

## License to Thrill

I was in the UK for Christmas and, amongst the many Christmas Special programmes on television, one particularly caught my eye. It was an hour-long homage to the best TV ads of the decade. It was riveting viewing, not tucked away at 2am on some obscure business channel, but ran at 8pm on the nation's largest commercial network; something I cannot see happening for the Best Banner Ads of the Century, or the Best Direct Response Campaign of the Millennium.

Amazingly, the top 20 list was not over-run with 21st-century brands such as websites (there was only one); mobile telephony (also only one) or Apple (not there at all), but fairly equally split between 20th-century and 19th-century brands, with even two from the 18th-century thrown in for good measure. Whodathunkit - a veritable hit parade from days of yore.

Guinness (founded 1759) was still doing the business as an advertising icon, closely followed by Budweiser (1785). Similarly Cadbury, my Alma Mater founded in 1824, was in twice for the drumming gorilla and those eyebrows that were shown here pre-Xmas (that girl really gives me the creeps). John Smiths Bitter (1847); Carlsberg (also 1847); Halifax bank (1853); Citroën (1912); Sony (1946), who I thought were yesterday's men when it comes to technology brands, also got in twice with their Bravia television. The list also included some brands for whom the word 'dull' had seemingly been invented. Hovis bread – unchanged since 1888; John West Tinned Salmon – a brand that should have been obliterated years ago firstly by Private Label and now cheapo Chinese imports; PG Tips – a brand of tea last seen as modern in the 1960s.

I would class all twenty of the chosen ads as best fitting the description: branded entertainment. There was no new news in these ads – most of the brands hadn't had new news since Armistice Day – and neither was there much in the way of feature/benefit, product demo good 'ol P&G stuff. Think Budweiser Wassup; Cadbury Gorilla and you see what I mean; they were all like that. One ad for Skoda cars involved nothing more than a group of cooks making a life-size Skoda Fabia entirely out of cake, with a detailed cake engine under a cake hood!

Most of these brands seemingly had little going for them in today's market. They were pretty much all falling off the end of the brand maturity chart. Their brand managers and advertising agencies could have wept and wailed about all the problems they faced: static/declining categories; mean, horrible retailers denying them shelf-space and demanding outrageous allowances; the strait-jacket of numerous past brand positionings and advertising campaigns.

But they didn't. Instead they had done what only brands like Hovis, John West Tinned Salmon and PG Tips could do: they used the vast reservoir of consumer goodwill, built up over generations, to engage in a different kind of dialogue with us. Unlike most venerable brands that have seen better days, they did not go down the usual route of gleaning from the hardy band of existing users what was liked about the product and then dramatising that. It doesn't work! I don't care why someone else buys it. By seeking only to entertain, the public could reengage with these brands on a more emotional level in contrast to the all-too rational basis of the past.

So why don't our ancient brands do the same? I'm sick of hearing about how Molson Canadian and Labatt Blue are being shafted at both ends by premium and buck-a-box

brands - boo-hoo! It was their fault anyway for leaving the front and back doors open. I'm even sicker of watching their lame efforts to 'tap into' some allegedly new insight about the brands. There isn't anything new so stop pretending there is! Instead, leverage what the new competition doesn't have: a lifelong relationship, and use that as license to be welcomed back into my life by entertaining me.

Come on Canada's marketers. Quit obsessing about your brand's limitations and leverage what you do have. Stop being my boring, whiny friend from ages ago who I haven't called in years. Because of our past, I will give you a hearing, so thrill me; amaze me; give me my best laugh of the day. After all, isn't that what friends are for?