

THE Ad-Makers

How the Best TV Commercials are Produced



Tom von Logue Newth



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inkers

are Produced



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Written advertising is as old as commerce itself. The development of radio, television, and cinema in the twentieth century, however, provided businesses with an exciting and dynamic new way to promote their products and services. While cinema relied primarily on advertising forthcoming features—the first “trailer” was shown in 1913—and early radio shows were usually backed by individual sponsors, it was the explosion of broadcast television in the 1950s and 1960s that created the moving-image advertising climate with which we are familiar today.

Initially, many television shows relied on the radio model, being sponsored by a single business or product, but it became quickly apparent that far greater profits were to be made by selling smaller parcels of time to different advertisers. And so the “commercial break” as we know it was born, a pause in the scheduled programming for a brief string of thirty-second films, promoting different products.

Advertising agencies predate the moving image by approximately a century, and so by the time of the television explosion of the fifties, they were eager to provide companies with the expertise required to capitalize on this new outlet. Typically, a business will employ an advertising agency to create its commercials across a number of different platforms. The commissioning company will usually provide a basic outline of what it hopes to achieve with the advertising campaign, what message it wishes



to convey, and which audience it hopes to reach; the agency will then refine these criteria, apply its own creative expertise, and flesh out a practical plan of action.

These conventions remain. First, however, the advent of digital recording technology and TiVo hard drives made it increasingly easy for consumers automatically to skip the advertisement breaks altogether. Then the mobile device took over, screens became both bigger and smaller, and a whole plethora of new platforms was born. The thirty-second TV commercial is far from obsolete, but its target audience can now more frequently be reached in a far wider variety of ways.

OPPOSITE LEFT:
Levi's Type 1 Jeans
"Runaway Car"
(BBH/ Traktor Films).

OPPOSITE RIGHT:
PG Tips "The Return"
(Mother/Rattling Buck,
d. Daniel Klenman).

BELOW LEFT:
Coca-Cola "Border"
(Weiden+Kennedy/
Furlined, d. Adam Hashemi).

BELOW:
Doritos "Tracker"
(Independent Superbowl
commercial, d. Marcus Dunn,
Jonathan Darden).



TV Advertising in the Internet Age

Traditional short-film type advertisements have found a home on video channels, playing in front of video clips or in page banners. Others have stretched the format or been presented as episodes. The ease with which videos can be watched, sent, linked to, and embedded has allowed the form to develop in ways that are free of traditional television requirements and conventions. While the mobile device in the back pocket is a well-established platform, however, the emergence of the Xbox as a catch-all media device, and the rise of the SmartTV, suggest that the screen in the living room is not going away.

The Internet age has added an extensive new dimension to the agency's role, also, as they catch up with the potential of virtual advertising. Frequently they will find it useful to subcontract to specialized companies who have proved themselves adept at handling commercial distribution

across social media, search engines, video sites, and other interactive spaces.

However, whether intended to play before a YouTube video, in the Super Bowl half-time break, or in the back of a New York taxi, the actual process of creating these short films remains largely unchanged. Once the creative plan has been sufficiently structuralized, the film will be physically shot or digitally animated, and then subjected to the appropriate post-production polishing.

The blooming of ways in which media is today consumed has allowed advertisers to stretch their imagination in terms of form, be it drawing from the popularity of documentary approaches and viral videos or exploiting interactive potential. Personal devices become a direct one-on-one conduit to the consumer, who may as well watch an entertaining advertisement as any other YouTube video. This demands a shift in the way advertisers relate to their audience, as the relationship between the two become more apparently personal.



Stages from Conception to Distribution

The process of creating a commercial remains basically unchanged. The client works out its message, audience, and selling points, to a greater or lesser extent, and presents them in a “brief” or conceptual deck. The creative director of the chosen ad agency will use this, the messaging, and the overall conceptual deck to develop a mass of different ideas and numerous scripts. With perhaps the best three, the agency will canvas production houses and look at directors’ reels. Perhaps three directors will be selected, based on talent and availability, and each of them will produce a treatment. By this stage, decision-making has to go through a number of levels, from agency to client, but once a decision as to the director has been reached, pre-production will start almost immediately.

Effects specialists are frequently brought in at this stage to make sure the ideas are going to be possible to realize in post and, during shooting, to ensure that the physical environment can be smoothly translated to the virtual, but otherwise the filmmaking process remains more or less unchanged. Storyboards are done and shots worked out, the production design department start sketching and building models, and casting and locations are

firmed up. The shoot is timetabled, then frequently thrown off by the unexpected—but the footage is captured, and then sent to a post-house. Editing and the usual polishing of image and sound are now often augmented by some sort of computer-generated imagery or manipulation, sometimes involving more time and manpower than the shoot.

There has always been a lengthy—and often frustrating—process of exchanging notes and changes back and forth between the client, the agency, subsidiary agencies, the production company, the director, and the editing team. The growth of social media and digital outlets means that for the client companies and advertising agencies, there is now a dizzyingly increased range of factors to be taken into account. But for the creative and the ad-maker, it represents the opening-up of a vast range of possibilities as to what an advertisement can be, how it can be made, and through which media it can be presented.

The following pages will trace a path through this complicated procedure, from corporate conception and brand identity via the back-and-forth creative procedure with advertising agencies, new media agencies, and production companies, to the varied and complex forms of post-production and digital effects work, and to the final placement and utilization of the advertising film.

OPPOSITE LEFT:
Guardian “Three Little Pigs”
(BBH London/Rattling Stick,
d. Ringan Ledwidge).
Copyright Guardian News
& Media Ltd 2012.

OPPOSITE RIGHT:
Specsavers “Eerie”
(Specsavers in-house/
Rattling Stick,
d. Daniel Kleinman).

“The blooming of ways in which media is today consumed has allowed advertisers to stretch their imagination”



To begin the process of making an advertisement, there must be a brief formulated by the client's corporation. This is the brand message that is to be conveyed by the overall advertising campaign, and it will often include specific requirements for the filmed commercial. It may well address potential problems, selling points, and other pertinent information, and anything else that is relevant to the marketing mission. Usually, it is

Overall Campaign Plan

The brief is handed over to the chosen advertising agencies, who bid for the job, and the more specific it is, the easier it is for them to address the client's needs. Often, the client company will involve the creative director of the chosen advertising agency in then refining the brief to take advantage of particular skills and experience. An experienced agency is invaluable in determining at an early stage what makes sense and what has strategic potential.

Product Identity, Message, and Audience

BELOW: Daihatsu car ad
(CST The Gate).

more on demographic information, and their own ideas about what is different about their product, leaving the more creative components to the agency.

The Agency Takes Over

Once the brief is handed over, the agency assumes most of the control. It is their responsibility to realize the client's mission, from conception and production to delivery. The client remains involved in the decision-making process but more as a final arbiter, and they will typically employ an agency in whom they have faith, and whom they believe can fulfill their marketing aims.

One of the agency's creative teams will take the brief and work over countless ideas, and then present them to the creative director. A larger agency will have several teams, and sometimes they will present ideas to compete for the same brief. The production team at the agency is frequently involved at this stage also, to start thinking how these ideas can best be presented, so that when the agency returns to the client with their proposal, they can explain to some extent how the commercial might be made.

There will also be a planning department involved at this stage, who will immerse themselves in the product and information-gathering.

end up knowing almost more about the product than the client does. Their work is a fundamental resource for the creative department.

Refining the Conceptual Deck

The creative team has to come up with a staggering number of ideas, and so their process is also one of immersion, thinking in, around, and about the product or brand. The creatives will work individually, in pairs, and in groups to come up with as many ideas as possible, most of which they will reject themselves. They will then submit these ideas to the creative director, up to sixty or seventy for one spot, depending on the number of teams working on the project. More ideas will be rejected, sometimes all.

The creative director will select the agency's top ideas, and present them to the client, who will select the one to go forward, and then the agency will produce the commercial.

The client will then be involved in the production process, and the agency will be responsible for the final delivery of the commercial.

There will also be a planning department involved at this stage, who will immerse themselves in the product and information-gathering.



Luke Mugliston: Agency CEO

As CEO of CST The Gate, Luke Mugliston draws on a wealth of experience from both client and agency side. He was running major brand accounts for Publicis when global investment giant Fidelity recruited him as marketing director; from there he moved to Aviva (formerly Norwich Union) to oversee their enormous—and highly successful—corporate rebrand, where he pioneered social media techniques among other innovations, before returning to agency side to head up CST The Gate with creative director and industry legend Dave Trott.



Career Path

When I left University I had no idea what I wanted to do. Funnily enough, advertising was one of the careers that I absolutely rejected because I saw a documentary about Saatchi & Saatchi in around 1995 or so. It was about graduate trainees and how they got into the business, and what the business was like. I just thought it was ghastly and full of jerk-offs and I'm never going to do that, and I'm never going to go into the financial sector either, for that matter. But it dawned on me that I would eventually have to start a career, and someone who worked in the advertising industry said that they thought I'd actually be quite good at it—I studied English at school and was reasonably adept at literary criticism, and had a degree in modern literature.

small agency called KWS. It was a private company, set up by ex-Unilever and JWT people, lovely people. There were about twenty-five of us—you were shoved in at the deep end, and if you survived, great, but if you didn't, you were out. You learned on the job. I loved it and had a fantastic time.

They sold their agency to Publicis group, one of the top five agencies at the time, who took KWS and merged it with another agency, where I worked on more accounts and grew up on that. After a couple of years I got plucked out of there into Publicis itself, becoming a board account director, and subsequently got snatched up by an investment company client who made me an offer saying, we like you, we're restructuring our end, we want some leadership.

the marketing/communications sphere. So when this guy asked if I wanted to come back, I'd done three years or so at Aviva and felt that I'd done an awful lot there and it had been really good, but that it might potentially be the pinnacle of something for me at that organization. I wasn't quite sure where I wanted my career to go next, and when this turned up I thought it might be a great opportunity to be chief executive of an agency that needed some sorting out, with some great talent and some interesting accounts, but also some management issues. So that's what I'm doing. That was ten months ago now that I started [late 2011], so I've been in this role, back on agency side, for ten months, and it's great. It's challenging, but it's great to be back.

Don't knock It Till You've Tried It

You still come across an awful lot of self-important, tricky people—it's not to say that my initial view of the industry and agencies and some people within the industry wasn't intact over the years, but as you get older you realize that every industry has those sorts of characters. There was a certain arrogance, a certain type of behavior, that I felt was off-putting. When I first started I felt much more comfortable because I went to a smaller business, rather than a big agency with a conveyor belt of graduate trainees. The people with whom I was working were lovely, and they were bright, and there was a real sense that because it was a private company, if you behaved with integrity you'd get rewarded. I was surprised by how early you were given responsibility and authority and ownership of client relationships—a lot of faith was put in you. You felt you were trusted, and it felt a lot more grown-up than I thought it would be.

Having said that, rapidly—in my first week—it dawned on me that this was a lot of fun for a twenty-four-year-old. On day two we worked on the LG account—a big 3M company, which then was kind of a sleeping giant in the UK but big internationally (and now it's even bigger). The first brief we had was a product recall for a fridge/freezer that was about to go onto a consumer show, because it was electrocuting people. So my first experience in advertising was this emergency brief to do the product recall, to get this product back out of the market, and do damage limitation for the forthcoming episode of that consumer show. That was interesting in its own right, but the irony was that the global tagline for the organization at that point was “Technology with the Human Touch.” In that first week, in that first meeting, you suddenly got an insight into how ludicrous—and very serious—all this was, because absolutely there was business involved, there was money involved, there were reputations on the line—but also just how funny and strange and bizarre the whole world of communications could be. So that was very exciting in the first week. Immediately the job was very stimulating and the people I was working with were great too. It was very different from the image that had been set out in the documentary for me.

I was also asked to work with an art director on a cosmetic account, and my job was to ring up all the modeling agencies in town and get all their books in; then I had to sit down and spend an afternoon with the art director deciding who was the shortlist of talent that we wanted to get in, and do test shots of, to cast as the main star of our forthcoming advertising campaign. That, as a young man, ringing up models, getting them in, taking their contact details . . . doing that, I just thought, I can't believe I'm being paid to do this, this is fantastic.

OPPOSITE: Aviva “Names”
(AMV BBDO/
Serious Pictures Limited,
d. Vaughan Arnell).



An Exciting Industry

Then the whole production process of making an advertisement is very exciting. There are things like doing market analysis, customer research, competitive reviews, strategy etc., but when you're on the agency side there's also that fun of actually creating the ideas and working on that whole process. It just feels exciting. You go to shoots, and you're part of that industry. You're doing lots of interesting and varied things, and your working week can be thrilling. So very, very quickly, starting as someone who didn't really know what they wanted to do, it suddenly felt that this was an innately varied job. I felt that it suited me, and actually if you're reasonably good with people, and you listen well, and you have a point of view, and you're helpful—

because it's a service business in so many respects—then you can do well here.

You end up building relationships with clients, and you get the satisfaction of those clients trusting you from a very early age. The other thing that was apparent to me, compared to people I knew working at other companies, was how quickly you got fronted at a very young age to present to very, very senior management in client organizations. When I finally went to Fidelity, for example, it struck me that I had frequently presented to the highest levels of management, whereas employees who had worked there all their professional life had never actually met some of their leaders. Working on agency side is privileged in the sense that you do get in to see these people for whom advertising, especially if you're a service business, is their equivalent

BELOW: Aviva "Plymouth Football Fan" and "Silver Surfer" (AMV BBDO/HIS London, d. Declan Lowney). Courtesy of the Advertising Archives.



of a high street presence. All of that made me think, this is challenging, this is interesting; there's the excitement of winning new business, there's the tragedy of losing business (hopefully not too much but, you know, things happen). It's a very exciting world, and I just got swept up in that. Also you make really good friends—you meet people who are like-minded and often very bright, from all walks of life, and I just had a great, great time.

Aviva

The rebranding of Aviva wasn't just about the advertising; it was an enormous brand restructure, and a huge corporate action, as you can imagine. It's a massive operational and emotional undertaking for an organization of Aviva's size to change their name. We were trying to create something new and use it as an opportunity to regenerate the organization, to create a new experience for customers, and to effect literal behavior changes within the organization.

There were of course significant risks. The company was a number one player in its home market, in a long-term business, and people to varying degrees had a fondness for the legacy brand name Norwich Union. The nature of the business is all



**Lenin
Bros
Norw**

A Delicate Balance

London to St. Petersburg
Man to Craig
Norwich Union to Aviva

Arpanet to Internet
Bamboo Harvester to Mr Ed
Norwich Union to Aviva

Ed's biggest insurer is changing its name



William Cody to Buffalo Bill
Finisterre to Fitzroy
Norwich Union to Aviva

Ed's biggest insurer is changing its name



“People might not have an opinion about P&L, but everyone will have something to say about advertising.”



internal or commercial pressures that they were facing over any number of things, so having an understanding of what they go through has really helped us build better relationships with our clients. At the end of the day, you produce creative work, but you also build relationships with people who want to work with you. You'll go through lots of individual battles, but actually if you're helping them win the longer term war, then they'll value you for that. Those long-term relationships are very important, so ideally people will come to think of us as more than just their communications suppliers, and more like their secret weapon.

Philosophies

The philosophy of CST The Gate is built around something we refer to as "predatory thinking." There are hundreds and thousands of agencies all chasing what can feel like a relatively small number of clients with budgets. Agencies traditionally struggle to stake out their territory and define what's different about them as an agency. Many agencies will latch on to the latest thing, so you get a fair bit of "we're all about igniting brand conversations," which is fine, but often feels as if we are all dancing on a pinhead.

When you talk to people who help manage pitches and put together shortlists of agencies for clients to read, they'll tell you that apart from obvious ones, there are generally only two philosophies that stand out, or are memorable. One is that agencies are concerned with

BELOW:
www.cstthegate.com

OPPOSITE:
The team at CST The Gate.



simplicity of thought,” which Maurice and Charles Saatchi talk about religiously, because great communication is always really simple and really clear. In all their procedures and conversations and creative development, they use this as their guiding light for campaign creation, and it works very well for them.

The other philosophy that people remember is the one adopted by TBWA, which is called “disruption,” all about breaking category norms, fundamentally, and standing out. The third philosophy, our way of doing things, which we are told gets remembered, is predatory thinking. In fact, it’s nothing dramatically new; it draws upon things that most good agencies do anyway, whether or not they actually articulate it as a process. It’s fundamentally about trying to change the context to create an unfair advantage and being outcome-focused.

Predatory Thinking

A nice example is the problem of dealing with poor eyesight in Africa. A billion people in developing countries have defective eyesight. But it isn’t lack of glasses that’s the real problem, it’s lack of opticians. Rather than get a lot of costly opticians into poor areas, there was the ingenious invention of putting fluid into these very cheap glasses so that people can actually adjust them themselves. The point is that rather than saying, how can we recruit, train, and deploy a lot of opticians for these places, to come from a different angle and create a product that’s easy for people to use and cheap, and actually get the desired end result: better sight, so that they can go on and work.

Another particularly good example is this: advertisers have become acutely aware of the problems of “On demand”



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