

Honesty in advertising should start well before a plan is written.

Though it has been suggested often, I have refrained from writing about a continuing malaise in the advertising industry, a fraternity I used to be a member of. That is because candour is often not appreciated, conveniently deemed partisan. So I will stick with the facts.

It is easy to blame the government for the endemic levels of corruption in Indonesia. 85 per cent of the people and the same percentage of the country's professional managers agree that "corruption is one of the major problems affecting this country". But how often do marketing and advertising professionals stop to wonder how thin the dividing line is between monetary and intellectual corruption? Listening to local CEOs and regional heavyweights from both sides of the equation, it becomes obvious that a key facet of the old client-agency relationship have diminished over time. Respect. The pressure on margins is showing, literally. The carpets are thinner, reception areas are smaller, and the furniture looks cheaper at agency offices today. The thinning veneer reflects a deeper reality.

If a global media agency thirsty for continuous growth is ready to work locally for barely 2 per cent in commissions, can you really expect genuine investment in the brand's development? With the bar so low, how do local media agencies compete for a local marketer's business? If a creative agency working on a bare-bones retainer is counting man-hours all the time, how can you expect a team of top-flight talents to go beyond quickly filling in the boxes that the media agency has determined and the client has approved? That reality seems to be as true for local counterparts as it is of regional leadership teams for global brands. Exceptions will of course prove the rule.

Cut-throat competition and the need to stay ahead can affect fundamental honesty. Here is a specific example from my everyday world, one that I am familiar with. Several agencies have proprietary tools, they are almost de rigueur 'discriminators' now. But if an agency runs a survey with 2000 respondents in only the biggest cities once in a blue moon and claims to know "Indonesian consumers" better than anyone else, should it be congratulated or condemned for promoting fiction? Especially if a continuous survey with 27,000 respondents covering Indonesia, urban and rural, is updated and made available every 90 days? Such a comparison would be as ridiculous as a navy captain equating a patrol boat to an aircraft carrier, simply because both float. Both have different capabilities, on different scales. One has width, depth and speed. The other isn't designed for all three needs.

In most product categories or service industries today, whether it is a detergent, a beverage, a cellular phone, a motorcycle or a bank account, consumers outside the top 20 cities account for more than half of today's consumers and tomorrow's demand. An occasional study conducted in the big cities can therefore only be offered as a proprietary tool that helps convert an agency's unique philosophy into concrete action. Overselling it will expose the agency to a veteran, if not to a novice. By character, it is a snapshot in time with gaps sometimes as large as two years between one study and another. If plans are not evaluated periodically, if real conversion of clusters or targets isn't measured, accountability is a meaningless word. To suggest that habits don't change so a study once in two years is good enough, is simply untrue. People don't switch religions, but shampoo?

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Economic realities like a fuel price hike or global food shortages that raise prices locally, new technologies like the cellular phone or the internet all have dramatic and rapid impact on consumer behaviour. Anyone who watches Consumer Confidence go up and down knows the real meaning of down-trading. Any caretaker of a brand who doesn't think it is important to know whether the competitor's customers are more "confident", doesn't really know what brand equity means. Add to these volatilities the impact of a new brand launch as witnessed by Lifebuoy's cannibalisation of Sunsilk, or a major price cut affecting Simpati's changing fortunes. Then there are the revolving door relationships generated by banks offering vulgar bribes of hundreds of cars in their chase of term-deposits, or the immediate impact of promotions too many to list. Change happens, in months and quarters, not just in years.

Marketers incapable of recognising different tools for what they are should seek a more suitable profession. The clear definition of roles and responsibilities requires the client to know his or her job too. The agency as a crutch is no excuse for a marketer's failings. Working together, on the same page, is vital. Even if reading sales data or a consumer panel each month enables a marketer to sharply define the differences between one brand and another, an agency will have no option but to imitate that definition in broad demographic terms, using a completely different source of information. Using media to reach that broad, out-of-focus target audience is like firing a shot-gun with fingers crossed. Measuring conversion on a periodic basis and making course corrections would be impossible.

Only if both marketer and agency were both using the same robust database, as indeed many are today, target definitions would become sharply focussed. These could include smart definitions like "11 million grocery buyers who buy Rinso powder most often but not Sunlight dishwashing liquid"; "Of people planning to buy a new motorcycle, the 4 million who reject Yamaha"; or "3 million people in the top 20 cities intending to open a savings account in the next 12 months". Buyers are vital targets in some cases, users in others. The media vehicles and promotional efforts that affect these uniquely defined groups can then be selected and measured on a quarterly basis. There was a time when such a process would be wishful thinking, but it is a reality today. It requires both client and agency to be accountable, each paying their way for knowledge essential to each. Anything for "free" should raise suspicion, because there are no free lunches in the real world.

To deny the existence of robust 360-degree targeting and monitoring capabilities would be wilful distortion, akin to crimes against the marketing community. Difficult to imagine perhaps, but such capabilities do not exist anywhere else in Asia, yet. For marketers to ignore the truth because it reveals ugly scars, would be unfortunate. To promote fusion of different data sources instead is almost as perverted, in the face of clinical evidence of errors. Expatriates in particular would do well to remember they are there to help raise standards, not exploit ignorance. If people betray their profession, what should their punishment be?

Though involved with the country's largest continuous syndicated survey, I would be the first to say that anything bigger and better deserves to be embraced. Regardless of the producer, good robust research can be the catalyst for rewarding relationships: client and agency, marketer and consumer. Respect is at the foundation of those relationships.

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