

THE LAST WORD / DIE LAASTE WOORD

PRAKTYK EN UNIVERSITEIT

Nina Overton-de Klerk

Dit is 'n eienaardige ervaring om die eer vir *Die Laaste Woord* te hê. Ek was vir jare in die akademie en natuurlik baie nou betrokke by *Communicare* as redakteur, en skielik moet ek nou van "anderkant" af, en vanuit 'n ander stoel insigte weergee wat vreemd op my eie ore sou val, was dit 'n paar jaar gelede. Dit is egter insigte wat ek in lojaliteit wil teruggee aan 'n geliefde instelling wat grootliks vir my vorming verantwoordelik was, al sou my slotopmerkings moontlik ontstel.

Ek wil begin deur te sê dat die praktyk 'n aangename verrassing is. Ja, die pas is vinnig, die mededinging is kwaai, en tyd om lank oor besluite te besin en "na te vors", is daar nie. Jy neem 'n besluit en leef daarmee - goed of sleg. Resultate wys gou. Byna week na week sien mens die gevolge van 'n besluit wat geneem is. Soms skep dit verleentheid maar as dit suksesvol is, is die vervulling groot. In kort, die adrenalien wat die privaatsektor bring, is byna verslawend vir diegene wat van adrenalien hou.

Ek wil byvoeg dat die privaatsektor glad nie so bedreigend is soos wat ons akademici soms half minderwaardig begin glo het nie. Spesifiek in die advertensiebedryf en in die bestuur daarvan, word 'n besondere hoë waarde geheg aan holistiese, strategiese denke (meer daarvan later), wetenskaplike vorming en rytheid van denke. Die multi-dissiplinêre rond-en-bontspring wat die universiteit en spesifiek die geestwetenskappe bied, is onmisbaar.



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Tweedens verdien die kommunikasiewetenskappe veral 'n pluimpie. 'n Mens besef nie hoe goed al die basiese kennis wat mens oor jare opgebou en gedoseer het, te pas kom nie. Voorbeelde is die vermoë om te luister, die vermoë om te onderhandel en by uitstek die vermoë tot deelnemende bestuur en die skep van opwaartse kommunikasiekanale. ('n Mens verbaas jou oor die sterk hiërargiese lynfunksie, die "ik-heb-gezecht en *finish-en-klaar*"-benadering wat mens nog plek-plek in die privaatsektor aantref!) Ten spyte van die universiteit se burokratiese karakter, vind mens origins tog onder dosente 'n kultuur van gelykheid en van oop en deelnemende gesprek. Ja, daar is voorsitters en dekane, maar hulle is nie "base" soos mens in die privaatsektor kry nie. En die "klase" in die bedryf is dikwels verbaas as hulle 'n geleentheid kry om op vergaderings te praat, wat nou van help besluite neem!

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Moving on to the most critical issues facing the advertising industry today which also impacts on university education, I can very briefly mention the following:

Creativity

The growth in media alternatives and the explosion of products and competitors have increased the noise level in which advertising operations. Research by *Impact Information* in South Africa supports this by showing that awareness levels of advertising messages on television has dropped from 28% in 1985 to 14% in 1992, and continuing to drop up to 1994. In addition, the consumer is overwhelmed by choices, which is not made easier by increasing product parity. It is becoming impossible for marketers to maintain 'n proprietary edge for long; competitors with swift product development systems now cut the ground from under almost any leader's "proprietary" position in a matter of months.

The result is that products and commercials become the same, look the same. Marketing for products such as soaps, shampoos, margarines, petrol and the house brands has become almost generic.

Implication? The advertiser of today simply needs to break through the clutter and to reach his audiences by acquiring new levels of creativity. In South Africa being creative and at the same time effective, poses a tremendous challenge. It is true that South African advertisements compare with the best in the world, judging by the number of international awards we have won. Critics, however, warn that South Africa models itself too much on Western countries and has not yet succeeded in truly reconciling Western and African value systems in our creative strategies. Experts believe that the problem begins within the formal, Western-oriented education system, which suppresses the inherent

creativity Black children have. The result is that we tend to reward creativity which appeals to the upper market, Western-oriented audiences, and not necessarily to the much larger rainbow market of South Africa.

Secondly, it is fine to reward creativity as such (e.g. through the prestigious Loerie Awards). But one must make sure that creative ads also work in the marketplace, which is, after all, the real reason for advertising. To this end the AAA has recently launched the APEX awards, which rewards performance excellence in the marketplace. These awards will result in interesting case studies - also for university textbooks - because entries will have to isolate advertising's effectiveness as opposed to other marketing techniques.

Increasing pressure to "deliver"

Today's marketers are becoming increasingly critical of the advertising agencies. Advertising is expensive, and the bean counters are looking at short-term marketing tricks rather than long-term brand investment (which is a mistake, of course).

Be it as it may, the agency commission system is questioned more and more, marketers fear that agencies exploit them and are just many grabbing yuppies (or ageing yuppies) earning exorbitant salaries and driving around with fancy cars chatting away on their VO-DACOMS (or oops MTN's!).

Advertising, of course, has always been a profession which is an easy target for cheap shots. Much of the criticism against it is ill-founded due to lack of knowledge and understanding. Agency people are extremely intelligent, lateral thinkers who by and large give marketers excellent value for their money. They can be also very altruistic; many campaigns have been conducted free of charge for various wor-

thy causes such as fighting cancer and aids and educational purposes.

However, it has become clear that advertising in itself must be advertised, not only to rectify negative perceptions, but to convince the sceptics that the true value of brands lies in their longevity, which can only be achieved through advertising.

Government relations

One of the most important markets which need to be convinced of the value of advertising is Government. Not only is the present Government known to be negative about the advertising industry as such, and to regard advertising as a "white thing", but most black people are very uninformed about advertising as a profession and what it entails. To a large degree the fault lies with advertising training institutions who have never really targeted black people in their recruitment, or informed black people of advertising as a career option.

The advertising industry does not exist in a bubble. It is accountable to society and to the forces of democracy at large. The RDP expects each and every sector of business -public and private - to demonstrate the contribution it is making to the reconstruction of this country. The advertising industry is expected to do this by running the RDP campaign, whilst at the same time striving to overcome negative perceptions and educating Government officials on how advertising briefs and campaigns work.

Consumer lobbies and Government officials are agitating for tighter restrictions on the advertising of liquor (similar to the proposed anti-tobacco restrictions) and a complete ban on milk formula-products for babies. These measures require fancy footwork and sophisticated lobbying from advertising agencies, as well as expert research input from academic institutions to remain pro-active.

It also demands an understanding of politics and how the new South African democracy works.

Empowerment

Empowerment requires of the advertising industry to become far more representative of society at large in the number of black people appointed at management level (at the moment only $\pm 10\%$). A wise decision of the advertising industry is to achieve this not through tokenism but through training. The AAA School of Advertising is an important vehicle for this and black university students who meet the entry level requirements are at the moment important target markets for recruitment. Bursaries for disadvantaged students are made available through agencies and the Creative Directors Forum.

Training

The AAA School of Advertising, a unique institution in South Africa and internationally, has endeavoured since its inception to provide practical training commensurate with the needs of the advertising and the communications industry at large and has achieved a level of industry employment which, at 68%, is significantly better than that for current university leavers.

In order to achieve even higher standards of training, it was recently decided to discontinue the AAA School of Advertising's two-year diploma course for school leavers from 1996. (This decision excludes the two-year diploma for Art & Graphic Design.)

Entry requirements for the new one-year diploma in Advertising with Specialisation will now be a university or technikon degree, or any suitable three-year tertiary qualification, or any one without these qualifications with

relevant work experience, personal maturity, exceptional talent, etc.

As universities and technikons are now also offering specialised courses in advertising and marketing in order to become more career-orientated, the new AAA diploma course will offer a more advanced, hands-on course as far as practical skills are concerned to gain a competitive edge over university/technikon study. An even higher level of student-industry interaction is foreseen, which will include a 6 weeks compulsory internship at an advertising agency under the guidance of a tutor, which will form part of the student's final evaluation.

Student intake for this one-year diploma will be determined by the number of graduates the advertising and marketing industry can absorb. This will be determined year by year through annual surveys.

In other words, the AAA School is proactively picking up on a trend that is prevalent in Western Europe, which is that university education provides the broader-based more holistic background, and that professional career training actually continues afterwards at a school of specialisation.

I leave you with a final thought which may not appeal to all of you, but has, of late, without invitation, been mulling around in my head. After 17 years of academic teaching experience, I am beginning to question whether university education, specifically in the social sciences, is not promising more than it can reasonably be expected to deliver.

It tries to develop scientific thinking and methodological skills, which is correct and desirable. On top of it all however, it promises career oriented training, preparing graduates to walk into any profession equipped with the necessary skills. Is this the truth? Do universities, with the exception of a few privatised or donated chairs, units, schools and centres, possess of the financial means to buy in the expertise and facilities to provide hands-on career training? Can it - should it - try to do two things at the same time?

As universiteite dan beroepsgeoriënteerde opleiding wil of moet doen, dan moet hulle die moed van hul oortuiging aan die dag lê om mense aan te stel wat studente werklik vir die beroep voorberei. Hulle sal moet afsien van die vereiste dat alle lektore oor M-grade moet beskik of alle professore oor 'n doktorsgraad plus die nodige aantal publikasies (verkieslik in geakkrediteerde tydskrifte). Eenvoudig gestel, "*you can't have your cake and eat it.*" Daar is uitstaande mense in die bedryf wat oor al die ervaring, sukses, senioriteit en rypheid beskik, maar miskien net 'n B-graad het. Desnieteenstaande sal so 'n persoon 'n baie beter professor in 'n toegepaste, beroepsgeoriënteerde kursus wees. Na alles, het hy/sy "gepromoveer" in die bedryf!

As dit nie gebeur nie, gaan al hoe meer sake-ondernemings hul eie skole (of universiteite soos General Motors in die VSA) begin, om te doen wat universiteite nie in slaag nie.