

# Media agencies need to sell the sizzle too



*Kristian Barnes  
Agency brands*

As Phineas T. Barnum once said: "Without promotion something terrible happens ... nothing".

Unfortunately, as "brands" most media agencies currently do very little or nothing to promote their brands.

Some might argue that with the thin margins that most buying agencies work on there is neither the human or financial resources available to embark on branding campaigns. Interestingly, even in web space very few media agencies have comprehensive local sites. Most are linked to or mirrors of the international sites, and in some cases the only information for local Australian clients is a contact name.

There are at best estimates probably 60 media agencies servicing the \$11.6bn ATL Australian advertising market, with 20 players accounting for around 51%. This is a

highly competitive market especially when you remove from the available clients the ones that determine their media agency choice at an international level.

Creative agencies are more effectively able to demonstrate and differentiate their brands and also grasp the need to do so

**Unhappy, uninterested and under-qualified staff are a wonderful negative brand statement. Simply, they will be how your business and brand is judged.**

more universally. For media agencies our brands and what they mean for clients is a little more abstract, a lot more complex and is a little less clear cut to show. That is why those media companies that do it well, do well. For the agencies that have built their brands well, they live and breathe them with their staff and clients. However, these mostly tend to be the challengers in the market – often original boutique shops and/or consultancies set up around an innovative idea or unique service requirement.

Interestingly, over time, as the original founders become less involved or the business matures beyond a certain point, brand dilution both internally and externally can occur.

Being clear about what you stand for is a very enticing offering both to clients and

staff, potential and existing. It is much easier to do business with and work for a company that knows what it stands for and its direction. As in most service industries the staff are the brand ambassadors. In our instance, they interact with clients, media suppliers and other industry people representing the agency that they work for. Unhappy, uninterested and under-qualified staff are a wonderful negative brand statement. Simply, they will be how your business and brand is judged.

Given almost full employment levels the search and/or retention strategies for good staff is high. It seems that claims of staff stability have become a more important indicator of a good media brand, as well as the ability to attract good talent.

All brands are judged on promise versus delivery, and media agencies are no different. The promise of smarter strategy, incisive buying, better account service and improving business clients' results is all dependent on the people working in the agency. A good brand attracts better people.

Media agencies' brand building is not as easy as creative agencies'. Media agencies are similar to doctors, accountants or lawyers; superficially there are similar offerings and similar prices charged, but there are very significant differences in the quality and value of the service delivery. However these seem to be only expressed through WOM and office refurbes.

The winners will be those who do set up deliberate and well differentiated strategic plans. May the best man win. ■

*Kristian Barnes is managing director of MPG.*

## Get creative to generate great ideas



*Amantha Imber  
Creative thinking*

Advertising agencies pride themselves on being creative, yet many internal practices actually have a negative impact on creative behaviour. Indeed, so called 'creative' agencies are generally famous for only a handful of good ideas that were generated by an even smaller number of individuals within the agency.

One of the most bizarre aspects about advertising agencies is that there is actually a department labeled "Creative". Indeed, the writers and art directors who make up the department even get called creatives. When working as a strategic planner in advertising, I often wondered where that left the rest of us.

Since I, as a planner, was not in the 'creative' department, did that mean that planners had no ability to come up with a good idea all on their own? Agencies need to resist the impulse to label one department, above all others, creative. By doing so, the rest of your staff will feel significantly more motivated and confident to suggest an idea of their own.

Another aspect of agencies that

decreases creativity is competition.

Common practice within agencies is to have teams compete against each other on larger briefs and pitches.

Common sense suggests this method of idea-generation should generate better ideas because each team wants to win.

**Email around a random fact every day. Do anything to expose people to more stimuli. It is useless having a whacky-looking agency if everything stays the same all year.**

However, competition actually decreases creativity and motivation to generate great ideas. Harvard University research suggests that when people compete against each other they stop sharing information, which is highly detrimental to great idea generation.

On the subject of great ideas, it always surprised and frustrated me that the only good ideas celebrated were those that won awards. That really sucks for those who came up with many great ideas that never get off the ground.

To foster creativity, all great ideas should be celebrated regardless of whether they win an award or even get made. Try recognising those who came up with a brilliant idea that the client did not buy. Rewarding 'failure' is incredibly

important to signal to staff that it's okay to take risks, a critical part of a truly creative culture.

If thinking creatively is critical to your company's success, here's a novel idea – try investing money in developing employees' creative-thinking skills. It's

surprising how many advertising agencies believe they don't need training in this area. If your company is suffering from too many great ideas and too many efficient 'creatives', then it is a rare beast. If like everyone else, you need more great ideas, and need them faster, invest money in up-skilling people.

One of the most effective ways to enhance creativity is to surround people with diverse and changing stimuli.

This exposure gets a greater number of thoughts firing in the brain, which leads to more numerous and better quality ideas. Change pictures and posters on the walls regularly. If there aren't any, put some up. Stick interesting articles on the backs of toilet doors where people have time to read.

Email around a random fact every day. Do anything to expose people to more stimuli. It is useless having a whacky-looking agency if everything stays the same all year.

And finally, on the topic of recruitment, is the question of how to decide who to bring into your agency.

The idea of recruiting staff based on creative competency levels is an obvious concept, but surprisingly one that is not utilised by the majority of advertising agencies. Sure, copywriters and art directors have to present their books to be granted entry, but you can never be sure how many people contributed to an idea and how long it took to be created if it is sitting statically in a book.

If the best idea in the book was in the making for 12 months, it's unlikely the person will cope with one-to-two week deadlines for coming up with killer campaign ideas.

Instead of looking at books, test people's idea generation and problem-solving skills as part of the recruitment process. Give people a problem to solve, or a brief from which to generate ideas. You will quickly get a sense of how creative the person really is.

So please, go forth and implement, and watch the ideas roll in. ■

*Dr Amantha Imber is head inventiologist at Inventium.*