

Innovation in Creativity



After a ten year stint at Ogilvy Bombay, Prasoon Joshi is now the Regional Creative Director, South and South East Asia for McCann Erikson. With more than 300 advertising awards to his credit, including Gold Lions at Cannes, he was recently in Sri Lanka as part of the International Advertising Associations 'Brand Mantra' program. Business Today spoke to Joshi on the pressure to sell products, win awards, be innovative and ethical all at the same time.

By Harin Fernando.

Why are agencies increasingly opting for experiential marketing as part of their communication strategy?

The time has come and now more than ever the consumer is becoming more and

more sharper. They are increasingly aware of the fact that they are watching, reading and viewing an advertisement. They are extremely conscious and hence whether you are in 'marketing or advertising, you have to arrest the consumer in a manner whereby he does not feel conscious of the fact that, 'I have just watched an ad' or that 'this was a trick'. The challenge for tomorrow is to create advertising that does not look like advertising, which does not announce from the first frame that 'I am an ad' and 'look at me as an ad.' Things that are experiential becomes genuine and honest. The consumer feels 'I know more about it' thus reducing the distance between the brand and the consumer. That is what people are trying to do. What was direct marketing, what is database marketing? as the consumer becomes more economically empowered and receives a lot of information, the consumer starts expecting individualistic treatment 'aimed and tailor made for me.' In fact the Amex campaign "Quite frankly American Express, is not for everyone" is exclusive but by being exclusive it is being inclusive. It is saying that it is not for everyone but because of that, 'you' are special. Treating the consumer with respect and treating the consumer with an understanding that the consumer is intelligent, is what the challenge of today is. You cannot just draw rosy pictures and then imagine the consumer is going to buy into it. The consumer is becoming more aware of the fact that we are selling something to him or her.

Do advertisers and marketers often underestimate the sophistication of the consuming audience?

They underestimate the desire; they see the apparent, what is clear and overt. I think they need to look beneath the surface, everyone desires to live a certain kind of life, desires to be treated with respect. An illiterate does not want to be called an illiterate. The consumer might be living a certain kind of life and the research might tell you such, that these individuals' wages are so much and they wear these kinds of clothes and consume these kind of products. But what you forget is that individuals consume and live images. You do not consume a product, you consume images.

Your thoughts on a possible benchmarking system for creativity?

If your client comes to you with a problem, and says I need to communicate this in the common consumers language, what he or she will understand and I want you to translate my marketing objectives and product benefits as well and

communicate all of the above. You will then create an advertisement that will meet those requirements. I think you do not have to stop at that point, mostly we stop at that point. We say this advertisement is doing its job. Take a flute in your hand and you will say 'this flute produces a nice sound, when you blow air through it,' but the flute's job is not just to produce sound, its job is to produce music. So simultaneously for creative people in advertising, their job is not just to communicate, that is the bare minimum, their job is to take the brand to a new height, to create music, so that people fall in love with their brand and say 'I like this and want to buy this.' Increasingly the USP (unique selling proposition) concept is becoming redundant, as all the products are more or less the same, because not many inventions are happening. There are certain categories like soft drinks, where there are very few innovations happening. Once the flavor of coke was changed in the US and the consumers retaliated. So there are many categories where you cannot innovate or change, so how do you then keep your brand fresh? You keep your brand fresh through newer and fresher ideas. That is the challenge for creative people. In simple words, make the brand more lovable and take the brand to a greater height not just communicate it.

How does McCann stand out in the Indian advertising?

In the last four years, McCann Erickson India has been seen as a creative force; McCann Erickson was not previously seen as a creative house, I was brought in to change that. I spent 10 years with Ogilvy before that, and am now happy to say that McCann Erickson is seen as an extremely creative agency, both Ogilvy and McCann Erickson are the two top agencies in the country. McCann's creative strategy, has a specialty about it, it comes from consumer insights. We utilize real life observations that we dig into, and we take pride in the fact that we understand the consumer very well. That is a reason why we are growing as we are and so many clients trust us with their brands.

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How did you manage the balance between selling and winning?

I always considered awards incidental, I feel that awards are important but they

have to happen on their own. As a selfish creative person what do I want? I want, when I go to a relatives house, the children to talk about my ad, sing my jingles, repeat the dialogues that I have written into my advertisements. This gives me a kick that my ad is working with the consumer. At the same time, as I sit in my own fraternity I want the appreciation of my peer group. Both are important. Specialists and connoisseurs like your work, so do the common people for whom you created the ad.

I have found, that if you think awards are incidental and your main job is to innovate and create advertising for your consumer I think awards will follow. The biggest example is Coca Cola in India, which has won, from a Cannes Gold to an Effie' and has taken the brand preference to a greater height in India like never before. I feel a great campaign should be as such.

Was the pressure to sell at McCann different to the values at Ogilvy?

The only difference was Ogilvy was a very well established brand in India. McCann was not, they were also a relatively new agency in the country. Ogilvy has been in India for more than 70 years and McCann only for seven, so that also is a difference. I felt that the challenge was to create it right from scratch. I joined McCann because of that, many people frowned when I joined McCann, 'you are heading the creative of Ogilvy, Bombay' which was the hottest creative office in the country at the time 'and you are going to McCann' which was not seen as a creative agency and why are you doing that, it was hara kiri (suicide). I took it as a challenge, because if I had gone to another agency, which had a good reputation, I would have never been able to test my ability in that sense. I wanted to test myself and throw my self into deep waters, and see if I can swim there or not.

"We don't get ideas, ideas choose us, so you have to be a worthy medium to be chosen by an idea"

Brand building takes time, what advise is there for new market entrants?

I think short-term measures are criticized quite a lot. In my point of view short-term measures are important. When you have both and immediate and long term task to do, you have to somehow create a balance between both, you have to create a language, even if you are talking about a price promotion, it should be in

sync with the brand values. If your brand values believe in giving people value for money and high quality you should not leave them for short-term measures. I am not against short-term measures, but provided they are in sync with the brand values.

What are the key learnings the west can take from the east when it comes to communicating with audiences?

The biggest thing the west can learn from us is, that there is nothing called 'single minded benefit,' you can see a co-existence of contradictions in the east. The same guy who might be a miser, who will not give a single penny to anyone, will splurge on his daughters wedding. So you have got to understand this dichotomy, you have to understand these contradictions. On the very same road you will find a Ferrari, but also the oldest model of an obscure car. How does this work? You have to understand that. How do these co-exist? These contradictions co-existing is something the west can learn. Contradictions are a part of life, they become single minded and they should learn from us that single-mindedness is always not important. The East is about layered communication, it is about doing so many things together.

Why is the West considered the home to 'new' and 'fresh' ideas?

I feel that we are in a confused state. When it comes to advertising, we think that advertising trends are born in the West, we follow them later. The time has come, we have to realize that advertising trends and styles have to be born in our part of the world. There is not a single campaign in the nature of ike or the Honda 'grr' which is coming out of our part of the world, the reason is that we are confused and do not rely on our original thinking. We have to be honest to the core, to the roots of our country. There are ideas sitting there, there is a 'laziness of the familiar' when you are familiar with something, you become lazy, you think 'I know this, I will do it' you do not work hard, you do not chisel it, you do not craft it well, you do not present it well, because you are too familiar with it. I think that we have to leave that aside and really pay attention to the insights and inspirations that come from our part of the world and from around us, rather than saying 'that' is the trend. The trend is going to be created by us. We have to realize the responsibility of creating a trend. In Thailand they have done it upto an extent but barring them, I do not think even in India, although we have done a few campaigns which have won awards, I feel we are still far away in terms of

creating a cultural revolution in advertising. This is in terms of style, innovation of ideas and the creation of a fresher language. A language has to come out of us, that is what I am waiting for and keep talking about, let us create one campaign from this part of the world that shakes the whole wo'rld, the way Bollywood shook the world. I was talking to Tarsem Singh (film maker) once. According to him what saved Bollywood is that it never succumbed to they style of Hollywood. They had their own communication and entertainment code and they always stuck to that. As a result a new language was created which the west and the whole world took notice of, today there are many films such as Moulin Rouge etc. which are trying to imbibe that kind of language. If we follow suit and produce a few campaigns, the world will then take notice of us. In the meantime of we go to imitate them, nothing will happen, we will be seen as poor imitators.

In the great scheme of things, how important is the big idea?

I think ideas are overrated, nothing is original according to me. Somebody, sometime has done it, that is why ideas have to backed by great craft. The presentation of those ideas has to be intricate. An ad for me is 50% idea, 50% presentation and we talk too much about the 50% that is the idea. We forget that there is a lot of pain and labor that goes behind the creating and development of the ad. We should present it nicely. If you cook a nice meal, but you throw it in front of the guests, they will not want to consume it. You have to present it and dress it well, taking it forward from there and I think in the East we are not good at presentation, we are not good at execution. We are improving but we still have a long way to go, whenever we have executed it well we have got the benefit.

What is the impact of 360° advertising?

It is about consumer contact points, where you can contact your consumer, for me that is 360°. The other day I was thinking about it, if there could be someway of advertising in dreams, for example, if you are going off to sleep and there is someway I can influence your dream, if there is a device, a pillow for example, which advertises in your dreams, that also for me would be part of 360. It's about consumer contact points. Which street the consumer will take, which bus he or she will ride on, which bench he or she will sit on, which school their daughter studies in, all these places are consumer contact points.

You have to exploit them and contact your consumer there. The cumulative effect

of 360 is superb, if you compare it, vis-a-vis others, you will find that if you truly have a 360 campaign, the impact of it, is mind blowing.

The potential for this region to be a leader in creative outsourcing?

We are increasingly involved with a lot of projects running in the west, for example Perfetti is a client of ours and for them we have done a campaign for Happy Dent chewing gum. This we developed for the Indian market. But we were then asked to re-shoot the film with foreign models in India and they are running it in the west. There is still a long way to go, we are outsourcing the intellect, but not the execution. People think that we are not well equipped, technologically we are lagging behind, they have started realizing there are great minds in this part of the world, but when it comes to execution they do still not rely on us and I think that is the distance we have to travel.

The fine line between 'Indulgent creativity' vs selling the product?

It would be foolhardy to think that creative people join advertising to sell, they are all drifters who come from different fields, not being satisfied. They could not get a break as a fine artist, painter, writer or as a musician. Hence, they find advertising is a field where they can experiment and make money while utilizing their skills and craft. I think gradually one has to train them, as David Ogilvy use to say 'give me a writer and I can convert him into a copy writer, but if he is not a writer I cannot do anything' so if you have a basic talent you can be trained, to write for your clients. You have to gradually develop people and make them understand that the prime basic purpose of this business is to sell the clients products and find a balance doing it. I give a lot of room for creative people to experiment, there are certain ads we might not release, but I never stop them from doing those ads, because I feel it is very important for them to practice their craft. So coming up with pro bono or one off projects is important as it gives them a chance to sharpen their skills. Creativity is basically inherent, but it can be honed.

Should the regulation of advertising be undertaken internally or should external bodies be responsible?

I believe in freedom of expression. A hot topic these days is tobacco advertising in India. I feel that something, which is allowed to be sold in the country, should be allowed to be advertised. If you are really concerned about it, stop selling the

product. As far as ethical bodies are concerned I think the best thing would be if advertising people take responsibility themselves, and they become self regulatory, rather than external bodies coming and telling them, 'this is right and this is wrong.' I am all for external filtration or exercising your own conscious and value system, rather than relying on an external body.

Many global agencies represented in Sri Lanka are headed by foreign personnel, is this not a waste of Sri Lankan talent?

I believe in local creative hugely, I think even if you import talent, the responsibility for importing talent should be that they guide and train local people, so that they can take over tomorrow. If you have learnt something, from some other markets, then please share it. Why have I come here? I have come to share my experiences with people and tell them this is the way to go. But I think the future depends on local people, the development of local people. Otherwise getting people from outside such as expats etc., is a short term solution, that is not going to give you a great future, if you do not train your local talent.

What are your thoughts on the limited examples of Sri Lankan advertising you have seen?

It is behind, mainly in terms of execution. I have seen some extremely good ideas here, there are some good minds, the problem is they tell me of the lack of budgets and the room for experimentation, and I think that those should increase. Because I have witnessed some good ideas but was thoroughly disappointed with the execution of those ideas. Craft is a major issue. I was surprised to learn that there is no arts school in this country, and when I asked many art directors, where did you train they say, 'we have just instinctively trained' and that is a shame. I think more resources should be allocated to film, art and copywriting training. Are we investing enough in our people? Because right now they are learning on the job.

If you could rejuvenate one brand what would it be?

Coke. We are trying to take Coke to a newer height, in the past Coke created popular culture all over the world, I feel Coke is riding popular culture today, it is not creating it. It is such a powerful brand and I would like to take Coke to a height that it used to be.

What inspires you?

I gather inspiration from all around me, I live my life, I travel a lot, and you never know when ideas will hit you. We do not get ideas, ideas choose us, so you have to be a worthy medium to be chosen by an idea and to be such a medium you have to invest in yourself, that is living life and experiencing more.

