

Does creativity sell?

By [Will Awdry](#)

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We live in an age where thousands of ideas, messages, services and products fight for our attention. American children now see 40 000 TV commercials a year - double the amount 20 years ago. (*Source: Kidthink, DDB Toronto, 2004*).

Man's inventiveness is populating space stations, piloting remote control cars on Mars from earth, and showing films like Titanic. The latter convinced audiences of its seaworthiness, despite the ship in the movie only ever being half built and never leaving the studio.

With so much information clutter and abundant evidence of man's ingenuity, a question as simple as 'Does creativity sell?' should be redundant. It should strike as crass and irrelevant, as if to talk of William Caxton in an age of digital printing. One of those 'Haven't-we-moved-on-from-that?' questions, delivered with a weary roll of the eyes.

Sadly I have to report the opposite. It is horribly current.

In a sense, it has never gone away. However, it needs to be answered - emphatically but reasonably - more than ever in the marketing saturated 21st Century. As the economics and management of selling evolve in client organisations - from global corporations to hot-house start-ups - the value of creativity is under scrutiny as never before. Reactionary doubt pops up in opinion pieces and on speaking platforms all over the planet. It's usually characterised by statements such as 'I don't want creative work. I want something that sells'.

It's absurd that they can't be seen as one and the same. Absurd that it should still be debated. Absurd that the question has to be answered over and over. And slightly less absurd that, in part, the question is absolutely legitimate.

Creativity is using thought to rent space in peoples' minds with a positive idea of a product, service or brand. It needs to be managed lest it operates in a vacuum detached from the message it has to convey. The factories that produce creative work - largely marketing communication agencies - obviously have a responsibility on this score.

So far, so much common sense. The fact that the midwife of this piece is the Loeries, an institution in part designed to celebrate creativity, suggests a positive note. However there are two considerations that cast doubt on creativity's selling power.

The first is why are there so few global companies using creativity globally? For every VW, Nike and Sony, there are legions of companies that dispense with creativity in the black box of persuasion. An examination of creative advertising award schemes and creative effectiveness awards shows there is a close parallel and consistency between the two. It's just

that the honours are shared by a tiny handful of practitioners.

The second, is that it must be accepted that there are other ways to sell. Weight of advertising, consistency, campaignability, co-ordination and integration all sell. They can be measured very accurately, continuously monitored and perform in yeoman fashion without frightening the children at all. They are not wrong in any sense.

It's simply that creativity is so much more 'right'. The power of inventive thought is such that it can project a selling message with more weight, efficiency and sustainable thrust than any number of 'calculator disciplines'. Honestly now, how many brands' advertising can you remember off the top of your head and why? Perhaps, to misquote, real honesty is too often the first casualty of marketing.

There's plenty of evidence that creativity is driving marketing achievement, but not always through advertising channels. In the UK, the Innocent (fruit smoothies) company has grown to an £18 million pound business through using its packaging as a communications vehicle, spending less than £1 million to date on advertising. Lush is a 10-year-old company started from a shop in the South of England that borrows the creative language of the Delicatessen and applies it to soaps, shampoos and personal care products. It now has 100 shops worldwide. The I-pod is an astonishingly technological creative response to changes in the way we consume music now - in turn, setting a whole new agenda for the way we shall listen to music in the future.

There are also, like beacons, great, effective ads from around the world that stand apart in both our and our consumers' minds because of their creativity. My agency is lucky enough to work with Volkswagen and other local jewels in the UK market. I spent 14 years working with Levi's and Audi at BBH as well as others.

And, today, we can look around and see brilliant examples like Playstation, Peugeot, VW, Fox Sports, Lynx/Axe, all producing cut-through work. More exciting still, is the move on to ideas beyond the TV commercial that work at every point of contact. One of my favourites this year comes from DDB South Africa and the 'Singing-in-a-shower' idea that was realised for Johnson & Johnson. All of these ideas rent space in peoples' heads for longer than any amount of functional explanation or judicial presentation of product qualities.

Creativity sells and sells brilliantly. But it needs support, protection, explanation and experiment. It needs champions. As you click through this website, it might strike you that the Loeries is a triumph of pomp and circumstance over the real demands of the day-to-day, hand-to-hand marketing in South Africa. You couldn't be more wrong. Acknowledging and then celebrating creativity that sells isn't a luxury by any means... It's a necessity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Will Awdry is Creative Director: International Accounts at DDB London and will be speaking at the Loerie conference at the weekend. Awdry started his advertising career as accounts executive, and has worked as a copywriter and digital producer. He has also been on the Board of numerous companies, including Bartle Bogle Hegarty, Leagas Delaney and BBH. He joined DDB London as Creative Director, International Accounts, in 2003, and currently looks after Dell, Nestle Purina, and the Unilever account for all DDB territories. Awdry has worked on accounts such as adidas, Cadbury's, BT, Heineken, Knorr, and Tag Heuer, and has won numerous awards, including D&ADs, Cannes awards, Euro Best's and Campaign Press awards.

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