

THE HARD SELL VS.

THE SOFT SELL

A LOOK AT ADVERTISING IN BRITAIN AND AMERICA

The general received wisdom about advertising in Britain and the US is that it is like rock 'n' roll: the Americans invented it, the British listened, learned to do it themselves and, eventually, ended up doing it better than its creators.

Not surprisingly, this is a view normally put forward by UK admen but it is often supported by their US counterparts,

especially the creatives — those who dream up the ads. The hard sell that characterizes American advertising is rare in Britain and where used is often unsuccessful. Why this has happened is unclear. Certainly the British have never felt at ease with selling.

That is why the middle class developed the concept of the tradesman's entrance which kept "peddlers" out of sight. By contrast there is no shame in selling in the states. One of the greatest American plays of the

20th century, *Death of a Salesman*, is about a seller.

This resistance to selling in Britain has meant agencies have been

forced to come up with more indirect ways of promoting goods. The pill has always required more sweetening in Britain than the US.

A man in a good position to make a judgment is Chris Wauton of West & Co., a Tampa-based agency. Wauton is a planner who has recently arrived in the states from Abbott Mead Vickers, a highly respected

SCIENCE
OR
ART?

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creative shop in London. "They told me when I left London that I was leaving advertising. So, when I came out here to West I thought they'd be light years behind but the truth is that the leading 20 US agencies are driven by the same standards as those in Britain. The problem starts with those that aren't in the top 20. America was opened up by force of will and that has led to a forceful style of advertising which is often ineffective."

"It can be hard here," says Ben West, Wauton's boss. "Americans have become extremely sophisticated consumers of media with the proliferation of cable channels. They are not held captive, they command. If the commercial is too intrusive and persuasive they just edit it out. British ads seem to assume a greater input from the viewer and that's what we try to encourage here. We need subtlety, we need metaphor, we need fewer traders doing their own ads and trying to be Barnum."

The spectacle of a Chevy dealer from Terre Haute, Ind., appearing on screen and shouting about discounts on his pickups while mentioning the names of competitors and giving them free publicity makes British admen laugh in a fastidious sort of way.

Tim Delaney is chairman of Leagas Delaney in London, an agency which handles accounts such as Harrods, Timberland, Porsche and ICL computers. Delaney, despite being married to an American, is not a fan of his wife's country's advertising.

"What has happened in America has been a disaster. The business has become commoditized, overresearched and risk-free. Therefore all the campaigns are the same — the lowest common denominator answer to every advertising problem. Creative work is brought on a commodity basis and the old relationships have just gone out of the window as there will always be someone down the road who'll do it for five percent. Especially all these massive, debt-laden dinosaurs who need bulk to keep going. They are desperate for any business." (In the good old days agencies could get a straight 15 percent of total client spend as a fee for their work.)

Delaney continues, "I blame it directly on the rise of the MBA — they're taught that you put one thing in one end and it comes out at the other. Advertising's not like that, it's intuitive, sometimes unquantifiable. It's persuasion. It's Speaker's Corner and a crowd. It's not a science, it's an art. In the states everything seems to be on a terrible downward spiral. They seem to have lost faith in their own products and in their ability to communicate. I find it incredibly depressing." Delaney's despair is indicative of a

certain toughening of approach in Britain by clients as well.

**SOME CREATIVES
SEE THEMSELVES
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There is a problem here. The MBA with his nose on bottom line deserves some defense. The results of advertising can never be quantified with complete accuracy, especially above-the-line television advertising. The costs of television production spiralled out of control during the 80s and many clients felt they were

being taken for a ride. In a business rife with maxims one of the most famous came from a marketing director who said, "I know only half of the money I spend on advertising is working. The trouble is I don't know which half."

This is one reason why direct mail — an American invention but catching on fast in the UK — is so admired by the harder nosed clients in search of concrete results. One could compare the letter in the post to the sniper's volley, picking off carefully chosen targets. The networked television commercial is more like a massive, costly blunderbuss hitting certain targets but many unwanted ones as well.

Careful selection of targets means that few campaigns are exportable across the Atlantic. The social and cultural fabrics of Britain and the US are extremely complex phenomena. It isn't even possible to say that they are linked by a common language anymore, as any Brit who has asked directions to Miami will tell you. It has become more than just the fact that a "rubber" means one thing in the UK, quite another in the US. Glenn Frank once wrote that "An advertising man is a liaison between the products of business and the mind of a nation. He must know both before he can serve either." No adman, however self-confident, has a brain large enough to cope with both countries.

A rare example of a truly worldwide campaign is that run by British Airways. British Airways has been with Saatchi & Saatchi for 10 years in the UK and has recently moved its business to Saatchi in New York as well. Its recent television commercial, named "Global," was conceived on a grand scale and featured thousands of people shot from the air moving together to form a human face which winked and then turned into a globe. It was a fine piece of work conceived by a pair of *enfants terribles* then at Saatchi in London who went by the name of Fink and Clarke. (Fink once hurled a yucca plant at another operative, yelling "Don't block my creativity!") Some creatives see themselves as true artists in Britain.)

BA currently spends around £12 million a year in the UK on advertising and £10 million in the United States. "Global" was a creative idea that works well across all international boundaries," says Derek Dear, the general manager for marketing and communications at BA. "It

represented qualities of boldness and dynamism but also a feeling of caring — of bringing people together. Every other airline strives to do this but we wanted a unique claim to those virtues. Our tracking studies worldwide show that it is putting this message over everywhere. It certainly stands out in the US where there is a lot of awful airline advertising — no more than wallpaper."

It was fortunate for Dear that the commercial worked so well as it cost no less than £1 million to shoot in Utah. There were a lot of extras to feed. Such "Big Ideas," as they are known in the trade, require both commitment and usually large amounts of money from a client. Big Ideas can turn into Massive Disasters and in recent recessionary years Big Ideas have been thin on the ground because clients have chosen smaller-scale, cheaper approaches. Dear is honest enough to admit that great ads are useless unless they are telling the truth about the product: "Twelve years ago we did some nice advertising through FCB using the slogans 'We'll take more care of you' and 'Fly the flag,' but we didn't deliver in those days."

Few products can cross the Atlantic and be sold by universal communication. There is no better example to illustrate this than ice cream. In Britain until a few years ago ice cream was something that would not even have been allowed to trade under the name in the US because it contained skimmed milk and vegetable oil. (Americans found it utterly unpalatable.) It came in "bricks" from supermarkets and the market was held by the scruff by Unilever which had a market share of nearly 80 percent in some European countries. It is nevertheless a superb, emotive product, oozing with childhood memories and thus a gift for ad agencies to get their teeth into.

Enter Häagen Dazs. "People eat 22 liters of ice cream a year in the states. Marlon Brando is said to eat a pot of Häagen Dazs per day. However, in Britain we are down at 5-6 liters per year. "Our market is far less developed," says Stefano Tiratelli, the account director for Häagen Dazs at its British agency Bartle Bogle Hegarty. Häagen Dazs, which is part of Pillsbury, in turn owned by Grand Metropolitan, decided to dispense with children and make its ice cream a sophisticated, adult product.

Not for the first time, BBH turned to sex to sell the new arrival. Press ads started to appear featuring couples in various states of undress feeding each other the product. In the latest tastefully photographed black and white execution, a woman spoons some strawberry into her man's mouth and he has the top button of his jeans undone. The accompanying copy runs, "At Häagen Dazs we HOLD tight with the principle that ice cream should be thick and creamy. Consequently we keep TIGHT control on the amount of air beaten into the product." The

words "hold" and "tight" are in larger, gold type that stands out.

**"THEY TOLD
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Americans are startled by the presentation of a brand they have held dear since childhood being presented in such a way. Simon Esberger, Häagen Dazs's marketing director of the UK, admits that "they could never run our stuff in the United

States. There the product is a family thing.

It's been around for 30 years there and you cannot just turn it into something else — dispose with all the old brand values." The other thing you could never do in the US is charge what is asked for a tub of Häagen Dazs in the UK, where it is twice as expensive.

Sex and ice cream now seem inextricably linked in British ad agencies' minds. Another premium ice cream product, New England, went one rating certificate further than Häagen Dazs, its agency Howell Henry Chaldicott Lury, shot people eating the product and emitting long, moaning noises which are normally reserved for the bedroom. There was no voice-over, just the sort of sounds you normally hear in cheaper adult movies. This was too much for the television regulatory authorities in Britain, which stepped in and banned several of these executions.

Bartle Bogle Hegarty is also responsible for Levis in the UK and the campaign is one of the most famous and admired of the last 10 years. The first commercial to promote Levi 501s featured clothes coming off (again) as a handsome man took off his jeans in an American launderette and sat in his boxer shorts as they went through the tumble drier. The soundtrack was Marvin Gaye's "I heard It Through the Grapevine."

The ad was a sensation. Within six months of "Launderette" appearing, sales had risen by 800 percent. The ads were shown in clubs, spoofed in British lager ads (the most arcane form of British advertising and incomprehensible to most Americans) and their creator appeared on Desert Island Discs — one of the most famous programs on British radio. BBH Levis commercials have put no fewer than five rereleased songs to number one in the music charts, and record companies queue outside the door of BBH's Soho office offering their wares for the next Levis commercial. BBH sells the ads to 16 European countries and another 25 worldwide.

They would not work in the US, though. "We trade on the mythical view of America and have built a mystique into it," says Stefano Tiratelli, who also wears the Levis account director's hat. "They live it from day to day, although I do wonder sometimes what would happen if they ran our ads there." He is quite right. BBH's vision is highly stylized, beautifully executed pastiche. It is America through a foreign eye.

The commercials have firmly established Levis at the