



A true story: the birth of a great campaign

By PAUL FELDWICK

This is the sort of story you'll rarely hear. But many marketers and all agency people will recognise it. And while not all advertising campaigns come into being in this way, it is a refreshing change from the logical, tidied up versions of case histories that never happened quite the way they are told or written about. The Rowan Atkinson campaign for Barclaycard described here went on to be vastly successful and a Gold winner in the IPA Effectiveness Awards

SOME 14 years ago, the agency I worked at – it laboured then under the unwieldy name of BMP DDB Needham Worldwide – was invited to pitch for the Barclaycard account.

Barclaycard was one of the two leading credit card brands in the UK. It had a history of famous advertising, which for the previous nine years had featured the television presenter Alan Whicker. One of the questions posed to agencies in the pitch was whether to keep Whicker, who was strongly associated with the brand, or move on to something new.

Barclaycard was facing a challenging business environment. Shifts in interest rates and growing levels of fraud had reduced profitability. Meanwhile, many new credit cards were marketing themselves aggressively with interest-free offers. Despite this competition, Barclaycard management proposed the bold step of adding extra services such as purchase insurance to their product, investing in improved customer service, and – to pay for all this – introducing for the first time an annual fee for card users.

The Barclaycard clients were delightful to work with. They gave us a brief of exemplary detail, and were never too busy to see us during the run-up to the pitch. By the time of the presentation, we felt we understood them and their business very well; and they must have thought so too, as they awarded us the business.

As we got to know the company it became clear that no one there really wanted to retain Whicker, and we agreed. Not only had the campaign run out of steam, but Whicker himself was getting older and his much parodied blazer and moustache were

looking increasingly old-fashioned.

So at the pitch we presented a new creative idea, which everyone found very exciting. We told them they no longer needed a celebrity. Instead, we had a big blockbusting relaunch commercial, something on the scale of British Airways' 'Manhattan'.

The big idea

We would see a great city of skyscrapers from the air. As we zoomed in, we would see people everywhere running up stairs and spilling out on to the rooftops. Music would build excitement. We would cut to the pavements, where bits of something, like ticker-tape, were floating down from the sky. As one fell into a cup of coffee at a café table, people would look up to see what was happening. Eventually we would all see that the people on the tops of the buildings were joyfully cutting up all their old credit cards and throwing them away. As the music swelled to a climax the final words on screen would read – 'Barclaycard. We think it's all the credit cards you'll ever need.'

We began to work together with great enthusiasm. Then we hit a few snags.

The new campaign was pretested by a well-known qualitative research company. Although the results were – to put it mildly – disappointing, the researchers were keen to show the agency that they could be constructive. They assured us and the client that with a few tweaks, the idea could be made to work.

The idea begins to unravel

Meanwhile the first production estimates were coming in. No one had ever pretended that this film would be cheap. But the costs that were now becoming apparent, involving helicopters and casts of thousands, were

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threatening to use up most of the media budget.

At the same time the TV companies' statutory copy clearance people were looking at the campaign. We could not, they told us, show competitors' cards being cut up. And throwing things off buildings raised a number of problems: danger to others, encouraging litter, etc.

So the original idea was modified and scaled down. Out went the helicopter shots, and we would see only crowds of people running up stairs. A voiceover explained more product benefits. We took out the shot of the card falling into the coffee.

The second round of research was even less encouraging than the first. Still, the research company insisted that it was just a matter of getting the detail right – while of course we at the agency were equally keen to save our great, pitch-winning idea.

And the copy clearance people were still unsatisfied.

When we came to the third test animatic, the crowds of people had been reduced to one man in a macintosh. He was standing on a fire escape cutting up an anonymous credit card and putting the pieces in a paper bag. At this stage, the initial lukewarm response in the groups turned to total mystification.

Back to square one

It was now at last reluctantly agreed that the original idea was dead. A new campaign was proposed. This would dramatise the benefits of the new card by showing what could go wrong if you didn't have one. For instance, to demonstrate that Barclaycard now offered medical assistance we had a commercial that opened on a totally deserted beach. We heard gloomy music as a sinister wind stirred magazines on empty sunloungers. A doom-laden voice announced 'Every year, 40,000 people have to cut short their holidays due to illness ...'.

It was now nearly six months since our appointment. Our clients had been endlessly patient and understanding, but even they were now beginning to drop hints that the relaunch date was very close, the airtime was booked, and they would really appreciate



ate being able to approve something soon.

Research was booked in a hurry. The research company that had worked with us so far was unable to meet the tight deadline, so I ended up doing the groups myself.

At the last minute someone suggested that it might be a good idea to hedge our bets – just in case the new idea wasn't right. One of the creative teams, we heard, had an idea involving Rowan Atkinson.

Hurriedly the Rowan Atkinson animatics were prepared. These bore no relation whatever to the final campaign. The first one began with a joke competition to find the replacement for Alan Whicker. A variety of

Rowan Atkinson,
3 March 2005.
Atkinson appeared
as Richard Latham
in Barclaycard's
advertising from
1992 to 1997.

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unlikely people were doing very poor Whicker impersonations, culminating in Atkinson tearing off his false moustache and deciding to be himself. In the following scripts we saw Atkinson in a Whickerish reporter role, but getting it all wrong.

The empty beach campaign was among the most disliked ideas I have ever shown to consumers. Miserable, gloomy, doom-laden, and also extremely boring, were some of the kinder things said about it. I was glad I had an alternative in my art bag.

Sadly, the Atkinson campaign didn't fare much better. The Whicker impersonation was embarrassingly unfunny. The scenes that followed met with a fairly stony response too.

Stumbling upon success

There was nothing for it at the debrief but to tell the truth. I explained that the first idea was a total dog. I admitted that the Atkinson scripts weren't right. There was only one shred of hope, which I had to make the most of. When I asked the groups rather desperately at the end what they thought we should do, everyone agreed that 'you should use Rowan Atkinson, because he's funny whatever he does'.

It is enormously to the credit of our clients at Barclaycard that they accepted this recommendation, such as it was, with equanimity. We began negotiations with Rowan Atkinson. Luckily for all of us he was open to the idea of doing TV commercials.

However, he didn't want to appear as himself. In fact, he had a very good idea of who he wanted to appear as – a new character he was already thinking about called Richard Latham, a sort of bumbling secret agent –

Blackadder meets James Bond.

Far from causing us a problem, the Latham character offered a providential answer to the one remaining detail of the campaign: the lack of any actual scripts or ideas.

Our creative teams were briefed to write scripts about Latham. Rowan Atkinson and his producer John Lloyd were closely involved at all stages, often rewriting the scripts themselves during the actual shoot. They were of course complete professionals, and – perhaps because they had no need to prove their 'creativity' – always understood that they were creating advertising, not pure entertainment.

The airdate was now so close that there was no time for another round of animatic testing. We and Barclaycard had to trust Atkinson, Lloyd and our own judgement, and so three films were shot and put on air. At the same time, the finished films were Link-tested by Millward Brown – not, we agreed, as a go/no-go decision, but as the first stage of our diagnostic learning about the ads. This approach was continued throughout the campaign, and the findings were used to upweight or downweight different treatments and to carry out minor improvements. None of the commercials was ever researched as an animatic.

The rest is published history, and the campaign's success in defending the brand, transforming its image and its profitability, is described in *Advertising Works 9* – the paper won a Gold in 1996.

Lessons to be learned

I've told this story as honestly and accurately as I can from my own memories. Others who were involved may be able to correct some details, but I am confident that it's fairly close to the actual events.

But the story might have turned out differently in so many ways. Our clients might have approved the original idea without research and spent millions on something that probably wouldn't have worked. Or they might very easily have rejected our slightly vague proposal to 'use Rowan Atkinson because he's funny' and required a new set of scripts (quite possibly a new agency too). They might have insisted on agreeing every

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word of the Latham scripts by committee and subjecting them to animatic testing – which might have done little harm but by my guess would probably have hamstrung the apparently effortless craft that Rowan Atkinson and John Lloyd were allowed to bring to the results. And so on.

The campaign was allowed to emerge as it eventually did because everyone involved was prepared to trust one another, and to work together as a team. Anyone who had used their power to assert control over the process would quite likely have killed it – whether it was the client insisting on approving every word of the scripts, or a creative director refusing to work within Atkinson's idea, or a planner or researcher demanding some impossible standard of 'proof' before making any decisions.

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The IPA awards spotlight the kind of cam-

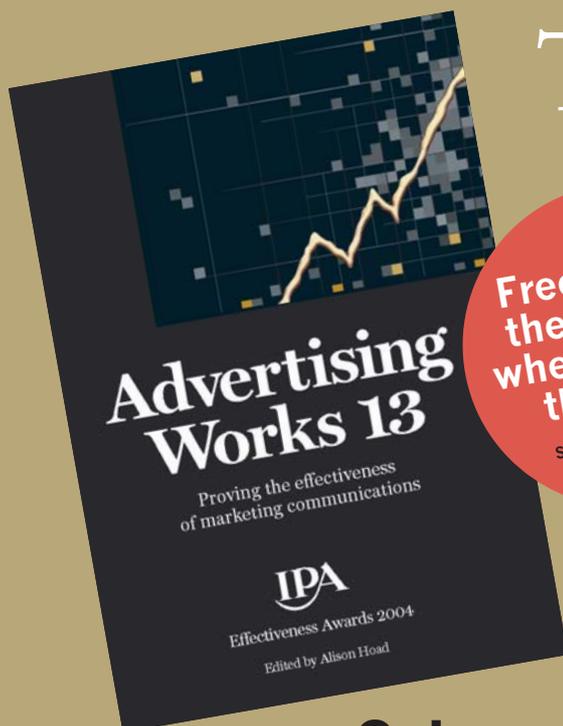
paigns that actually work in the marketplace – not just those that fit some narrow theory of how advertising ought to work. The winning papers show us what success really looks like. They will tell you a great deal about strategic thinking and learning from research. They will tell you about business results, about consumer responses, about the logic and rigour of proof. But I suspect they do not usually reflect the amount of muddle, error, guesswork and pure luck that actually led to each of these successful campaigns.

So perhaps when reading these cases as a guide to best practice, we should remind ourselves that in the real world of business there are no additional prizes for elegance, logic or neatness – only for ending up with something that works. ☺

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Adapted from the IPA's Advertising Works and How: Winning Communication Strategies for Business. Published by WARC 2005 www.warc.com/awb

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