

A Eulogy to the Big Mistake

In the effort to de-risk marketing investments, a lot of modern advertising has lost that creative spark that sets the ordinary apart from the sublime. Liam Sheehan says it's time creatives got creative again – even if it means making the odd cock-up along the way

How many memorable ads have you seen lately? I mean *truly* memorable ads. Ads that have you smiling to yourself as you sit in rush-hour traffic; ads that make you want to tap complete strangers on the shoulder and share the joy of what you've just witnessed. If you're anything like me, the answer will be a big fat zero. Yet, most of us remember great advertising from the 70s, 80s and even the 90s. So what has happened in the past few years to create the current situation, the creative desert in which we now find ourselves?

What has happened, I believe, is that marketing, and marketers, has got safer. People are so afraid of making the big career-limiting mistake that they are missing the big breakthrough. Granted, the flipside is that there are fewer big mistakes; fewer Guinness Lights. But playing it safe comes at a price. And the price is that the product, the output, becomes very bland. And, as everyone knows, in the world of advertising, 'bland' is the kiss of death.

Advertising was always meant to be a mix of art and science. When I started out in this business, it was more akin to art but I think it's moved closer to science. This might help knock off a lot of the rough edges but it's the edges that make things different; that separate ordinary ads from extraordinary ones.

There was a time when marketers were individualistic and relied heavily on gut feel. That was before techniques like market research, consumer studies and trial launches became the order of the day. A lot of campaigns nowadays, before they ever see the light of day, have been researched and focus-grouped to death. So what you are getting in advertising is a sameness – a banality – that you used not see.

To me, it's no surprise that the most memorable Guinness ad of the past 15 years – the one with the guy dancing to the catchy music – was something of an advertising fluke. It was a filler for another campaign that was delayed. It was never researched. Yet it became one of Guinness' most successful ads ever, helping to push up sales and brand recognition everywhere it was shown.

Now just imagine what a focus group would have made of that ad concept. "Ok folks, we've a barman standing behind a Guinness tap and this guy who works on Moore Street is going to sort of hop up and down for 35 seconds..."

Marketers will argue that research is a process that ads need to go through to ensure 'relevancy' to the target market. Process is fine but one wonders whether marketing has become so process-driven that's it is being re-engineered into something that may not be relevant in the future.

Now, contrast what has happened in mainstream brand marketing with what has happened in the computer games industry in the past decade or so. It wasn't so long ago that a computer game consisted of two bats and a ball on a black-and-white TV. But over the years it's evolved hugely. The industry has worked very hard to make itself more and more relevant to the consumer and to move the boundaries of what's possible.

I'm not sure, on the other hand, whether marketers have actually pushed the boundaries in any meaningful way in the past 10 years. And it's not difficult to understand why. To justify their budgets, marketing directors have to convince The Business that the money will be well spent. As a criterion for justifying a budget, 'gut feel' doesn't get you very far; what The Business wants is evidence that the money won't be wasted. So up goes the powerpoint crammed with compelling findings from focus groups, market research and customer insight brainstorms. For the board, research becomes the great 'de-risker'. But what often passes for research is a highly selective distillation of facts which together build the case for a budget.

Marketers will say that by doing all the research they are ensuring the campaign succeeds but in fact what they're really doing is ensuring it doesn't fail. To my mind, there's a world of difference between the two.

So what of the future: are we destined to live in a world of banal ads? Thankfully, I don't think so. I believe great advertising can and will make a comeback. And what will drive its return is the same thing that drove it away in the first place: euro and cents. In the past few years, playing it safe has been the right thing to do both for marketers and their corporate masters. But now the goalposts are shifting. Consumers are spending less time watching TV and more on Facebook. They have a Skybox and can skip ads. They have busy lives, and their tolerance level for inferior, irrelevant advertising is getting lower and lower.

Faced with the challenge of engaging such a fickle and demanding audience, brand owners will have no choice but to rediscover their creative spirit. Whether it's a 30-second TV spot, a primetime radio ad or a piece of direct mail through the letterbox, the message will have to be clever enough and incisive enough to cut through all the other noise and capture the consumer's attention for those precious few seconds. There will inevitably be mistakes along the way, the campaigns that sink without trace, but there should also be creative gems that stick long in the memory and remind us what great advertising is all about.

Liam Sheehan is sales and marketing director at An Post