

It's an Outdoor Advertising world

Posted on

Outdoor advertising is as old as history itself but became commercialised only about 45 years ago. The pioneers in the field were Outdoor Publicity Services and Ceylon Publicity Services.

Billboards, banners and posters are the most popular form of outdoor advertising and with electronic and print media rates being expensive, the use of outdoor publicity material, especially billboards, have caught a market. Subsequently, the use of buses, vans, promotional vehicles, bus stands, dealer boards, walls and name boards became popular.

“Most companies have found that outdoor advertising is the cheapest form of advertising. Cost per sighting is very little”, explains Duleep Nugawela, Chairman and Managing Director of Springfield Media Technologies Ltd. “For example, for a billboard that was put up at a populated junction, the cost to the client was approximately 11 cents per minute”, he said.

Outdoor advertising agencies have sprouted by the dozen overnight. In a radius of 25 kms around Colombo, there are 383 such small-time artists, who are mostly breakaways from the big companies. “Some clients go for price, not for quality. And when this happens there is a lot of undercutting that goes on and unethical practices are used. Sometimes, it is these small-time people who create problems for everyone in the industry”, says Nugawela. “Most often, they do not get authorisation from Government bodies, or worse still, they remove an existing board and put up their boards. Such incidents have happened and criminal charges have been brought against such people. In 1993, we lost three large 30” x 20” billboards overnight, in Kandy.”

There are problems that face this very lucrative industry-unethical business practices, lack of experience leading to unprofessional techniques and lack of cooperation by Government authorities. “But these problems are made by our own industry by putting up boards in unauthorised places etc. We cannot blame the authorities for taking a hard line on us”, laments Nugawela, adding that another problem is that scenic places in the country are defaced or completely blocked out by placing huge billboards in front of them. “There should be at least 500 metres

between each board or else the whole purpose of selling your product by the use of this media is lost.”



Vandalism is another problem that is faced by outdoor media. It is not uncommon to see a billboard, bus stand or telephone booth advertising cigarettes, beer or alcohol, defaced with rude words or black spray paint. “There are better ways of showing disagreement”, says Nugawela emphatically. “They should put up a counteracting board by the side of it or under it this will give the message.”

Placing of outdoor material too is important. The product advertised should suit the environment in which it is placed and not be a distraction to drivers. A billboard, advertising underwear, caused an accident and had to be removed and placed elsewhere due to it being a distraction to oncoming vehicular traffic.

Godwin Perera, Group Marketing Consultant at Aitken Spence, was very adamant that restrictions should be placed on posters and hoardings. “Private residential walls are defaced by posters being pasted one over the other. The life span of a poster these days must be a couple of hours. Our politicians are much to be blamed. People who put up banners must also be given the responsibility of removing them. Outdoor publicity has run wild and must be brought under control.”

New technology has moved into this industry as well. The *Tri-Vision boards*, a wonderful invention that does not bore the viewer but is extremely expensive as it is brought into the country duty paid, is one of them. Springfield is in the process of producing a local trivision where the cost will be less and more approachable by local clients.

Metro Media Technologies from the USA has introduced a computer printed vinyl fabric, flexiface, which can reproduce all images. The skin is printed in one piece and stretched onto the iron frame and can sometimes be a double image, enabling a board to be seen from both sides. One of these was the Lux International Beauty Queen's billboard. However, this too is expensive and cannot be used economically in a small country like Sri Lanka. However, it is a very popular medium in India as the boards can be transported from state to state.

Most outdoor advertising can now be drawn, planned and scaled on the computer. Those days this was done with a hand drawn image projected on the wall. An electronic sign cutting system, using 3M stickers which withstands the humidity of our country for letters, images and pictures is done, thus cutting down manpower hours six times over.

Sri Lanka has gone towards greater things in the advertising world without looking back. Agencies now work hand in hand with modern technology, and even with limitations of people resources and knowledge, are on par with some of the best work produced the world over. International awards bear testimony to this fact.

Looking towards brighter horizons, many agencies have tied up with international agencies-Bates Strategic Alliance, LDB Lintas, Advantage Sri Lanka with Zenith, are some of these. One of the reasons for this is that we, by ourselves, are not able to tap our resources. With the coming of foreign brands, which are most often represented by foreign agencies, into the market, we too must use the same concepts for worldwide campaignability.

"One of the main problems that I found was that agencies are not putting a case forward to a client convincingly", says *Pradeepta Roy* of Advantage Sri Lanka. According to him, clients dictate and agencies churn out advertisements.

There was a common consensus among agencies that one of the best campaigns produced was the ODEL campaign. Ranil de Silva of JWT mentions that it was one of the best produced, while Roy, complimenting JWT says, "this is what I mean by campaignability. The whole concept was carried right throughout from media advertising right down to the new shop decor and the goods sold in them. ODEL as a brand is well advertised and Ranil has come up with a very nice Christmas campaign."

Even though there are marketing associations like the Sri Lanka Institute of

Marketing (SLIM) and the Chartered Institute of Marketing that conduct classes and examinations in marketing, advertising is only a single subject in these courses. There is now a need for good training. Godwin Perera believes that it will be excellent if proper training is given to Account Executives, Copywriters, Visualisers, Commercial artists etc. "It will help to upgrade advertising because unlike in those days, when parents never wanted their children to be in advertising, today the attraction of advertising as a career means that proper training and guidance are very necessary", he says.

“There is still the myth that advertising people are not normal”, says Ranil de Silva. “People say they don’t wear proper clothes and are always having parties. We work very hard. It is a very stressful job and only the hotel industry, probably, is more stressed than we are. And that is why we need to unwind”. Getting into the ’90s however, more and more people began joining the industry, and now there are over 3,000 people in the direct industry with another four to five thousand in the support services”.

International Advertising Association and the Ad Circle are places where the agency personnel get together. The 4A's, a fraternity for accredited agencies, clients and media personnel, still exists, but seems to be redundant. The Ola Awards were held for a couple of years and subsequently as the committees changed, the enthusiasm died down. However, the Bell Awards organised by SLIM, have been held annually,

recognising all areas of media including outdoor, production houses and total campaigns.

One of the problems of the industry is that there is a crying need for a proper body that will collectively take up the problems of the advertising industry with the relevant officials. As a first step, the initiative has been taken by Duleep Nugawela, to form an Outdoor Advertising Association. Still in its infancy, the association will spell out the do's and don'ts of outdoor advertising, while at the same time giving guidance and advice to the smaller companies. "This will also be a stepping stone to stopping the bad practices that prevail in outdoor advertising", said Nugawela.

Another problem is the sprouting of many Radio and TV stations, newspapers and magazines without proper research or market surveys done. LMRB (Lanka Market Research Bureau) does a National Media Survey once a year and monitors TV viewing weekly. However, the technique needs to be updated quite often and far greater research has to be done in this area.

For Sri Lanka to maintain its good work and strive harder to be recognised in the international advertising world, the quality of advertisements produced have to be consistent and not just flashes in the pan. Every single agency in the country must expose their people to international multi-media activities and techniques, giving them the scope and drive to be ambitious and be as good as their counterparts the world over. Advertising culture must change and so must the agencies' and clients' thinking and it is then, and only then, that Sri Lanka can proudly fly the flag of worldwide recognition in advertising.



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