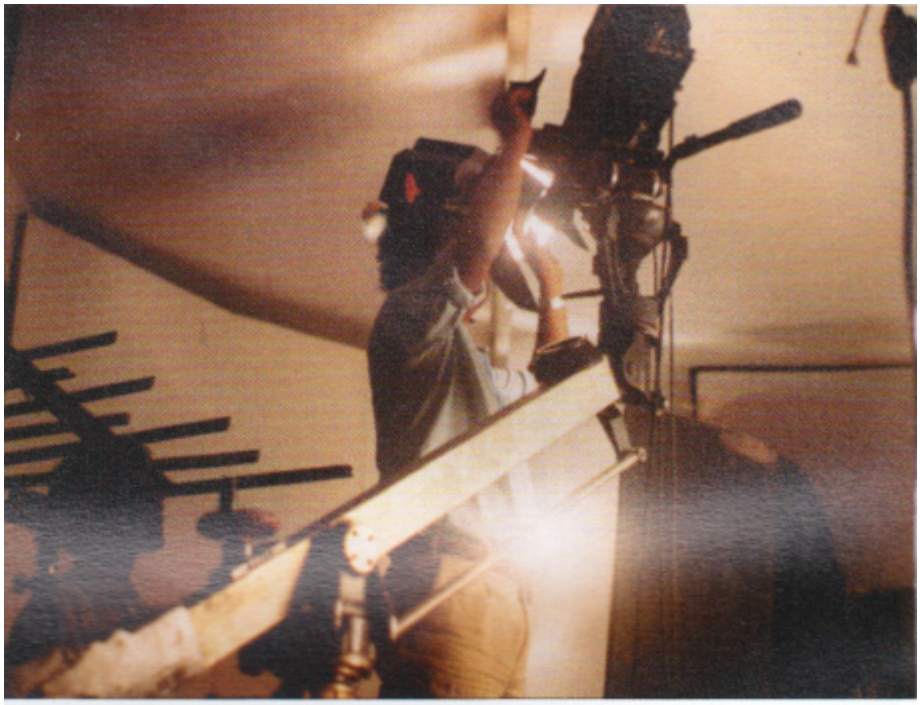
Small Screen Sell Out

You wake up in the morning a groggy wreck, but one touch of the razor’s blade turns you into Superman. The toothbrush leaves a trail of stars as you swipe it across your teeth. Downstairs in the wood-panelled kitchen your wife is serving breakfast, dressed in a glamorous Manipuri sari. You smile fondly at the sight of your children, already dangerously overweight, gobbling processed foods and swilling full-cream powdered milk with evident relish. At this rate, the little dears will soon be needing angioplasty to pry apart their cholesterol-clogged arteries. but no matter, the insurance. company will take care of it. In your world insurance always pays, just as the bank is full of smiling staff dying to lend you money, and headache pills always bring instant relief.

Recognize it? This is the world of the Sri Lankan television commercial, where miracles happen every thirty seconds and real life takes place on another channel.

Hundreds of millions of rupees are spent every year to create these fantasies, in the belief that they persuade people to buy and use the advertisers’ products. But do they? Are Sri Lankan advertisers really getting their money’s worth? And if not, whose fault is it? Trying to find out, I interviewed a number of people active in the business of TV commercial production. I discovered an industry in transition, prey to technical, creative and financial disagreements, unsure of its future path. I learned that marketing, advertising and production people have very different ideas about what a good TV commercial is and how to make one. With little reliable information about Sri Lankan consumer attitudes available to settle the argument the man who pays the piper usually calls the tune. The results are what you see on Your screen every day.



Harder than it looks: shooting a commercial

The child with four parents

Most creatures are born of two parents, but a television commercial has four; the client whose product or service is being advertised; the ad agency, which writes the script and is responsible for turning it into pictures on videotape: the production house, which provides the studio space. equipment, and technicians, and the director, who actually makes the commercial. In Sri Lanka, most directors are affiliated to production houses, so the two can be taken together as a single entity. This is not invariably the case, however. The most expensive commercials are shot using foreign directors who work with a combination of local and overseas production facilities.

This three-way power balance (client, agency, production house/ director) creates enormous tensions. None of the parties involved has enough control to ensure that The finished commercial will turn out exactly as he/she visualizes it;

each knows that the others have plenty of scope to affect the final result, even to ruin it. Pre-production meetings are fraught with stress. Ostensibly these meetings are held to finalize decisions regarding models, locations, music, voice talent, costumes, props and so on. In fact, they are the client’s and agency’s last chance to

influence how the commercial will look and sound Once the meeting ends, the production is out of their hands: from now on, the director is king. So exchanges grow heated, tempers flare, clients thunder and scriptwriters sulk, till at length a compromise acceptable to all parties is reached, and shooting begins.

This ‘committee approach to making commercials is one of the reasons why what ends up on television is so mediocre Fresh, original ideas the kind that make consumers sit up and take notice- rarely survive it The best ideas don’t even make it across the client’s desk “Clients feel safer approving a budget for a script that looks like something they’ve already seen, laments one industry insider. “So every time something interesting comes along, it’s rejected in favour of a mundane script that’s just like everybody else’s”. The costlier the production, the more nervous the client, which is why the most expensive commercials are usually the dullest. By playing safe, the client has ensured that the consumer never even notices his commercial’

In more developed markets, client, agency, director and production house have clearly defined areas of expertise and never step outside them. In Sri Lanka, the situation is different. “The client thinks he’s boss because he pays for the production”, explains an agency copywriter. “I think I’m boss, because I wrote the script. The director and production house think they’re boss because they make the bloody thing. So everyone butts into everybody else’s job, and the result looks like nothing on earth.”

The heyday of the production house

The situation dates back to the early days of the industry, when skills and experience were in short supply, and one studio, Tele-Cine Limited, had the monopoly of local productions. It was a position of power, and Tele-Cine made the most of it. D B Suranimala, the brilliant, imperious director responsible for much of the company’s output at the time, says that “Agencies didn’t have experience about scriptwriting and so on, so the client would tell the agency ‘we want it like this’ and they would come and have a sit-down script discussion to decide how we were going to shoot the commercial. It was really a joint effort.” Others remember it differently. “Production houses started to for- get who their real customer was”, says Neelanie Goonetillake, Account Director at advertising giant J Walter Thompson. “They thought they could undermine the agency if they had good relation- ships with clients.’ Naturally, that created a rift between production houses and agencies.

Suranimala refutes this, pointing out that there is never a discussion between production house and client without the agency being present. “What happens is this”, he says. “At the pre-production meeting, when the [script] is being discussed frame by frame, the client will ask my opinion about something. So I have to make a decision, and be very frank about it…and that is what some agencies resist. They think, ‘this is our territory’. I say fine, but do your research. Don’t leave room for the client to question me or ask my opinion”. Nevertheless, he makes it quite clear on which side of the client-agency fence he falls. “I know one thing: it is the client who makes the final decision. And I know how clients think.”



An independent voice: director Steve de la Zilva

The turning tide

Tele-Cine’s monopoly was broken in the mid-1980s, when agencies started fighting back by retaining foreign directors and studios. More domestic production houses also opened up: the first, Donalds Video Productions, was staffed, initially, by defectors from Tele-Cine. Today, Donalds is probably Sri Lanka’s leading production house in terms of turnover of business. “Take anyone who is worth reckoning [in the industry], they have all sprung from Tele-Cine”, says Goonetillake. At first, these

alumni took their alma mater’s mother-knows-best attitude with them. They could afford to: production houses still called the shots. But the tide was turning.

“It started when the tele- drama crowd saw what was happening in TV commercial production”, says Steve de la Zilwa, a highly-regarded independent director. “The dollar signs just lit up in their eyes, and in they all came. Then they found there wasn’t enough business to go round.”

The new arrivals had incurred enormous debts investing in equipment. Desperate for funds to meet their loan installments, they began offering the use of their facilities to anyone who wanted them, at bargain-basement rates. Soon a price war was on. Industry ethics took a beating; it was the age of the kickback.

The handful of reputable production houses tried to stay aloof, but even they felt the tremors. The results weren’t altogether negative; for example, production-house quotations became far more realistic. “People used to just look at a client and name a figure”, says an old industry hand. “Now, due to the rise in competition, quoting is more professional – and the mar- gins are much slimmer. In fact, sometimes there’s hardly any profit being made at all.” With costs becoming all-important, the balance of power shifted to the people who write the cheques. Clients began making more and more of the really important decisions: which director and production house to retain, which models to use, which ‘take’

of a scene to include in the final edit. Some even began bypassing the agencies altogether, going directly to production houses. The power balance had become a power struggle, with alliances being forged and battles fought over thirty seconds of videotape.

The foreign invasion

But almost willy-nilly, the industry was maturing. “Production values have improved over the years”, says a senior product manager at a leading multinational, one of the largest advertisers on Sri Lankan television. “That happened after the foreign producers came in, and local production houses really felt the competition. Nowadays we get similar production values [from the locals to the ones] we get from foreigners”. He feels local producers have far to go. “They need to be more organized”, he says. “If the locals can show the kind the kind of quality we’ve obtained using foreign producers, of course we’d go for local production”. Echoing a widely-held view that the industry is due for a Shakeout, he recommends a

consolidation of resources. “On the one hand, you get [Sri Lankan] directors like Steve de la Zilwa. who are very good, but have to go to someone else for the equipment. Then there are production houses, which are well equipped but don’t have the talent. In cases like this the agency has to play a bigger role in the production. Meanwhile, his organization continues to use foreign talent extensively.

The ‘foreign invasion’ is a serious bone of contention between agencies and production houses. Agencies tend to prefer foreign di- rectors and producers – not least because working with foreign talent usually involves overseas junkets for agency creative and client service personnel. Also, clients are notoriously willing to pay more for a foreign’ production than for a locally made commercial. Domestic producers, on the other hand, argue thatthe huge sums of money spent on foreign production could, if invested at home, help develop the technical and

re personnel sources available locally. “The thing I like best abroad is the acting talent”, enthuses Lilamani Dias Benson. The head of the LDB Lintas Ammirati Puris is famed for the keen personal Interest she takes in the TV commercials produced by her advertising agency. “The second thing is

an idea. A good producer can give an idea so much extra value that it really comes alive. For these rea- sons, we do work with foreign production houses”. But Dias Benson is careful to point out that her agency also supports Sri Lankan producers and works with them regularly. She pooh-poohs the idea that local production houses try to sideline the ad agencies (“I must say we’ve never had any problem with that at all!’) and points to the recent Surf Ultra hidden-camera commercials as evidence of Lintas’s commitment to local talent. “In the Lintas and Surf world there’s an Indian team, trained in the USA, that goes from country to country making these commercials”, she explains. “Because the

Sri Lanka market is so small the cost of using them wasn’t justifiable. The client wanted to give up the idea, but we said ‘no, we want to try it with local talent’ and went ahead. We used Sri Lankan production facilities entirely, and everybody just got involved to the hilt. You can’t imagine the level of excitement behind the scenes!” The client was satisfied, but the Surf Ultra campaign has been something of a victim of its own success; the interviewees, who had no idea they were being videotaped, were so enthusiastic about the product that consumers have trouble believing their televised responses are genuine.

Steve de la Zilva, who directed the Surf commercials, agrees that the acting talent is better overseas, especially in India. “They have a booming film industry, so there are thousands of aspiring actors and actresses. While they’re waiting for the next movie part to come along, they act in commercials to earn a living”. But apart from good actors, he doesn’t feel overseas productions justify their cost. “They say Bombay has a lot of facilities to offer, but I’ve been studying this pretty carefully and Bombay production houses aren’t that much better equipped. Agency people go over there and they’re impressed by the racks and racks of equipment they see, but What we have here can do more or less the same job.

S. Thiruvarangan, head of Vision Art, a high-tech post-production facility in Colombo, agrees that the technological gap is narrowing. He feels the real gap is one of talent. “The Bombay director has done hundreds. maybe thousands of commercials – he has more experience. All the same Thiruvarangan feels that the real reason clients are willing to pay more for over- seas talent is the notorious Sri Lankan prejudice that anything foreign.

The Real Boss

As this article is being written, advertising agencies around Colombo are preparing to hear the verdict of the judges at this year’s Bell Awards ceremony, organized by the Sri Lanka Institute of Marketing. Excitement rises to fever pitch as agency staffers speculate which of the year’s ads will receive coveted ‘gold’ awards. The awards do more than boost egos in the creative department; they also attract business to the winning agencies. And at the Bells, the most prestigious award for a single advertisement is that given for the best TV commercial.



Old hand:
Neelanie Goonetillake

Some years ago, the SLIM prize committee caused a scandal by refusing to make awards number of categories, claiming that none of the entries submitted reached an adequate minimum standard. Nowadays, Bell Awards are given away in every category

no matter how low the standard, but the question raised by SLIM's controversial action persists. Is Sri Lankan advertising – especially TV advertising really any good at all?

The question needs to be properly understood. A 'good' TV commercial is not

necessarily one that is exciting, funny, clever, or nice to look at; excitement, humour. cleverness and beauty are just ways to make sure the ad gets noticed so that it can do its job. A good ad is one that does the job it is supposed to do. And the final arbiter of that is the consumer.

It is she not the client, not the agency, not the director and his production house who is the real boss. It is she who decides whether a commercial succeeds or fails. The trouble is, hardly anyone in the business is listening to her.



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