefs end with "we have the best service" which reminds me of a particular brief for a bank which we received 8 years ago. After days of deliberations to arrive at a brand proposition we really could not define one that was unique. The Chairman of that bank was very serious when he eventually said "let's hire some beautiful girls to sell our deposits and the deposits will come". The bank is non-existent today because the head of the company made an assumption that depositors don't think

deep enough. It was “fatal attraction” in routine marketing belief that consumers savor the cream to determine if the cake is good”.

## **We try hard to be real.**

The brands that were researched were all globally recognised award winning ads that had a lot of entertainment value in them. I saw many of you smile when the ads were shown. Don't you think the consumer has the right to smile too? Sri Lankan advertising tends to be too real, too serious, too formula driven and weighs heavily on the rational side. They are simply too close to reality. We lose the plot when we don't have fun. We are obsessed with replaying their life. Great advertising borders on a little bit of surrealism and tickles your imagination.

Brands have a license too. It's called a creative license and is different from your driving license. A driving license gives you approval to drive but has a lot of “Don'ts” - Don't break the speed limit, don't go –up a one way street, Don't break the traffic lights...but we have respite when we get caught because we can still pay the cops off and get away with it. With a creative license there is only one condition- “break the rules”. But it has one big draw back. You cannot bribe the consumer. So get it right the first time and stay with it. We need to be investing in great ideas. Big ideas work harder than big budgets.

## **In conclusion:**

- Advertising is the face of a company and that is why it is important that the decision making and ownership must come right from the top. For some reason if the top is unable to make that decision then the bottom must be totally empowered to go with it and there must be no interference from the top.
- Brand Managers must be licensed to break the rules. There should be a KRA in their evaluation- What rule did you break this year which positively impacted your brands performance?
- If you want good advertising, eliminate the several layers of approval. I know one company that has 8 levels of approval and the advertising that comes out reflects the confusion and inconsistency in their thinking.
- Don't ever make your advertising company work under duress or threat of losing the business. It becomes the most unproductive relationship that produces unproductive advertising. Just fire them if you have to.
- I recall Andrew Perutz the former marketing director of BAT speaking at a forum and he said the agency and client relationship should be like a marriage made in heaven. It's important that you get that relationship right with your agency.

- Finally, we must make-up our mind- Is the customer “dumb” or is he “king”. I believe it is the latter, for as long as brands exist he will decide..... and not you.

If you think this forum has been dedicated to fight a cause for agencies, then I have failed and not done justice to it. The only objective I had before I embarked on this research project is to fight a cause for the consumer - He has spoken and has done so convincingly.

Thank you.