

Finding your toothpick and top hat in a world of sameness

 By Leigh Andrews

2 Nov 2018

M&C Saatchi Abel was one of the IAB Bookmark Awards' top six-ranked digital agencies presenting at the Digital Agency Showcase at Red & Yellow School. Founding partner Jason Harrison explained why Miley Cyrus is more influential than Stephen Hawking.

“If you aren't entertaining, you aren't in the game.” - Jason Harrison, [@mcsaatchiabel](#) at [#DigitalAgencyShowcase](#).

It's a full house today and we're so satisfied with the turnout. Can't wait to see the results of these insights as they ripple and reach young creatives. [pic.twitter.com/kasTY4m0aB](#)— Red & Yellow School (@RedAndYellowEd) [October 25, 2018](#) ”

Harrison took just 20 minutes to cover three themes, but began with the M&C Saatchi Abel origin story.

On 1 February 2010, it started with a very simple purpose: To create beautifully simple solutions for this increasingly complex world.

Eight months later, in October of that same year, Instagram launched, with zero users. Two months later, they had a million users. In June of 2018, they just passed the billion user mark.

Harrison commented, “It's safe to say the amount of complexity, and fragmentation in the world has become completely exponential, and probably quite paralysing to all of us.



From start-up to 'Agency of the Year' in five years

Mike Abel 8 Dec 2015



The truth is, we are swimming in a sea of data, trying to reach completely fragmented and unengaged audiences, to market products that are losing relevance to the swipe of a thumb.

So for advertising and marketing professionals, where the world has become a very scary place, M&C Saatchi Abel believes you need to embrace two things – first, a **customer-first approach**, because when you put the brand first, it's easy to lose the customer.

“ But when you put the customer first, it's easy to understand the role of your brand. If you understand the role of your brand, it's easy to be useful to the customer. ”

Second is **brutal simplicity of thought**. More than a discipline, it's a test that forces exactitude or annihilates, accelerates failure when a thought is weak and clarifies and strengthens a cause that is strong.

But in this complex digital world, the enemy is complexity, and ultimately, complexity is the hiding place for mediocrity. Harrison offered three ways to break through the mediocrity:

1. Develop ideas for a digital world, not digital ideas

We've become obsessed with digital as a platform and as a process.

We love to make stuff, we love to tick boxes, we love to distribute it – so much so, that often it doesn't even matter what it is, as long as it's a cinemagraph, or a five-second video, or even a three-month content calendar, packed with promotions. If we can fragment our assets into thousands of pieces, we've done our job right.



#BizTrends2018: Rewind from attention spam back to attention span

Leigh Andrews 8 Jan 2018



But isn't that the definition of spam? Isn't our job to be relevant? Harrison says it's odd to take a medium that's about engagement and co-creation and transaction, and instead treat it like an affordable content delivery mechanism – a postbox.

Perhaps we have to shift our view, from a communication channel to a solution that we hardwire into our product or service, into our consumers' lives in a way that creates business advantage.

Harrison also shared a personal example of spam and his current relationship with his telco provider: They're interested in selling him copious amounts of data, and interrupting his Saturday morning to tell him he 'only' has 4.5 GB of data left. It's still quite a transactional relationship.

Harrison compared this to work by the agency group by international telco Optus, which sells data in Australia.

This is a far more emotional relationship, says Harrison – a different idea, built for a digital world, not just a digital idea.

The question we always need to ask is whether we are ticking the wrong boxes. Which boxes do we want to tick for the world of digital?

2. How do we build brands that move at the speed of culture?

This is why Harrison says it's no coincidence that digital has two 'i's. The first is the I-generation: People have become self-obsessed, it's all about their identity and reputation in shining lights. The second 'i' is the physical eyeball. We have the ability to distribute billions of Terrabytes of content, every single day.



Campaigning to #DefeatDayZero

Leigh Andrews 8 Feb 2018



With those two dynamics at play, says Harrison, you've got to think about two fundamental drivers of human nature: **The need to be seen, and the need to be heard.**

For the need to be seen, Harrison turned to Youtube, on the internet – to Miley Cyrus in particular. He showed an image of her on a wrecking ball – clothed, unlike in the video that's now five years old, nearing nearly 1bn views.

Then he showed an image of the late Stephen Hawking. His video in which he spoke of the future of people and civilisation has amassed just 2m views over the same time span.

“ Harrison said this shows that if you want to be seen in this digital age, you have to entertain. If you're not entertaining, you're not in the game. ”

To further prove this, Harrison showed an image of Cara de Levigne at Princess Eugenie's wedding, dressed in a gentleman's Royal Ascot outfit, complete with top hat and tails, but the real 'Wow' factor is the Uber-chic toothpick she held between her fingers.

“She's completely unconventional, she's challenging the norm, she's tapping into popular culture and making a statement. Then Harrison showed what most of the other guests at the wedding wore:

“ So, what's your toothpick?

Jason Harrison, co-founder of [@mcsaatchiabel](#) talking about how to stand out in a world of slick sameness.

How the toothpick & top-hat beats the “fascinator” every time [#DigitalAgencyShowcase](#) 💎💎

[pic.twitter.com/0sWhG5X0u3](#)— Mike Abel (@abelmike) [October 25, 2018](#) ”

Harrison said the point is that brands tend to act like the guests on the left – professional, stylish, staged and expected. You have to stand out in today's world. You have to be the opposite of the obvious, and tap into newsworthy topics and our customers' passion points.

We have to understand what is that little toothpick in our communication. As a marketer today, you have to ask yourself which is your brand now, and which is your brand in the future?

Being seen is one thing, being heard is another.

Harrison mentioned Nando's as an example of a brand that has moved at the speed of culture. In a category that's dominated by massive spenders, and much bigger players, their being heard comes from a very simple role: They want to be the voice of the people.

Harrison says they often get asked for the secret formula, for their Nando's work and in response to a question from the audience on how various agencies work together on a single client, Harrison shared that there's one Whatsapp group for the Nando's work, between M&C Saatchi Abel and VML – imagine the flood of messages!

He said the answer is simple – Nando's really understand their audience. They also understand, with such clarity, the role of their brand. They know what their brand does in the lives of consumers. Last, but certainly not least, is that Nando's as a company, and as a brand, and brand team, gives themselves and their agencies permission to do the work without fear of reprisal.



#Loeries2018: Marketing Leadership and Innovation winner, Doug Place!

Leigh Andrews 17 Aug 2018



South Africans, in general, have unbelievable insights and ideas, we just don't see them through. We sometimes just don't have the guts to go that far. To get into the consumers' world, rather than staying in the comfortable space of ours.

If you do push further and jump into where customers are and where the culture is, you can do work that truly affects people, and they see themselves being heard in your work, such as in the [#rightmyname](#) campaign, which has since gone global:

The work makes you question whether we're really moving fast enough – freeing ourselves and liberating our brands, as expressions of human beings and things. Why can't we be more human with our brands?



#DigitalAgencyShowcase: Being more human, doing digital work

Leigh Andrews 31 Oct 2018



3. How do we unlock the exponential role of digital?

Harrison says the truth is that to put the customer first, we need to understand them. We need to ask ourselves whether we truly do understand them. At M&C Saatchi Abel, they always speak of diversity of thought – getting a very diverse group of people around the table, to understand the consumer in all their facets. To understand their barriers and their burdens and frustrations, and how our digital solutions can make their journey either easier or smarter or more intuitive.

If you can't be seen or heard, you need to do one of two things: You need to either alleviate or elevate in the digital space.



Are you confusing success and achievement?

Jason Harrison, M&C Saatchi Abel 20 Jun 2017



To illustrate this, Harrison showed an example from overseas – Target, similar to our Game or Makro stores, has a pharmacy division. If you're a parent, you know that giving your kids medicine is highly stressful.

Harrison says their solution could be called UX, innovation, or just damn clever.

They realised very few of us read medicine bottles correctly or understand them. In a family that's ever-expanding, people can take the wrong medicine, especially at 3am in the morning, when you run to the medicine cabinet in a panic. And so, they allocated a colour to different members of the family.

But Harrison says the true genius of the idea was in realising they could make navigation of medicine easier, but that another problem lies in getting children to take the medicine. To solve this, they created 19 different medicine flavours released on the [Flavorx.com](https://www.flavorx.com) website, for children to add to their medicine.

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[View this post on Instagram](#)



FlavorX all types of flavors #flavorx

A post shared by [Smokers Club \(@916_trii_meds\)](#) on Jun 20, 2017 at 12:17pm PDT

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proud of – the Street Store pop-up store for the homeless. There's one happening right now for the victims of the Khayelitsha fire.

The Street Store both alleviates and elevates.



Global Street Store Day is launched to celebrate the 700th Street Store

M&C Saatchi Abel 24 Nov 2017



It elevates the dignity of the homeless because many homeless people get handouts that don't actually fit them – that's degrading. It also alleviates uncertainty for the donor in how to do so in a dignified way, more than dumping a bag of clothes at the side of the road, then driving off.

The project started off with five cardboard posters down on Napier Street, which turns into an open-source project, spread around the world in 15 languages. The result is a Street Store happening every second day around the world. It's rent-free, premises-free, denoted only by posters.



The Street Store - supporting the homeless with dignity

12 Feb 2014



Harrison's presentation ended with the question, **are your digital solutions actually useful?** If we're not being useful, solving real-world problems, maybe we need to be doing something else.

Harrison ended with a reminder that the enemy of great digital solutions is complexity, and that complexity is often the hiding place for mediocrity.

To break through the mediocrity...

1. **Develop ideas for a digital world, not digital ideas** – change the language
2. Free ourselves up to **build brands that move at the speed of culture**
3. Unlock the true, exponential potential of digital – to **alleviate and elevate**

“ Harrison ended with a quote fitting for celebrating Nelson Mandela’s centenary: ‘It always seems impossible, until it is done.’ ”

He asked of all of us, to start today.

Red & Yellow chairman Rob Stokes concluded that they will definitely hold another showcase next year. Watch for more of my [Showcase](#) coverage, and follow [Red & Yellow School](#) and [M&C Saatchi Abel](#) on Twitter for the latest updates.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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