



Confessions Of An Advertising Wanker

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There was a time in the late 1980s when there was only one thing worse than admitting you were a conservative at heart. And that was admitting you worked in advertising. Of all the vocations guaranteed to earn you the ire of the chardonnay-slurping chattering classes, 'advertising copywriter' was right up there with 'live animal cosmetics tester' and 'Amazonian lumberjack.'

Personally, I blame Tim Bell, a one-time high-flying, fast-living ad exec and now British aristocrat encumbered with the wonderfully alliterate title of Lord Bell of Belgravia. According to Matthew Norman in *The Independent* newspaper, not only was Tim Bell 'an erstwhile cocaine abuser' but even worse, he was largely responsible, as Account Director at Saatchi and Saatchi's, for getting Margaret Thatcher elected three times in a row.

With such stunningly simple but effective headlines as 'Labour Isn't Working, and 'Educashun Isn't



Working' Tim's team managed to marry advertising and politics in a way that saw the conservative adman cemented as an archetype in the public mind. Under Tim's stewardship, the Saatchi brothers not only dominated the creative leagues for over a decade but also became big players in the success of the Thatcher governments.

If that wasn't enough to keep his hands full, Tim Bell also had a predilection for 'masturbating at the window of his Hampstead bathroom in full view of passing au pair girls'-which saw him convicted for indecency.

No wonder they call us advertising wankers.

For my sins, I managed to resist both the white powder and the window wagging, even though I spent a large part of the '80s whizzing around in flash cars and enjoying lunch breaks that started at midday and ended at midnight. Nonetheless, I must confess to having indulged in Lord Bell's other mortal sin-I used to make ads for the conservatives. Not the British Tories, but Australia's very own Liberal Party.

Clearly, I lacked Tim's magic touch. My first party-political TV commercials failed to persuade the Australian electorate to put Andrew Peacock in the Lodge.

The advertising agency I was contracted to, George Patts, knew they had a problem pitching the suave, well-heeled Victorian jetsetter Peacock against the downto-earth 'Hawkie' and his working class charisma. Hawke had a natural affinity with the public, best summed up in Keating's snide remark about him 'running around shopping malls tripping over television cables.' The voters loved him, even though his government was looking tired and dipping in the polls.

George Patts called me in because of my track record in directing successful TV commercials for them, featuring-wait for it-the Gobbledock. The theory being that if I could convincingly bring that famous furry little chip-loving dwarf-in-a-suit to life then I was the perfect choice for fleshing out the personality of Andrew 'all feathers and no meat' Peacock.

Andrew, you see, had this unfortunate habit of freezing up as soon as the TV cameras switched on, giving him the false appearance of being stiff, wooden and aloof; even though in person he is naturally at ease, extremely warm and very, very funny. (Sound familiar, Julia?)

With the Gobbledock I relied on a couple of boffins with remote controlled devices and fishing wire to raise its eyebrows, roll its eyes and twitch its nose in order to visually bring its personality to life on the small screen, but I decided on a different approach for Andrew.

Instead, I filmed Mr Peacock in a variety of politically appropriate situations (visiting factory workers, at a TAFE and so on) with the strict instructions that he was to just be himself-no holds barred-and that he wouldn't know if the cameras (hidden out of sight) were rolling or not. The theory worked a treat. Andrew does the best line in filthy jokes and risqué repartee of the sort no polly these days would dare countenance (sadly) and he had everyone from little old migrant seamstresses to bogan tradies rolling around in stitches. Lip readers would have had a field day if



they'd bothered to look closely at the finished ads, but for the rest of us his hilarious banter was drowned out in the final edit by a gnawingly irritating jingle about 'there are questions that have to be answered.' The questions never were answered, and in fact Andrew never even got the chance to ask them, quitting politics straight after his loss.

Although he achieved a reasonable swing to the Libs, it wasn't enough to defeat the Hawke legend. (Only Labor can bring down a Labor hero, as Kerr, Keating and Shorten have shown.)

This supping with the Kooyong Devil was the last straw for some of my friends, and I quickly found the dinner invites to Balmain and Haberfield drying up. Not that I particularly minded. One thing advertising people-particularly creatives-had to put up with in the pre-*Gruen* world (where advertising became not only acceptable, but cool) was being endlessly blamed for everything 'bad' in the world. Obesity? Yep, I did ads for KFC, Maccas, and an entire series of 'Dougie the Pizza boy.' Pollution (as it used to be called in the pre-climate change era)? Yep, I did ads for gas guzzlers and four wheel drives. Pester power and kid's cereals? Yep, that'd be me again. Hole in the Ozone layer? Guilty as charged. And so the list went on and on. In fact, it was pretty difficult to find a single ad we did in those days that couldn't in some way or other be deemed responsible for some great social ill. Hell, I even did cigarette ads.

Advertising is the art of persuasion. In essence, we find a way of encouraging people to spend money on something they either don't need or can't really afford. Because when they need it, there's no point in advertising, and if they can afford it (and want it) then they're going to buy it anyway. From a leftist point-of-view, this is immoral in the extreme. But from a realistic point of view, this is what keeps the growth, innovation and aspiration in our society occurring, from which we all benefit. People who worked successfully in the 'art of persuasion' recognised that greasing the wheels of consumerism was an end goal in itself, from which untold benefits materialised. Far from damaging society, advertising was merely the most visible part of the iceberg called capitalism. Capitalism, we realised, may not be perfect in itself, but-to nick a phrase-it's certainly preferable to the alternatives.

Then, in the mid-'90s, advertising wised up.

First came the 'charity ads', in which advertising creatives (in order to win awards for themselves) offered their services free to various charities in exchange for a license to do something creatively powerful and make an impact. Ads for causes ranging from Amnesty International's letters-to-prisoners to NAPCAN's awareness campaigns about child abuse were designed to generate not only exposure for the cause, but also for the advertising creatives and directors responsible for them.

Meanwhile, some smart adman came up with a name for a product called 'Green Clean' (or something like that), stuck a dolphin on the label, and sat back while sales went ballistic. Of course, it was just a dishwashing liquid that was in essence not all that different to the normal stuff-although marginally more bio-degradable. But it was enough to make a legally acceptable claim about being 'better for the environment.' Cannily repackaged it was just what a certain type of consumer was desperately looking for in order to be 'seen to be doing something' about the



myriad environmental problems creeping onto the social agenda.

Suddenly new products with names like Dolphin Detergent were being advertised left, right and centre, demonstrating you could have your cake and eat it too. You could be a lefty and an adman. A touchy-feely social conscience, traditionally the dominion of school teachers and social workers, could be harnessed to sell stuff. As advertising commentator and shampoo marketer Inga van Kyck maintains, 'anything can be sold as green if you need it to be.'

And that's where it all began. Advertising had found a new tool.

A conscience. Hallelujah.

Around the same time, in the late 1990s, advertising proprietors cottoned on to the fact that they were paying their creative staff way too much money. In those days, in Australia, the ad agencies operated what the courts later deemed to be a cartel, giving themselves an unfair advantage in the selling of media space. Because they were making so much out of media, the cost of creative services had always appeared relatively insignificant. It was only once the monopoly had been dismantled and advertising agencies' profits plummeted, that they woke up to the fact that a junior copywriter could be earning not much shy of a cabinet minister. When the salary squeeze came, which it rapidly did, advertising ceased to be the stomping ground of the uber-rich Eastern suburbs yuppies, who instead headed off to the more lucrative fields of real estate and hedge fund managing.

Now, advertising found itself lumbered with a new breed of less ambitious, more impoverished university graduates who drifted into the creative arena, bringing-along with their worthless Bachelor of Arts degrees-soft left political idealism and half-baked utopian beliefs.

A new type of adman had been born. The socially aware creative.

During my recent stint as an Executive Creative Director, I was constantly amazed and a little startled at the politically correct attitudes and earnest moralising of many of the new breed of copywriters and art directors I employed. Worse still, even today's young 'suits' seem to labour under the illusion that they have every right to impose their own code of self-determined 'ethics' upon the advertising process. (The role of the suit is basically the go-between, responsible for generating profitable business for the firm.) My argument was, and is, that so long as the product is legal, the brief falls within the advertising guidelines, and you don't have a personal stake in why it shouldn't be advertised (ie my Dad was a dipso who died of liver cancer so I'd rather not work on grog, thanks) then, much like with the legal profession, the product has a right to the best professional services it can afford. They don't buy it. Today's young practitioners of advertising have a nervous suspicion about the industry, and to some degree a distaste for it, that is borne out of contemporary education (or should I say 'educashun') where the fundamentals of law and commerce give way to a vague, ill-conceived reluctance to embrace what makes the marketplace tick in favour of what makes you personally feel warm, gooey and superior.

Nowadays, the red-blooded adman of the past has been replaced by a green-blooded creature



who struggles to reconcile his or her core political beliefs with what the job demands of them-wholesale salesmanship. This has had some fascinating outcomes.

In the last few years, most of the big winners at the Cannes Advertising Festival (the global benchmark for creativity) have had an overtly environmental slant. In fact, Al Gore was recently one of the keynote speakers. Australian adman Dave Droga won one of the first 'Titanium' awards with his 'Tap' project, which sees New York restaurants charging a dollar for tap water for a week once a year, the proceeds of which then goes to help UNICEF provide fresh water to the third world. When that won big, it opened the floodgates. Following swiftly on its heels came our very own Earth Hour. This publicity generating vehicle, spearheaded by Leo Burnett Sydney, skilfully harnessed PR, advertising, news and people power and blended them into one glorious cocktail of feel-good fuzzy emotions all in the name of the WWF and 'awareness' about climate change. (Er. we're not aware of it?) The glittering trinkets won almost outnumbered the number of lights that were switched off. Increasingly, the main creative gongs are handed out to a plethora of environmentally or politically sound advertising ideas. The sell of the idea has been replaced by the soul of the idea.

Craig Davis is the creative chief of the ad agency that still bears the names of two of the 80s most irrepressible ad men, Mojo. In their day, Mo and Jo gave us virtually all the classic and most overt consumption-orientated ads of their era, ranging from 'I Feel Like A Tooheys or Two' to the Meadowlea Mum who so clearly needed congratulating. But whereas those two archetypal admen sat around their office strumming guitars, swigging booze and making up ads over long lunches, Craig approaches the task very differently in his quest to bring his own sense of morality into advertising. His 'brand-karma' website allows consumers to name and shame products and brands that don't live up to his, or your, sense of what is right and wrong. Craig-a firm believer in climate change and a nonbeliever in 'growth'-sees Creativity (which he always gives a capital 'C') 'as a restorative and rebalancing force in the world,' going so far as to suggest that 'what is a monumental problem for the planet and people is also a monumental opportunity for our industry.' Sounding somewhat messianic, he goes on to assert that 'here is a higher purpose for Creativity than making advertising.' One suspects that maybe not all his highpaying clients, who include Coca Cola, Toyota, Lion Nathan, L'Oreal, Nestle, LG and Qantas, are in total agreement. But who knows? Maybe they are.

'I believe that every one of us should have their own morality and they should apply their own morality. All my people are free to say they don't want to do something. There is no punishment for that.'

Noble words indeed. Funnily enough, they come from Lord Bell. Who says all advertising people are wankers?