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SPEECH TO MALAYSIAN ADVERTISING CONGRESS

"ASIAN ADVERTISING: WHERE TO ?"

GOOD AFTERNOON LADIES AND GENTLEMEN AND MAY I THANK THE ORGANISERS ON BEHALF OF THE BATEY GROUP FOR INVITING US TO TALK AT THIS CONFERENCE.

THE THEME GIVEN IS "ASIAN ADVERTISING: WHERE TO ?".

THERE ARE TWO STRANDS TO THIS QUESTION THAT I WOULD LIKE TO EXAMINE. FIRST, THE CHARACTER AND STYLE, THE CREATIVE EXPRESSION OF ASIA'S ADVERTISING INDUSTRY - SHOULD ASIAN ADVERTISING BECOME MORE OF A MIRROR OF ITS LOCAL CULTURES TRYING TO FIND A UNIQUE EXPRESSION OF ASIANNESS AS SOME FEEL SHOULD HAPPEN IN ASIAN ART AND ASIAN VALUES; OR SHOULD IT SEEK TO BE MORE INTERNATIONAL IN FLAVOUR, CROSSING BORDERS AS EASILY AS OTHER ASIAN EXPORTS ?

SECOND, AND THE MAIN FOCUS OF MY PRESENTATION, WILL BE A LOOK AT THE STATE OF THE ADVERTISING INDUSTRY IN ASIA: WHERE IS IT HEADING, IS IT IN GOOD ENOUGH SHAPE TO FACE UP TO A FUTURE IN WHICH IT WILL SOON BE THE BIGGEST ADVERTISING MARKET IN THE WORLD. WILL ASIA BE ABLE TO SET AN EXAMPLE TO THE REST OF THE WORLD IN THE ADVERTISING ARENA, AS THE JAPANESE DID WITH "JUST IN TIME MANUFACTURING" AND SINGAPORE DID WITH THE AIRLINE INDUSTRY ?

LET'S START WITH THE FUN PART BY LOOKING AT SOME ADS FROM ACROSS THE REGION TO TRY AND ESTABLISH EXACTLY WHAT CHARACTERISES ASIAN ADVERTISING. THE FIRST I'D LIKE TO SHOW YOU IS A PRINT ADVERTISEMENT CREATED FOR THE PAN PACIFIC HOTEL THAT APPEARED IN SINGAPORE A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO.
THE HEADLINE READS: "NOW YOU CAN PICK UP TARTS AT OUR FRONT DOOR".

IF GETTING NOTICED IS ONE MEASURE OF SUCCESS, THEN THIS AD DID OK! THE PAPERS AND WOMEN'S GROUPS RAGED AT IT. STRAITS TIMES HURLED ABUSE AND A MERRY BANDWAGON OF INDIGNATION GREW. WHY? BECAUSE IT WAS CITED AS ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF CRASS WESTERN ADVERTISING AT WORK IN ASIA, OUT TO WRECK ASIAN VALUES AND ASIAN MODES OF EXPRESSION. WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WHEN THE INITIAL EXCITEMENT DIED DOWN, IT EMERGED THAT THE AD HAD IN FACT BEEN WRITTEN BY A CHINESE LADY NAMED SEOW BEE YEN, (WIFE OF THE AGENCY BOSS - EUGENE SEOW). SHE WAS VERY PROUD OF THE AD AND HER CLIENT WAS DELIGHTED; THEY GOT 10 TIMES MORE PUBLICITY THAN THEY HAD ACTUALLY PAID FOR. ASIAN ADVERTISING? CERTAINLY! [SHOW NEXT SLIDE].

LET'S LOOK AT ANOTHER PRINT ADVERTISEMENT. THIS WAS PUBLISHED BY THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH IN SINGAPORE TO PROMOTE DENTAL CARE. THE AD TRANSLATES LITERALLY AS: "14 IS 14, 40 IS 40, 14 ISN'T 40, 40 ISN'T 14". AND IT READS SOMETHING LIKE THIS (MY APOLOGIES TO MANDARIN SPEAKERS IN THE AUDIENCE FOR MURDERING YOUR LANGUAGE):

"SHI SI SHI SHI SI,
SI SHI SHI SI SHI,
SHI SI BU SHI SI SHI,
SI SHI BU SHI SHI SI"

THE SUBHEAD READS:
"TRY SAYING THAT WITHOUT YOUR REAL TEETH"
HERE WE APPEAR TO BE ON SAFER GROUND IN SEARCHING FOR GREAT EXAMPLES OF ASIAN ADVERTISING. A GOOD ASIAN CONCEPT THAT WESTERNERS MAY NOT APPRECIATE, LET ALONE BE-CAPABLE OF CREATING, AS THE IDEA IS FOUNDED IN CHINESE LINGUISTIC CULTURE.

SORRY, WRONG AGAIN! THIS WAS WRITTEN BY JIM AITCHISON, NOW EXECUTIVE CREATIVE DIRECTOR OF BATEY ADS, WHO IS AS AUSTRALIAN AS THEY COME. IT WON THE CHINESE COPY AWARD OF THE YEAR AND WAS PARTICULARLY PRAISED FOR BRINGING HUMOUR INTO CHINESE ADVERTISING. ASIAN ADVERTISING? FOR SURE!

[ADVANCE TO NEXT SLIDE, A BLANK]

NOW, A SERIES OF TV ADS THAT APPEARED IN CHINA RECENTLY.

[PLAY ADS].

THE SERIES WON 5 GOLD AND 5 SILVER AWARDS, PLUS THE BEST AD AND BEST CAMPAIGN OF SHOW AT THE RECENT 1997 HONG KONG ADVERTISING AWARDS. AN EXTRAORDINARY ACHIEVEMENT AND ANOTHER GREAT EXAMPLE OF AN ASIAN IDEA PLUGGING INTO AN IMPORTANT ASIAN THEME IN A PECULIARLY ASIAN WAY - FAMILY VALUES AND HUMAN RELATIONS SEEN FROM A CHINESE PERSPECTIVE. THE PRODUCT OF AN ASIAN WHO KNOWS HIS MARKET? NOT QUITE. ACTUALLY, IT WAS WRITTEN BY A CANADIAN MAN OF JEWISH EXTRACTION, POLISH DESCENT, WITH A TOUCH OF NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN- MIKE FROMOWITZ, CHAIRMAN OF BATEY ADS HONG KONG.

ANOTHER AD FOR ERICSSON, THIS TIME WRITTEN FOR THE THAI MARKET.

[PLAY AD].

A POWERFUL AD, WHICH MAKES ITS POINT WITH ARTISTRY AND COMPETITIVE CLARITY, THE SORT OF AD ANY CREATIVE DIRECTOR IN
LONDON WOULD BE PROUD TO HAVE ON THEIR REEL AND WHICH HAS ALREADY PICKED UP NUMEROUS TOP AWARDS IN THE WEST.

I WON'T KEEP YOU IN SUSPENSE: NO, THE AD WAS NOT WRITTEN BY AN EXPAT, BUT BY THE THAI CREATIVE DIRECTOR OF BATEY ADS THAILAND, CHUKIAT.

LASTLY TWO FILMS PRODUCED BY OUR SINGAPORE AGENCY FOR MERCEDES AND SIA THAT ENJOYED WORLDWIDE AUDIENCES [PLAY ADS]

THE PRODUCT OF MALAY CHINESE, ENGLISH EXPATS, SINGAPOREAN INDIANS, OR AUSTRALIAN MAURITIANS? WHO CARES? THEY ARE GREAT ADS WHICH SEDUCED BOTH CONSUMERS AND CREATIVE AWARD JUDGES FROM NEW YORK TO SYDNEY, VIA SEOUL AND SINGAPORE AND WHICH WERE CREATED AND PRODUCED HERE IN ASIA.

THE POINT IS THIS: THERE IS A BEWILDERING MIX OF CULTURALLY DISTINCT ADVERTISING THAT APPEARS IN ASIA, TARGETED AT PEOPLE WITH A TIGHTLY DEFINED SET OF CULTURAL PERAMETERS; TO THESE PEOPLE IT MAKES SENSE TO ADVERTISE IN A WAY THEY CAN RELATE TO BEST.

THERE ARE OTHER AUDIENCES IN ASIA WHO ARE MORE INTERNATIONAL IN THEIR OUTLOOK AND WHO SEEK TO BE ADDRESSED USING THEIR PREFERRED IDIOMS. NOTHING WRONG WITH THIS EITHER. AND NOTHING WRONG WITH A CAUCASIAN WRITING THE CULTURAL CONCEPTS AND AN ASIAN, THE INTERNATIONAL ONES. THE KEY IS THE ORIGINALITY AND IMPACTFULNESS OF THE EXPRESSIONS AND THEIR APPROPRIATENESS TO THE TARGET AUDIENCE.

ASIA'S ADVERTISING IS PROBABLY THE MOST VARIED IN THE WORLD; IN BATEY SINGAPORE ALONE WE HAVE CREATIVES FROM 9 NATIONALITIES
ORIGINATING FROM 5 CONTINENTS, INCLUDING A CREATIVE DIRECTOR WHO IS A MAURITIAN, BUT DRESSES LIKE A RASTAFARIAN AND SPEAKS LIKE AN OZZIE.

MUCH AS CULTURAL DIVERSITY THROUGH IMMIGRATION TURNED INTO AMERICA'S GREATEST ECONOMIC ASSET, SO THE EXTRA-ORDINARY CREATIVE DIVERSITY OF ASIA'S AD INDUSTRY MAY TURN OUT TO BE OUR GREATEST STRENGTH IN THE NEXT MILLENNIUM. AND THIS STRENGTH IS BEGINNING TO SHOW THROUGH IN OUR PERFORMANCE IN THE WORLD'S MAJOR AD INDUSTRY AWARDS.

LAST YEAR AN ASIAN AD AGENCY WON THE SECOND LARGEST NUMBER OF AWARDS IN AUSTRALIA'S OWN AD INDUSTRY AWARD SHOW, IN COMPETITION WITH AUSTRALIA'S DOMESTIC AND LOCAL BRANCHES OF INTERNATIONAL AD AGENCIES - ALL OF ITS WINNING ADS WERE CREATED IN ASIA. IN THE US MOBIUS AWARDS LAST MONTH, AN ASIAN AGENCY ALSO WON 7 STATUES AND 5 SILVER AWARDS - AGAIN AN UNHEARD OF ACHIEVEMENT FOR AN ASIAN AGENCY. MODESTY FORBIDS ME TO SAY WHICH AGENCY THIS WAS!

BUT IF THE CREATIVE PRODUCT IS BEGINNING TO SHINE, WHERE IS ASIAN ADVERTISING HEADING AS AN INDUSTRY?

NOWHERE WITHOUT TALENT!

THE KEY TO SUCCESS IN ANY INDUSTRY IS THE CALIBRE OF PEOPLE IT MANAGES TO ATTRACT IN COMPETITION WITH OTHER SIMILAR INDUSTRIES. WE COMMISSIONED A VARIETY OF DIPSTICK STUDIES RECENTLY AMONGST HIGH FLYING GRADUATES IN SOUTH EAST ASIA TO GET A FEEL FOR THIS AND THE RESULTS WERE NONE TOO ENCOURAGING:

OUT OF A TOTAL OF 20 CAREER OPPORTUNITIES PUT IN FRONT OF THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST, ADVERTISING EMERGED AS 4TH FROM THE BOTTOM.
WHEREAS THE TOP CRITERION IN CAREER EVALUATION REVEALED MONEY AS THE NO: 1 FACTOR, LESS THAN 1 IN 8 THOUGHT ADVERTISING WAS WELL PAID, WHILST 3 TIMES AS MANY PEOPLE AS THIS THOUGHT ADVERTISING OFFERED A "HIGHLY STRESSFUL ENVIRONMENT". ONLY 1 IN 12 THOUGHT IT OFFERED "GOOD PERKS". THE 2ND MOST APPROPRIATE DESCRIPTOR OF THE INDUSTRY WAS "LONG AND EXHAUSTING HOURS"; THE 4TH MOST FREQUENTLY CITED DESCRIPTOR WAS "MUCH BACK STABBING". NOT A GREAT START IF WE ARE TO ATTRACT THE BEST IN ASIA.

ARE THERE TOO MANY EXPATS IN ADVERTISING IN ASIA ? YES, BUT LITTLE WONDER WHY WHEN ONE LOOKS AT FINDINGS LIKE THIS. WE DO NEED SOME QUALIFIED SOLDIERS TO GO INTO BATTLE WITH AND THE ASIAN AD INDUSTRY IS FAILING TO ATTRACT QUALITY ASIAN CANDIDATES. THIS IS THE MOST SERIOUS CHALLENGE WE FACE IN BUILDING A WORLD COMPETITIVE AD INDUSTRY.

HOWEVER, WE ARE NOT ONLY FAILING TO ATTRACT TALENT, BUT WE ARE FAILING TO KEEP IT. THE INDUSTRY STAFF TURNOVER IN SINGAPORE AND MALAYSIA IS EXCEPTIONALLY HIGH AT 40 % PER ANNUM; FAR HIGHER THAN OTHER SERVICE SECTORS SUCH AS CONSULTING, WHERE THE FIGURE IS ONLY 20%. AND MANY OF THE BRIGHTER PEOPLE WE DO MANAGE TO ATTRACT, THEN LEAVE THE PROFESSION DUE TO THE LACK OF FINANCIAL REWARD IN THE MIDDLE AND UPPER REACHES COMPARED TO WHAT THEY CAN GET ELSEWHERE.

ANOTHER ENDEMIC PROBLEM LINKED TO THIS TURNOVER, IS THE LACK OF INVESTMENT IN PEOPLE. THIS MANIFESTS ITSELF IN 2 MAIN WAYS: FIRST THE SYSTEMATIC POACHING OF OTHER AGENCY'S STAFF AS A CHEAP AND QUICK FIX ALTERNATIVE TO TRAINING ONE'S OWN PEOPLE. THE SECOND ASPECT OF THIS PRACTICE IS THE OVER-PROMOTION OF PEOPLE WHO REALLY ARE BABES IN THE INDUSTRY, TO TITLES AND ROLES THAT ARE WAY BEYOND THEIR SKILLS.
THIS SHORT TERMISM MEANS THAT THE VERY LIMITED TALENT POOL
DOESN'T GROW; THAT THOSE IN THE SYSTEM ARE OFTEN UNDER-
QUALIFIED FOR THEIR ROLES AND THEREFORE THE SERVICE DELIVERY TO
CLIENTS IS SUBSTANDARD.

IT ALSO MEANS THAT PRICING IS OFTEN USED AS A PREDATORY WEAPON.
TO GET BUSINESS, MANY OF THE MAJOR AGENCIES WILL OFTEN GIVE
AWAY ARTWORK FOR FREE, OR CUT COMMISSION LEVELS TO THEIR
CLIENTS TO GET AN EDGE OVER THEIR COMPETITORS, AS QUALITY IS
UNLIKELY TO OFFER A DEMONSTRABLE DIFFERENTIATOR.

PERHAPS UNSURPRISINGLY, AGENCY PROFITABILITY IN SOUTH EAST
ASIA'S KEY AD MARKETS IS WEAK; AND, ACCORDING TO SOME ESTIMATES,
HAS SHRUNK BY AS MUCH AS 50% OVER THE LAST 5 YEARS.

THE KEY MESSAGE TO ALL IN THE INDUSTRY IS THAT WE MUST BUILD UP
THE TALENT BASE AND WE MUST CLEAN UP OUR ACT AS A RESPECTED
INDUSTRY, OFFERING AN EXCITING AND DEMANDING CAREER TO ASIA'S
BEST AND BRIGHTEST.

WHAT TO DO ?

MORE OF US MUST GET OUT INTO TOP UNIVERSITIES TO PREACH WITH
PASSION TO YOUNG HIGH FLYERS THE EXTRAORDINARILY EXCITING
NATURE OF A CAREER IN THE ADVERTISING INDUSTRY.

MORE OF US MUST INVEST MORE FINANCIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES TO
TRAINING OUR STAFF, SO AS TO INCREASE THE VOLUME AND QUALITY OF
THE TALENT POOL. THIS DOESN'T ONLY MEAN EXPENSIVE, EXTERNAL
TRAINERS, BUT ALSO MORE EMPHASIS ON IN-HOUSE PROFESSIONAL
COMPETENCE TRAINING FOR ENTRANTS AND ALLOWANCE MADE FOR THIS
IN THEIR WORKING DAY.
WE CAN ALL HELP BY OFFERING MORE INTERNSHIPS TO TOP YOUNG UNDERGRADUATES SO AS TO GIVE THEM A FLAVOUR OF OUR EXCITING INDUSTRY AS THEY PROGRESS THROUGH THEIR STUDIES.

WE CAN SPONSOR END OF YEAR AWARDS IN UNIVERSITIES FOR THE BEST AD INDUSTRY CANDIDATE AND SO FORTH.

BUT THE PROBLEM DOESN'T PURELY LIE WITH AGENCIES THOUGH. THERE ARE STILL TOO MANY ADVERTISERS IN ASIA WHO FEEL THE BEST WAY TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THEIR AGENCIES IS TO KEEP ATTACKING AGENCY REVENUES AND TO RELENTLESSLY DEMAND MORE FOR NOTHING. YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE LI KASHING TO CONCLUDE THAT THIS ATTITUDE IS A WASTE OF EVERYONE'S TIME AND MONEY; NEGATIVE ENERGY NEVER CREATES A POSITIVE RESULT.

ONE INCREASINGLY COMMON MANIFESTATION OF THIS IS THE GROWING NUMBER OF MEDIA VEHICLES WHO ARE PREPARED TO DO DEALS DIRECT WITH MARKETEERS, CUTTING OUT AGENCY INCOME COMPETELY ON A GIVEN PROJECT.

THE OTHER DAY, A COMPANY THAT WOULD BE A MAJOR ASIAN BRAND ACROSS THE GLOBE CALLED A PITCH AND GAVE THE PARTICIPATING AGENCIES 10 DAYS TO PREPARE THEIR STRATEGIC, MEDIA AND CREATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS. THERE THEN FOLLOWED A WAIT OF 6 WEEKS BEFORE A DECISION TO POSTPONE THE DECISION WAS ANNOUNCED. THIS IS NOT AN UNUSUAL SCENARIO IN EAST ASIA AND IT IS NO WAY TO BUILD WORLD CLASS BRANDS. IT IS SYMPTOMATIC OF A WIDER ATTITUDE THAT SEES AGENCIES SIMPLY AS SUPPLIERS, WITH LITTLE QUALITY INPUT TO THE MARKETING EQUATION.

THIS IN TURN ADDS, I WOULD SUGGEST, TO THE LACK OF WILLINGNESS OF SOME OF THE BEST OF ASIA'S STUDENTS TO ENTER THE AD INDUSTRY - THE PERCEPTION OF THE AD MAN AS AN ORDER TAKER, NOT A PARTNER, IS NOT THAT ATTRACTIVE.
"DEALS" AND DISCOUNTS ARE STILL TOO OFTEN THE DECIDING FACTOR IN AWARDING AGENCIES' BUSINESS, RATHER THAN CREATIVITY OR STRATEGIC INSIGHT. IF ASIA IS TO CONTINUE TO GROW STRONGLY, I WOULD SUGGEST THAT ADVERTISERS WILL NEED TO TAKE A FAR LONGER TERM VIEW OF ADVERTISING AND BRAND BUILDING AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO BUSINESS SUCCESS. AS COMPETITIVE COST DIFFERENTIALS DIMINISH BETWEEN ASIA AND OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD, BRANDS WILL INCREASINGLY PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN ASIA'S SUCCESS EQUATION AND A GREATER RESPECT WILL NEED TO GROW BETWEEN ADVERTISERS AND AGENCIES IF BRANDS OF GLOBAL QUALITY ARE TO BE BUILT HERE AND EXPORTED TO THE WORLD. CURRENTLY THERE ARE ALL TOO FEW IN ASIA.

IT COMES TO ME AS NO SURPRISE THAT THE WORLD'S MOST SUCCESSFUL FMCG COMPANY (AND THE WORLD'S LARGEST ADVERTISER) - PROCTOR AND GAMBLE - STILL INSISTS ON PAYING ITS AGENCIES THE FULL 15% COMMISSION ON AD SPACE FOR WORK. IT SEES AGENCY PROFITABILITY AS CRITICAL TO THE SUCCESSFUL MANAGEMENT OF ITS BRAND PORTFOLIO. WITHOUT FAIR INCOME AND PROFIT, ASIA'S AD INDUSTRY WILL GO NOWHERE FAST. MORE OF US MUST HAVE THE COURAGE TO REFUSE TO GIVE OUR WORK AWAY TO CLIENTS, SO AS TO GET A DECENT PRICE FOR OUR ENDEAVOURS, THEREBY ENABLING OURSELVES TO INVEST MORE IN MAKING THEIR BUSINESSES WORLD COMPETITIVE.

IT'S PRETTY CLEAR THAT ASIA'S AD INDUSTRY LEADERS NEED TO CLOSE RANKS, TO COLLABORATE MORE PROFESSIONALLY, CREATE MORE STRATEGIC ALLIANCES, WHATEVER, TO FORTIFY THE INDUSTRY'S IDENTITY AND FUTURE HEALTH AGAINST THE GROWING FORCES OF MARAUDING MARKETERS.

WE MUST SHARPEN UP OUR OWN ACT THROUGH TRAINING AND PROFESSIONALISM; WE MUST PRACTICE ON OUR CLIENTS WHAT WE PREACH TO THEM - EFFECTIVE SALESMANSHIP! WE MUST BE MORE
PERSUASIVE IN OUR EFFORTS TO GET CLIENTS TO ADOPT LESS OF A TRADING MENTALITY TOWARDS THE AD INDUSTRY AND BECOME MORE LONG TERM IN OUTLOOK, HELPING THEM FOSTER THE BRANDS THAT THEY WILL NEED TO KEEP THEIR COMPANIES COMPETITIVE GLOBALLY.

WE MUST BE AS SKILLED IN OUR ABILITY TO CONVINCE THEM OF OUR ARGUMENTS AS WERE THE AGENCIES WHO SOLD THEIR CLIENTS SOME OF THE FOLLOWING ADS; IF WE CAN MEET THE DEMAND, WE'LL BE IN GREAT SHAPE.

[PLAY AD REEL]

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN; DESPITE SOME OF THE MINOR CHALLENGES I HAVE ALUDED TO, ADVERTISING REMAINS THE MOST EXCITING AND REWARDING PROFESSION AROUND; WE'VE JUST GOT TO CONVINCE ALOT MORE PEOPLE IN ASIA OF THAT BEFORE WE CAN CONFIDENTLY SAY IN ANSWER TO "ASIAN ADVERTISING: WHERE TO ?"; "UP YOUNG MAN; ONLY UPWARDS !

THANK YOU.