

Home Thoughts From Abroad

While my fellow columnist, Mr. Base, updates you on the French advertising scene, I will attempt to do the same on the British equivalent from a tiny, road-warrior chain located at the end of the runway at Gatwick airport where I have been confined for three days while attending a conference. I cannot claim that my review is comprehensive or particularly representative, but just being immersed in another country's advertising does give pause for thought as to why things are as they are at home in Canada.

At the macro level, my first observation is that I have been seeing ads for a category that seem to have been extinct forever on Canadian screens – packaged goods. A particularly entertaining ad for Bisto gravy springs to mind, but there have been many others.

A frightening percentage of our ads in Canada come from the categories of cars, banks, beer, upcoming movies/DVD's, retail and bodycare. There's no variety. And given the number of channels and the airtime to be filled, we see the same ad a Brazillion times; whereas here in my prison cell, I don't think I have seen the same ad twice - and I find that really invigorating. I'm sure the media gurus will harp on about poor reach; fewer opportunities to see etc, but maybe things have now turned around. Maybe Apple had the right idea with their 1984 ad, but were 20 years too early? We're reaching people, but are we reaching their souls?

My second observation is that I now realize that my critical senses have become dulled as to just how crass the branding of our ads has become. I have become inured to seeing idiotic actors, wearing Halloween costumes, playing the role of the brand itself. I have been indifferent to the ridiculousness of the contortionist holding the outrageously stylized mock-up in full camera shot, no matter what else is going on in the plot. I see no sign of such approaches on British screens.

But there are some seemingly persuasive arguments for the branding approaches in Canada. What a great way to get 30 seconds of brand visibility into a 30 second advert; and even more compellingly, such techniques actually seem to deliver results. Listerine has apparently done well from its dynamic duo of Mr. Bottle and Mr. Toothbrush. Pepsi continues to thrive while the kick it old school guy self-consciously holds a can of Pepsi, gamely acting on while no doubt succumbing to a painful cramp. But just because something works does not mean that things cannot be done better.

While I can see how such techniques may well be the best way to register branding with respondents in the research process, I do not believe them to be optimal in real life. Firstly, we all know that good advertising has to integrate the brand, its benefit and the creative idea into one seamless whole. Having the brand as lead actor reading out the benefit to a bystander to me misses the critical element of a great creative idea: something that can build an enduring emotional bond with the brand.

My issue with the 30 second product to camera technique is that I am convinced it is a waste of time. If people are paying attention at all, they are either engaged in the storyline or they are noticing the pack – they can't do both. Since the brand probably isn't integrated into the idea, anyone thus engaged will be merely entertained, whereas for the dullards staring at the product, TV is an exceptionally expensive way to achieve the same effect as more static media.

But enough negativity. I am desperately missing seeing the smiling Tim Horton's girl and her muffins. While the ads might be technically more accomplished here, I've yet to see a brand that has a grip on the nation like Tim's. And if I had been confined much longer, I might even have started to pine for Beardie explaining the latest Canadian Tire gizmo...