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Wokabaut Marketing: Development Media
Or Commercial Conduit?

by

Amos Owen Thomas
WOKABAUT MARKETING:  
DEVELOPMENT MEDIA OR COMMERCIAL CONDUIT?

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With media coverage of the interior regions of Papua New Guinea virtually non-existent, an advertising agency has adapted the use of 'live' theatre in development communications to marketing purposes. A drama troupe travels from village to village performing multi-act plays into the scripts of which are woven product information. Considered a local marketing success, it is arguably culturally contextualised. This paper describes the mechanics of this medium, and evaluates its socio-cultural impact and ethical implications.

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea for Wokabaut Marketing (WM) was derived from two disparate sources. The term 'wokabaut' is Pidgin for 'walkabout', the aboriginal practice of periodic nomadic wandering and one inspiration for WM came from a popular cultural troupe known as the Raun Raun (Pidgin for 'itinerant') Theatre. Funded by the government and based in the Highlands, this professional troupe tours towns and villages in PNG performing tribal songs, dances and skits (Abrams, 1982). Its special blend of elaborate costumes, slapstick humour and audience involvement makes it a very popular, and once the only, form of street entertainment. It also puts on educational plays on family planning, hygiene and other health-related issues. Research on these plays revealed high recall and retention of the educational message (Scott, 1986).

The other inspiration was an importer-distributor who discovered that its instant noodles product had low recognition and usage in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, as the villagers found the written
instructions difficult, if not incomprehensible. So in the 1985, a substantial percentage of the advertising media budget was diverted to direct marketing. A demonstration team visited town centres and large villages, carrying out product education and demonstrations, such as boiling the product. Sales rose significantly, despite the fact that their product was more expensive than its competitors', and that in that year the coffee harvest, the major source of the villagers' cash income, was only average (Bingham, 1987).

Wokabaut Marketing is the brain-child of the managing director of an advertising agency based in Port Moresby, the capital city of Papua New Guinea. It couples the noodle distributor's direct marketing with Raun Raun's entertainment to produce a new advertising medium for the predominantly rural population of this developing country largely unreached by conventional mass media, broadcast or print.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Geography

Papua New Guinea (PNG) lies between the north of Australia and the equator, due east of Indonesia. To its east is the island-dotted region of Oceania on the Pacific Ocean. It comprises the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, the world's second largest, and a number of much smaller islands. The 'mainland' makes up 85% of its territory.

The geography of PNG explains some of the cultural diversity and limited socio-economic development of its people. The central spine of the 'mainland' is a mountainous region, called the Highlands, with peaks over 4,000 metres. The terrain restricted movement of its peoples, and resulted in the existence today of over 700 distinct language/tribal groups, many still retaining traditional animosity or, at least, mistrust.

The terrain also meant that the Highlands were isolated from the contact with the coast and thus the outside world till the 1930s, when the first Australian explorers ventured in. What was previously thought to be unpopulated, turned out to be the most densely populated region of PNG. In the past 50-60 years its stone-age civilisation has slowly encountered the industrial age.
2.2 Economy

Recent statistics indicate that about 50% of the population 10 years and above, were involved in farming or fishing, and only 10% had a wage job. Highlanders have additional income from cash-cropping of coffee and cocoa. The average per capita income is US$928 (World Economic Data, 1991).

Though the world's largest copper mine in the province of Bougainville is still closed due to a secessionist rebellion, discoveries of gold, silver and oil made in the late 1980s are beginning to come onstream. PNG is expected to be the 6th largest gold-producing nation. According to World Bank estimates, government revenues from minerals will rise to US$751 million by 1993. Agriculture, forestry and fishery resources are largely untapped. Thus, in comparison to other developing countries, PNG has much potential for economic development, if it overcomes a growing breakdown of law-and-order, due in part to the disparity of traditional and modern cultures, the urban 'haves' and rural 'have-nots'.

2.3 Marketing

Professional marketing is embryonic. As in many third-world countries, it is a seller's market, a distribution outpost for Australian companies, occasionally even a dumpling ground for failed products elsewhere. Market information is scarce and zealously guarded by the marketers, though most of this is inference from purchasing behaviour. The transition between a traditional and modern marketing system in the rural regions of PNG could take years, even decades. Meanwhile innovative marketing systems adapted to the socio-cultural environment, such as Wokabaut Marketing, are a basis for success today and foundation for the future.

Most retailing is via the ubiquitous trade stores, a number existing side by side in more populated areas, or a single one per village in more sparsely populated ones. Typical of other developing countries, these stores are family-owned and sell a small range of staple manufactured and packaged goods, such as canned fish, corned beef, rice, crackers, instant coffee, milk powder, detergent, etc. In small towns along highways wholesale stores sell in bulk mostly to trade stores, though occasionally to large family groups.
2.4 Mass media

The mass media of PNG comprises 3 newspapers, 2 national radio networks and 1 commercial TV station. Only one newspaper is a daily, published on weekdays, and is in English. With a circulation of 39,000 and a pass-on rate averaging 5.5, the Post-Courier has a total readership of 215,000, less than 10% of the population. The two other papers are weeklies: The Times of PNG, also in English, with an audited circulation of 10,000 with a pass-on rate of 3-4, and Wantok, in Pidgin, with a circulation of 15,500 with a pass-on rate of 9-11.

Of the two national radio networks, one is Radio Karai - the government station which does not accept advertising. The other is Radio Kalang an FM station, also owned by the government but run as a commercial network. Its potential listenership is estimated at 1.5 million or 83% of the population of major semi-urban areas (First Market Search, 1988). Local radio stations, owned by provincial governments and broadcasting in the major dialects of the area, do not accept advertising.

Television is the most recent entrant to the media scene. EMTV, a subsidiary of Australia's Channel Nine network, is the sole survivor of the two stations that entered PNG in 1987. It has a potential viewership estimated at 300,000 (Taylor, 1990). It is transmitted by microwave to urban centres, mostly provincial capitals around which electricity is available. Statistics are lacking but there is believed to be a high overlap of newspaper and TV audiences. There are plans by the telecommunications authority to extend TV reception to rural areas by 1993 through the use of satellite transmission.

3. MECHANICS OF WOKABAUT MARKETING

3.1 Schedule and reach

Wokabaut Marketing (WM) now has 2 troupes which tour most of the Highlands and part of the northern coast of New Guinea Island, covering 6 provinces in all which account for 57% of the country's population. Each province is visited for a total of 4.5 weeks using 12 separate tours to reinforce learning through repetition.

About 30 locations are visited on each tour lasting 3 weeks. The troupes tend to perform in town centres, high schools, urban squatter settlements, villages and markets, maintaining a ratio of two rural areas to
each semi-urban one. Schools, usually found in or near small towns, are targetted as places predisposed to behaviour change and their students as catalysts of change upon return to their villages. The troupe also performs at major tribal shows in the various towns, which draw thousands of visitors from the neighbouring regions. The total audience in the first year of operations was estimated at 252,000, making it a quasi-mass media. Though it is not quite comparable to the broadcast and print media which achieve approximately that reach each day.

Each troupe has a separate client list of about half-a-dozen clients whose products are non-competitive. The advertising agency has a policy of marketing only products which they claim benefit the villagers and do not adversely affect their lifestyle. A client list included biscuits, toiletries, ethical products, rice, canned corned beef, coffee, chewing gum, automobiles, rubber boots, paints, insect repellents and tools. It declines tobacco and liquor products, both of which are popular in this market and aggressively marketed. As these products are recognised sources of health and social problems, there are some constraints on their advertising in other mass media in the country.

3.2 Production and performance

To each product is devoted a one-act play, which functions as a 'live' commercial. A draft script by the client is then modified and elaborated upon by the troupe in the field under the supervision of a director. A videotaped rehearsal is sent back to the client for approval before the play is performed publicly. Each client may advertise a maximum of 3 products for about US$24,000 per year, payment being in two 6-monthly instalments. This is comparable to the cost of 600 radio spots or 84 non-prime television spots.

As a rule the troupe arrives unannounced by truck at a location such as a village square, drawing a crowd of between 300 to 1,500 onlookers, some curious but many now familiar with what to expect. The troupe proceed to set up a make-shift plywood backdrop on the truck which serves as the stage. Rock music plays from a tape-deck as preparations are made 'back stage' of the truck. The actors are equipped with wireless microphones for easy mobility on stage and audibility by the scattered audience.

A sampling of the plots of the one-act plays includes a reluctant child being taught how to brush his teeth, a husband's bungled attempts to
swat a fly and later to use an aerosol can properly, a mother explaining ways to cook canned-fish, or a picnic of young people using crackers and rice-cakes. All of this done in an indigenous brand of slapstick humour, the Wokabaut troupe has the rapt attention, gleeful laughter and even active participation of an audience that has little access to alternative entertainment.

Often at the end of each act free samples of the product or discount coupons are distributed. Wokabaut coupons redeemable at wholesalers or retailers are one measure of effectiveness of the medium. A chain of stores which participated in such a scheme experienced 95% redemption despite it involving the consumers travelling from their village to the store in town and trying a new product. (Bingham, 1987). The troupe also assists in setting up point-of-sale materials at trade-stores en route. At nightfall, after the performance, the troupe puts on videotaped TV programmes to continue the entertainment and to reinforce the commercial message through advertisements specially edited into the programmes.

4. CRITIQUE OF THE MEDIUM

4.1 Socially-conscious?

Wokabaut Marketing claims to be filling a gap in the geographic and demographic reach of the local mass media. It is worth noting that Indonesia, by contrast, banned TV advertising in 1981 for fear of it causing social unrest in rural areas with low purchasing power (Napis and Roth, 1982). A similar situation exists in the rural highlands and coastal regions, where the purchase of products promoted by WM would represent a disproportionate share of the consumer's cash. It is reasonably well-documented that low-income consumers in third-world countries are persuaded to spend on unnecessary advertised products what is needed for basic necessities (Medawar, 1979).

Average spending by consumers (nationals) in urban areas of Papua New Guinea is estimated by retail marketers at US $30 per household per week. It is a moot point whether advertising of consumer goods should be directed at the rural poor in addition to the urban elite reached by the mass media. There already exists an urban drift of people, with towns and cities facing an estimated growth rate of 10% per year. Ending up unemployed, these people are responsible in part for the breakdown of law-and-order in
urban areas. Marketing techniques and advertising media which reach rural regions, stimulating wants rather than filling real needs, are a contributory factor.

It would be difficult to argue that WM is socially-conscious advertising. Commendable as the advertising agency's policy on tobacco and liquor may be, it is debatable whether any of their products met their own criterion of having no adverse effect on lifestyles. Much of the rural population subsists on sweet potatoes, yams and vegetables, supplementing it only occasionally with meat, canned or fresh. Even for those whose regular purchases might already include canned-fish, imported rice and sugar, the benefits of potato crisps, house-paint and chewing gum are dubious.

4.2 Culturally-sensitive?

Although WM aims to provide a indigenous or at least culturally-sensitive medium of marketing communications, on analysis much of it is of a foreign culture and technology. A drama troupe has no equivalent in traditional PNG culture, the closest to which being story-telling by village elders. The troupe arrives by truck, often in villages barely accessible by the few cars that come their way. They set up a stage backdrop that resembles an urban house of non-indigineous design. They use an amplifier and speakers to play disco music quite foreign to the audience, as an overture to the performance.

The plays have a recurrent latent theme of emulating one's urban 'westernised' counterparts in the use of products. The TV sets left on at night, powered by the troupe's generators, bring into the village, via the programmes and advertising, a depiction of a lifestyle beyond their means. Over 70% of these programmes, taped off the sole local TV station, are of foreign, mostly U.S. origin. In addition the draft script for the troupe's acts are written by the client represented by an expatriate, usually Australian, executive. Then it is sent to the troupe, comprising PNG nationals, who provide some input. But they are supervised by another expatriate (at one time an Italian designer), a fact that the advertising agency stresses in its marketing to clients. (Wiley, 1990)

What Anderson (1984) said of the expatriate domination of advertising in the well-established Southeast Asian marketplace, seems no less true in less-developed PNG. Foreign-made advertising materials are banned in PNG on the grounds that they would be culturally
inappropriate and insensitive. While that may be true to a certain extent, such legislation serves only to ensure that nationals, both urban and rural, are more effectively manipulated for the largely foreign-owned importer-distributors by locally experienced expatriates. In addition, it guarantees the continued oligopoly of predominantly expatriate-owned and managed local advertising agencies.

Most developed countries have legislated or at least lobbied for industry self-regulation on advertising to children. It is well-researched and widely recognised there that young children are not able to discern the selling intent of TV advertising. In a less-developed country, this argument might reasonably be extended to teenage school-children, as well as adults of limited or no formal education or lacking urban socialisation.

4.3 Medium the message?

Most other mass media which offer advertising, provide informational and/or entertainment programming of a non-commercial nature to its audience. Advertising usually occupies a very minor proportion of the time or space in the medium, a proportion often regulated by the government. The medium's audience has the option of whether to pay attention to the advertising inserted. Wokabaut Marketing has succeeded in devising a medium that is unadulterated advertising, even if educational and entertaining in character. The audience does not have the option of selective attention, and may not have a choice in watching the entire performance as it is quite intrusive into the life of the village or rural marketplace.

Most advertising has to purchase time or space in which to convey its message. Once the villagers realise this, WM may be confronted with their 'compensation' demands for the use of space. (Land compensation demands characterise many modern developments in PNG, such as road construction and mining.) For the present, there appears to be no attempt at seeking permission from the village leaders to perform, with surprise being an element of this medium. There is the possible scenario of a competitor adopting similar or identical direct marketing methods. Then the villagers will subject to not just 12 visits from the WM troupe per year, but some multiple of that figure. However, not only would audiences decline in number, but the reception from the villagers could turn to one of hostility.
4. CONCLUSION

Wokabaut Marketing is certainly accelerating the diffusion of consumer goods into the rural regions, to the evident benefit of its sponsors, though possibly to the detriment of the social structures in those parts of PNG. This undermines a culture where reciprocal gift-giving is an essential element of social integration. Arnould (1989) documents a similar development in Niger where previously gifts were the produce of their own lands, but the substitution of consumer goods in symbolic exchange has placed great pressure on the possession of cash in a traditional subsistence economy.

Diffusion of consumer goods to villages through migrant workers returning from urban areas does take place, but it is a slower process. It also does not suffer from the pressure for cash, as the goods are paid for from wages earned in a cash economy. Further, choices were made by consumers who would have had protracted exposure to a competitive marketplace of products in their urban workplace. By advertising only non-competitive products in regions where there is little or no other advertising, WM is able to promote strong brand loyalty by causing the consumers to associate a product category with a particular brand.

Advertising is often seen as a necessary correlate of economic development, helping to increase consumption, and thus production and market growth. However, as Pollay (1986) points out, the economic benefit is questionable if the advertising promotes goods that are foreign-made, as is the case in PNG. Furthermore, the social and cultural consequences, more difficult to research than the economic, may be more insidious. WM, like all advertising, works psychologically to change attitudes, values, cognitions, etc. in promoting consumption.

Far from reflecting the indigenous culture, advertising such as Wokabaut Marketing reinforces certain elements of the culture that favour consumption, such as materialism and individualism. This may account for the slow demise of the strong communalism characteristic of traditional PNG society. There is reason to believe that advertising is a factor in the urban drift in search of a materially better life, and in rising crime rates in the towns. Thus whether markets for manufactured consumer goods should be extended into rural subsistence economies ought to be a matter of national policy, not simply a commercial decision.
REFERENCES


Taylor, John, managing director of EMTV, interviewed in September 1990.
