

What I learnt from John Webster.

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I worked with John Webster mostly during the seventies and eighties, when he was at the height of his powers. He was at that time the most awarded creative in the world – the lions and arrows themselves crowding unceremoniously for space on the shelves in his modest office, gathering dust. I was, to start with at least, the most junior of account planners. Yet he treated me, as he treated all of us, with unfailing respect – more than that, he always seemed genuinely interested in what we had to say, whether we were reporting back from research or offering our own interpretations and opinions.

And I think that leads me to the first thing I learnt from working with John – that the best work emerges from keeping the conversation open, rather than closing it down. John's starting point would always come out of a dialogue with the account team, rather than the written brief (in the early days, we didn't even have a creative briefing form at BMP). And from that point on, John was always curious, always experimenting – the clay, so to speak, was always still wet. When stuck, he

would go and talk to whoever happened to be around (after hours, that was usually the security guard) and that conversation would give him the opening he needed to go on. Talking about the work was for John not a threat, but always an opportunity. After all, he didn't have to agree with what anyone else said. But as he didn't feel the need to be defensive, ideas were allowed to emerge from the conversation which John would not have arrived at in isolation. He was especially interested in research, because I believe his motivation was always to create work that would get talked about excitedly in the pub or the playground, more than it was to win yet another award (those kept coming anyway). If real people didn't enjoy what he'd written, or it rubbed them up the wrong way, he'd try and find a way to recast the ad so that it worked: so that the Honey Monster (for Sugar Puffs) became large and cuddly rather than small and annoying, or Arkwright (in the John Smith's campaign) was transformed from a lonely wifebeating alcoholic into a wily old philosopher. So it was always a rewarding experience to sit in John's office, as he asked questions like 'Can you tell me a bit more about what you mean?' or 'How would it be if I tried it like this?'. And then listened in deep thought as you answered.

The other big thing I learnt from John is the importance of craft. There's a universal fashion now to talk about the importance of 'creative ideas'. If that means that good campaigns always have some kind of internal logic and coherence to them (even if that's hard to put into words), I'll maybe agree. But very often it sounds as if having the 'idea' is the only difficult, 'creative' bit, and the rest is mere decoration. People respond to ads, however, not to abstract ideas: ads that exist in the full details of how they look, how they sound, the timing of the edit, the camera angles, the soundtrack, the lighting, every nuance of sets and propping and casting...and so on. If there's such a thing as a 'creative idea' (which I doubt, though I don't have room here to get too philosophical), we only know about it because of the execution that embodies it. And John, it seems to me, never thought about ideas as separate from the details of execution. Unusually for an art director, he could write beautiful, hilarious, poetic copy; even more unusually, he could draw really rather well. From the outset, he would imagine a commercial as Mozart imagined a new symphony, in full detail, and

would present it as a drawn storyboard in which each shot was already composed in his imagination, complete with dialogue and music. Often, of course, much of this would change as the ad developed – either in response to research, or talking about it, or just because John himself woke up one morning with a better idea. But remarkably often, those very early storyboards showed an uncanny resemblance to the finished film. John’s work was what it was because he approached it as Picasso would begin a painting – not as an abstract thought that he was trying to illustrate, but as a tangible creation that existed in the real world and in real time. The reason John’s work still looks so fresh today, the reason we still admire so much of what he did, is not that he had better ‘ideas’ than anyone else. It’s because he made better ads.

