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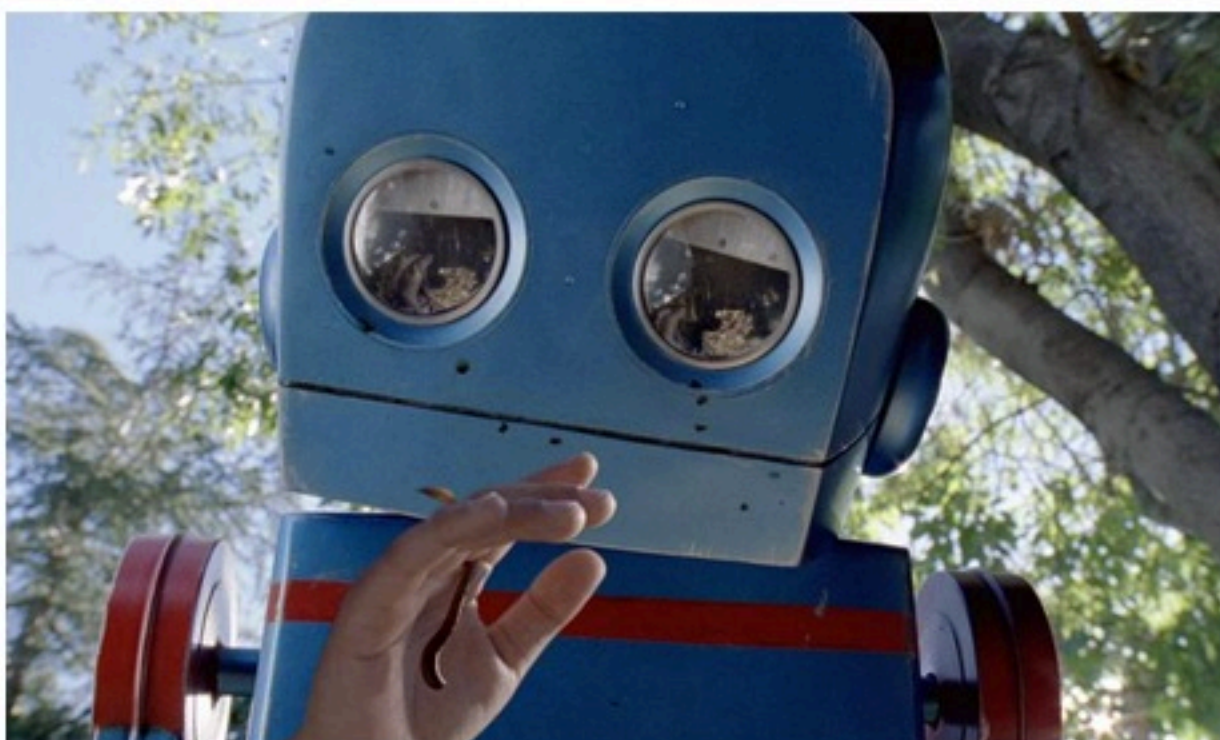
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Roboboy: realistic star of BBH's Persil ad

It is probably safe to say dull products prompt dull advertising. You'd

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It is probably safe to say dull products prompt dull advertising. You'd happily discuss what car you'd like to drive down to the pub but when you get there, would you sit and discuss which utility suppliers are the best over a pint? Which leaves advertisers of everyday goods in a quandary: should they just give up, admit defeat and defer to type? Or try to sex up their creative output in the hope that consumers might buy their product if it was cooler?

Until recently, the unwritten guidelines in washing detergent ads were to show as many of the following scenes as possible. One: bright, breezy mum clutching a washing basket, tutting good-naturedly at freckled child in dirty football kit, so cute it takes all your willpower not to reach into the screen and ruffle his already dishevelled hair. Two: deep inhalation of laundry, animated fragrant flowers and butterflies protruding forth from basket. Three: whiter-than-white sheet held up to the bright sunlight, preferably against a backdrop of a lush, spring-time meadow, laden with daisies and buttercups. Four: neighbours rifling through each other's laundry pointing out stains. And five: a "whiter washing in a week, or your money back" doorstep challenge.

Persil took a different tack a few years ago with its "dirt is good" approach which attempted to connect with consumers emotionally, and Bartle Bogle Hegarty's Roboboy ad is the best so far because it refuses to comply with any of the above rules. It stars a sad robot who gradually transforms into a boy while playing outside and splashing around in a muddy pool during a rainstorm, ending with the strapline: "Every child has the right to be a child. Dirt is good."

Many agency bosses would sell their mothers to get a place on Unilever's extremely lucrative agency roster. But once there, it can be difficult not to sell out and create safe wallpaper advertising adaptable for every market. So BBH should be applauded for not creating a more traditional advert. But will advertisers of equally mundane products be following Persil's lead? Is there a case for washing-up liquid or battery manufacturers taking a more avant-garde approach to communication? Should it be difficult to tell the difference between an ad for Adidas and a cleaning product? A large TV spend will not guarantee an audience - but at least an ad that tries to be different will get attention.

But just because one washing powder company has got its act together, that doesn't mean that other dull but necessary brands are following suit. Even Unilever has not applied rigorous creative standards to all of its brands. Take utilities. Even if really pushed, I'm not sure I could tell you which ads are for which companies - and this has only worsened with the green agenda handwoven as advertisers frantically add images of

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brands. Take utilities. Even if really pushed, I'm not sure I could tell you which ads are for which companies - and this has only worsened with the green-agenda bandwagon as advertisers frantically add images of windmills and melting ice-caps. Now that ads for breakfast cereals cannot target children given their sugar and salt content, uninterested advertisers have chosen the worthy route and are pushing the "wholesome grain goodness" message at uninterested parents. I say to hell with the sugar police and bring back Tony the Tiger.

Clearly, the list of dull advertisements for dull products is far longer than it really should be. But Dulux has shown it doesn't need to be this way. One has to sympathise with paint manufacturers - watching paint dry is the universal symbol of boredom, after all. For years, swaying cornfields, bags of barley, sloping sand-dunes and sunsets were all used in Dulux's ads. But its recent "we know the colours that go" campaign has proved an entertaining advertising campaign pays. The ads, which tie up with the US comedy drama Ugly Betty, led to an upsurge in consumers' estimation of the brand and it became the global leader in the decorative paints market.

And if you can make paint interesting, what excuse is there for everything else?

TBWA disowns award-winning but controversial advert

TBWA Worldwide has been quick to disown an Amnesty International ad, produced by its Paris office, which combines Olympic imagery with graphic portrayals of people being tortured.

The ad was rejected by the client for being too negative, but that did not stop it from finding its way online - and TBWA from becoming the subject of a backlash in China. Faced with calls to boycott the agency in the country, TBWA has been quick to say it was the work of one individual and a full investigation is under way.

However the question on everyone in advertising's lips is: if it was rejected by everyone, including the agency, how did it come to be entered into the Cannes Lions advertising festival last month where it won a bronze Lion?

TBWA, which works with Adidas globally - including in China - will be hoping this crisis goes away very quickly.

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Just don't do it

Nike has created a new global TV ad campaign celebrating the 20th anniversary of its Just Do It slogan.

The 60-second ad, called Courage, squeezes in quite a line-up of athletes sponsored by Nike over the years.

Basketball legend Michael Jordan, former Wimbledon champion John McEnroe and seven-time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong, pictured, are joined by Cristiano Ronaldo, Roger Federer and Liu Xiang, as well as the South African sprinter and double-amputee Oscar Pistorius.

The anniversary of the slogan has got the industry debating if there is any value left in it. There are two camps: some believe it is a strong positioning for a sporting brand, while others wonder what 'Just Do It' means.

But what would be gained from ditching it? Everyone knows that Just Do It is Nike. To change it would be far too risky.

· Lucy Barrett is the editor of Marketing

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