

MAKING YOUR MARQUE



Agencies are in the business of creating enduring brands for clients, but often struggle when it comes to branding their own backyard. But how vital is a strong agency “brand” to success? asks **Celia Johnson**

THE TEAM AT WHYBINTBWA

In 2007, Minneapolis-based creative agency Campbell-Mithun shocked the industry when, faced with a branding dilemma of its own, it appointed another ad agency to help.

At the time, management of the Interpublic-owned agency, which opened in the 1930s, feared that it didn't stand for anything in the marketplace, that it was pigeon-holed as a "solid account service shop" offering "middling creative" and that staff were buying into this perception as well.

So it hired Cue, also based in Minneapolis, to essentially breathe new life into the agency and create for it a distinctive identity. CEO Jack Rooney was quoted in *Ad Age* as saying an agency rebrand is "a bit like heart surgery. You can't operate on yourself." Many, however, questioned this strategy, arguing an agency that feels it cannot create a powerful brand for itself has little hope of achieving results for its clients.

Irrespective of what may be the best approach, the notion of an agency working on its own brand is somewhat of an oxymoron. After all, agencies are in the business of creating strong brands for their clients. Yet it is becoming increasingly important for brands to be on the front foot in developing brands for themselves. As the marketplace becomes more and more competitive, having a clear point of difference is vital to winning new business, retaining existing clients and attracting the best talent.

"In new business, having a strong brand is essential to get you onto a pitch list," remarks Andy Pontin, CEO of Clemenger BBDO Sydney.

"After all, most clients know the names of only three agencies – their current one, their last one, and maybe one other that people are talking about."

Paul Bradbury, CEO of creative agency Whybin\TBWA\Tequila, agrees that an agency's reputation is key to getting noticed.

"Essentially your agency brand is your reputation, or people's perception of what your agency would be like to work with," he explains.

"Both reputation and perception are critical for winning new business. Those agencies with positive top-of-mind reputation and perception will always get on an unfair number of pitch lists. That's half the battle in new business.

"Having a positive reputation always helps to keep existing business. Clients like to work with the best agencies and like to be able to tell their client peers they work with a hot agency."

Agency reputation is not only vital to prevent "anonymity" and "indifference", notes Richard Curtis, MD of brand consultancy Interbrand Sydney, but to instill confidence in prospective clients.

"We work in an industry that trades upon our ideas, one of the world's most fragile currencies," he explains. "So it's all the more important for an agency's brand to give companies confidence in the promise of their ideas, well before they've had the chance to experience the reality of those ideas delivered."

For Darren Woolley, founder and managing director of marketing management consultancy TrinityP3, marketers, like consumers, choose agencies based on their brand, but brand becomes less important in retaining business.

"Existing clients come to know and value the agency on the culture and relationship forged by the day-to-day interactions," he says.

"But clients who do not know the agency are attracted to strong and desirable brands, after all

they are consumers too. It is therefore increasingly essential for agencies to distinguish themselves in an increasingly commodity category."

Kat Thomas, managing director of PR agency One Green Bean, adds it is not only important for agencies to define themselves to attract clients, but the best talent.

"At an operational level, you want to ensure you not only attract the best staff, but also the right staff," she explains.

"If you're not clear about who you are, what you do and the principles you advocate in your specialist area, you will never attract the best employees. Ambitious, successful, career-focused people want the 'right' names on their resume and your agency brand defines your attractiveness."

Sangeeta Leach, co-owner of consultancy The Leach Partnership, agrees: "Strong agency brands do attract and retain better talent – Droga 5, Anomaly [from New York/London] and The Monkeys aren't suffering from the supposed talent drought affecting other agencies."

Clemenger's Pontin goes as far as saying that brand is ultimately more important internally, than externally.

"If an agency's vision is clearly articulated to agency staff, and is lived up to over time, then your agency brand begins to get definition," he says.

"The real power of agency brand is internal. If everyone knows which way the ship is sailing, and what the destination is, then you're much more likely to get there."

Simone Drewry, managing director of PR agency Mango, agrees that a clearly defined brand is the first step to success.

"An agency with a clearly defined brand is in a strong position for the other winning ingredients to fall into place – the kind of clients you want to work with, the type of work you want to produce, and the talent to do it."

Creating a brand

As agencies would know all too well, brands are difficult to define and pin down as their value is often attributed to the intangible.

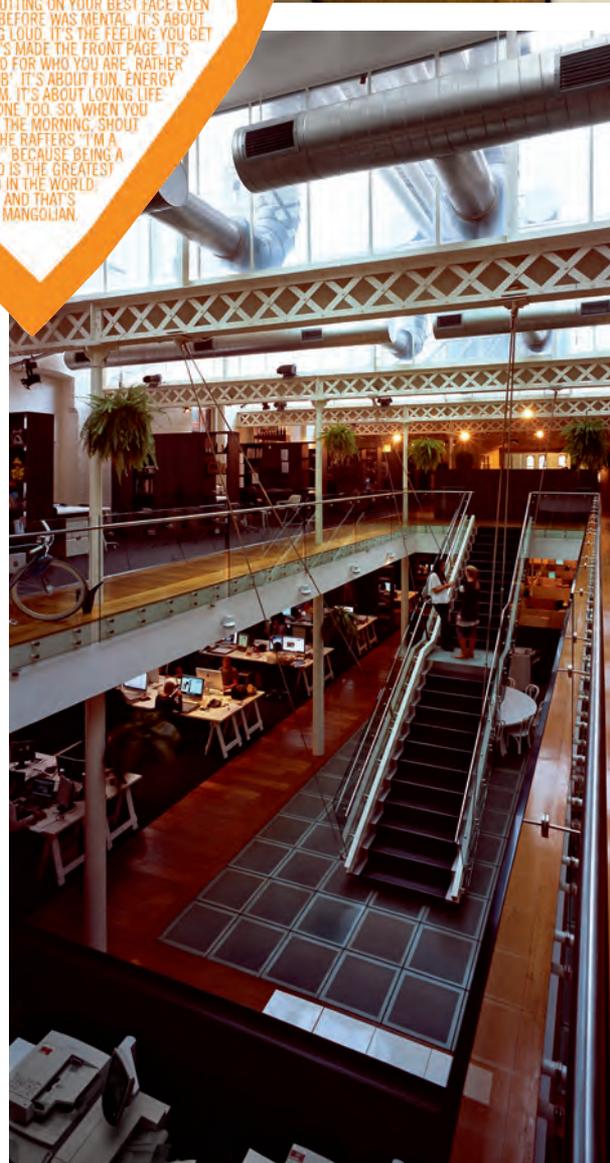
As Evelina Lye, head of national marketing at Mindshare, notes: "Everyone, including clients, want to be hanging out with the cool kid in town, if you're the 'cool' agency in town the price of that brand is invaluable."

So what gives an agency its "cool factor" and can an agency's staff actually create this themselves?

There are a multitude of things that contribute to an agency's brand, namely the people who work there (the talent), the work and its success, awards portfolio, culture, historic reputation and personalities, global network and agency vision.

It is therefore possible, to a large extent, to actively create an agency brand. As Woolley claims, "Of course you can and you should create your own brand, otherwise the brand is defined by default for you, either based on the power of personality – think Harold Mitchell or Sean Cummins – or the clients you have – think Oddfellows and Toyota or TAC."

Woolley adds that, similar to the work agencies do for their clients, creating a brand is all about brand planning.





AGENCIES CAN EXPRESS THEIR PERSONALITIES THROUGH THEIR LOCATION, MISSION STATEMENT AND BRANDING. (TOP) CLEMENGER SYDNEY'S RECEPTION DESK, (LEFT) MANGO'S DEFINITION OF MANGOLIAN, AND (BELOW) GPY&R MELBOURNE'S LIGHT-FILLED OFFICE

"IN NEW BUSINESS, HAVING A STRONG BRAND IS ESSENTIAL TO GET YOU ONTO A PITCH LIST."
ANDY PONTIN, CEO, CLEMENGER BBDO

relentless focus on the creative work."

Whybin's Bradbury agrees that an agency can create its own brand, adding: "Hire smart, nice people. Treat people with respect. Work hard to create great work, and the rest will take care of itself... You earn a reputation. There's nothing worse than agency heads that promise the world in trade press, but fail to deliver. I respect agencies that walk the talk and then are happy to tell people about it. Not the other way round."

The fact agency brands, or any brand for that matter, are the culmination of a series of values attributed to them over time is of interest. They are not created overnight. They are not the result of a flurry of press releases or self-promotion and they are not tied to one person or one campaign.

Ultimately an agency's reputation, or brand, will be based on the consistency and success of the work it produces. As Colin Wilson-Brown, owner of consultancy The Clinic, notes: "A strong agency brand is created by success, it doesn't create success."

Andrew Giles, public relations manager for Canon Consumer Imaging, who ran the company's PR pitch last year, agrees, saying: "Ultimately the best brand-building activity is to have a portfolio of great client work. Brand building and client service are not mutually exclusive and satisfied clients are often the gateway to new business acquisition."

And yet Wilson-Brown does not discount the value of good PR in building an agency's reputation.

"It is important that the industry knows about the agency's successes," he says. "This is best achieved through winning important awards – Clemenger Melbourne's success in the Effies is a good example – and by ensuring that people see the work and hear about new business wins."

Steve Doherty, national director at George Patterson Y&R Melbourne, agrees and insists his agency needs to focus more on publicity this year, as many remain unaware of its capabilities.

"Over the past two years we've spent a huge amount of time and effort building a strong and deep digital operation. But many prospects still think we just do big TV ideas, so there's a bit of a perception lag in the marketplace," he says.

Drewry from Mango adds that PR alone won't create a brand, but rather it is a by-product of a strong brand built on a great company culture, talent and work.

"Even the smartest PR person cannot create news and buzz out of thin air," she muses. "There has to be real stuff happening in the agency and genuine good news. PR helps create momentum, but it isn't the creator of a brand."

Getting it right

While many agencies claim to have strong brands, there are a few that stand out from the crowd. The likes of Clemenger BBDO, BMF and Host are cited by many as having distinctive brands which have been built over time through a number of successful campaigns, while independents Droga5 and newly rebranded The Monkeys are said to be "the most talked about".

Colin Wilson-Brown observes that the "hottest creative brands in Australia are The Monkeys and Droga5. Both have the advantage of being relatively new and talked about."

While Woolley adds: "Droga5, Monkeys and Clemenger BBDO have strong, distinctive brands ▶

"Work out what it is you stand for or offer or are passionate about," he continues. "It is not what makes you different, but what makes you distinctive."

"There is a section in the Jim Collins book *Built to Last* where they challenge business owners that if someone offered a significant sum of money to buy their business, only to shut it down the next day, what would suddenly be missing from the business landscape? This is a great exercise to work out what makes you distinctive.

"From this, develop a complete communications strategy to identify all of the ways you can communicate that to the audience, both internally and externally. It is not just running a press release in the trade press. It is about a systematic approach to building a long term, distinctive and desirable brand for your audience."

However according to some experts, many agencies are spending far too much time in unproductive workshops coming up with taglines masquerading as "brands".

"Agency brands are built from the ground up – not tagline down," says Leach.

"Most agencies don't spend enough time managing their own brand and use the excuse that they have to focus on their clients... By the time an agency has 25 or more people there should be at least one full-time position focused on the agency's brand and culture."

For Clemenger's Pontin, the most important thing is that agencies "walk to talk".

"There's no-one more cynical than advertising people, so a mission statement on a wall and a few bon-mots will get you laughed out the door," he claims. "It's much simpler – and therefore harder – than that. You have to be clear about what type of agency you want to be, what sort of values and behaviours you expect. And then you've got to walk the talk every day, in every meeting, in every decision.

"So it takes time. The Clemenger brand is so strong because it has been built over time with a

Q AGENCY TAGLINES

- Clemenger BBDO**
The work. The work. The work
- George Patterson Y&R**
Ruthlessly relevant
- Interbrand**
Creating and managing brand value
- MediaCom**
People first, better results
- Ogilvy**
Great work that works
- Carat**
Redefining media
- Droga5**
Creatively lead. Strategically driven.
Technology friendly. Humanity obsessed
- Clemenger Harvie**
Thinking that connects
- McCann**
Truth well told
- OMD**
Insight. Ideas. Results
- Host**
Ambitious ideas for adventurous clients
- The Works**
Creatives on the forefront

Q OUR BRAND IS...

Agency heads articulate their point of difference:

Clemenger BBDO

Andy Pontin, CEO (Sydney): "Relentlessly relevant. The Clemenger brand is bigger than any one individual, we have an ownership scheme that means that over a third of all staff are shareholders, and we plan for long-term success not short-term gain."

M&C Saatchi

David Whittle, managing director: "Brutally simple."

The Campaign Palace

Mark Mackay, chairman: "Evolving and coming to terms with the new world order. A strong creative pedigree, re-calibrating for the future."

George Patterson Y&R

Steve Doherty, national director, GPY&R Melbourne: "Creative, iconic, modern and progressive."

One Green Bean

Kat Thomas, managing director: "I'd like to think we have a reputation for creating and executing big campaign ideas, for strong social media capabilities, and for solid integration with a raft of agency partners."

Mindshare

Evelina Lye, head of national marketing: "As far as our brand is concerned we're simply obsessed with being original thinkers, and this plays to being entrepreneurial, always challenging and looking for better ways. We have a clear agenda of retaining, attracting and developing talent too. Great people = great work = great clients, and becomes a virtuous circle."

MediaCom

Toby Jenner, CEO: "The MediaCom brand is all about living and delivering in the real world, we are the real world agency. This is lived on multiple layers; delivering our clients business results out in the real world not just media metrics, understanding cultural shifts out in the real world through uniquely developed tools and systems. We're all about keeping things simple, ground in English not media jargon."

Whybin\TBWA\Tequila

Paul Bradbury, CEO: "The Whybin\TBWA brand is bold, entrepreneurial and disruptive. I think our brand has woken up in recent years from a short siesta. We back ourselves, and the confidence running through the veins of the company is a great thing."



OGILVY'S CHIEF EXECUTIVE TOM MOULTON SAYS HIS AGENCY'S BRANDING STILL FOLLOWS THE PHILOSOPHY OF FOUNDER DAVID OGILVY

based on what they do and how they do it. With media agencies... Mitchell & Partners has a brand built on personality while Ikon has a brand built around culture."

Despite all being poles apart in their market propositions, all these agencies have one thing in common – a clear point of difference. For The Monkeys, a focus on creating innovative content across multiple platforms including TV shows, short films, webisodes, music videos and even a sound to remind people to wear sun protection, has seen them thrust into the limelight. Add to this the agency's impressive awards tally, including picking up *B&T's* Agency of the Year for the second year running, and significant growth in staff, and it's little wonder its being talked about.

Likewise, Droga5, has built a solid reputation for its innovative, "disruptive" ideas. However, in Australia, some are critical of the fact the agency has seemingly benefitted from the good name and charisma of its US counterpart, while failing to produce the kind of industry-changing work the agency is renowned for in other markets.

What's in a name?

Apparently everything, when it comes to an agency's reputation. While they may not be the hottest shops around now, the likes of The Campaign Palace and Saatchi & Saatchi are examples of agencies which continue to benefit from the good name of their predecessors.

"The Campaign Palace had a lot of good people working there when the agency was hot in the '80s and '90s," explains Tom Moulton, executive chairman of Ogilvy Australia.

"When talent would leave and go to other agencies people would say 'The Palace is going to go under' but they never did because they're The Campaign Palace. The weird thing was, everyone at the agency could have left but it wouldn't have mattered because there was still The Campaign Palace. And I think that's evidence of a brand showing its strength."

He continues: "Brand is about personality and absolute consistency. When people act in erratic ways you don't trust them and the same is true of organisations".

He cites his own agency as having a strong brand, one that is very much tied to the philosophies and personalities of founder David Ogilvy and former partner John (Singo) Singleton.

"I was at a pitch for a retail client the other day and on the front of our document we just had 'We sell or else' – David Ogilvy. We've been saying that since 1947 and the client was very impressed and said 'Oh yes, we've heard about that...' There's no denying the David Ogilvy brand is a very strong one."

But is an individual's brand enough to rest an entire agency on? And, more importantly, should that be the case? Clemenger's Pontin says it's risky.

"Go back 15 years and Singleton's was one of the agencies dominating the industry... But by being so reliant on one individual, it lost its way once it lost Singleton."

A common pitfall

While it is easy to point to a number of really strong agency brands in Australia at present, there are others failing to make their mark. Leach from The Leach Partnership says many multi-national agencies are at risk of diluting their brand because they're trying to be "all things to all people."

"They have to try in order to grow but long term they are weakening any differentiation they may have enjoyed," she says.

Differentiation is clearly something Minneapolis-based Campbell-Mithun continues to struggle with. Despite making every effort to stand out, its website reads: "Strategic planning. Creative. Digital strategy and creative development. Design. Media planning and buying. All are disciplines we specialise in."

And the list goes on: "Direct response, traditional or digital. Promotion marketing. Point of sale. Package design. Youth and family marketing. We can leverage all, some, or merely one of our services for your brand." Enough said. ■