

STEVE HENRY

Steve Henry, born during a hurricane in Hong Kong, was the creative spark plug at Howell Henry Chaldecott Lury when it hit adland like a whirlwind two decades ago.

And when it comes to exploring the Next Big Thing in commercial communication, he continues proving he's still got the wind in his sails. Indeed, he exited as TBWA\London's executive creative director in July because he thought the agency was not concentrating sufficiently on newer forms of advertising.

As the driving force behind some of the most memorable ads of all time – from the Tango ads to “I bet he drinks Carling Black Label”; from Ronseal’s “does exactly what it says on the tin” to the Holsten Pils campaign that juxtaposed Griff Rhys Jones with old movie stars – Henry can be said to have left an indelible mark on UK advertising with this legacy alone.

Yet he's never rested on his laurels and is obsessive about exploring new platforms. Advertising can't have a future, he contends, if it continues living in its past.

Henry is something of a contradiction in that he's untemperamental and subversive at the same time and is never sure whether what he does is terribly important or exceedingly trivial. His eloquent use of language, and his ironic and very British humour based on acute observations of what goes on around him, are very much that of an Oxford English graduate. He cites full-time writing as his most likely alternative career and has been described as advertising's answer to Stephen Fry. What makes him remarkable, however, is a youthful mindset that belies his years (he was born in September 1955). “He has more innovation in his fingertips than most 30-year-olds,” a former colleague says of him. “He's full of restless energy.”

His relentless curiosity about what's new sets him apart from those creative leaders who always cite a 30-second TV spot as the answer without really understanding the question. Henry believes the death of advertising is greatly exaggerated. But he argues that this shouldn't be an excuse for complacency.

“It's still here, so people use that as an excuse not to change,” he says. “But the passive audience we assumed was waiting for mini-lectures on anti-dandruff shampoo has bugged off. People can time-shift their viewing to miss ads. Clients are up to speed and are dealing with it. Agencies, however, are caught on the hop.”

In future, brands will need to build “love me” credentials through virals and programme-making, he predicts. “People will still allow a certain amount of TV advertising, but if you see a teenager watching MTV, as soon as the ads come on they're off.”

His attitudes to advertising were influenced by Dave Trott. Having started his working life as a teacher, Henry was persuaded by a girlfriend to have a crack at advertising. After working briefly as a trainee copywriter at Crawfords, he was fortunate enough to join

the creative department led by Trott at GGT. Trott encouraged Henry's irreverent style and convinced him that the only way to be successful in advertising was not to follow the herd. “I fundamentally believe in the idea that creativity starts with carefully breaking the rules and standing out,” he declares. His philosophy reached its apogee at HHCL, which Henry helped launch in 1987 with Rupert Howell, Axel Chaldecott and Adam Lury after a spell as a WCRS group head.

HHCL's unconventional approach to creativity polarised opinion. It laid down its marker with a trade ad showing a couple on a sofa making love while the TV was on. “According to current audience research, this couple are watching your ad,” the copy read. “Who's really getting screwed?”

At first, neither consumers nor the industry knew quite what to make of empty laundry baskets being used to launch First Direct or a jeans commercial featuring a group of people sitting around laughing and the line: “Pepe, because one day you'll die.”

Henry and his partners defended the approach, arguing that advertisers and agencies were trying so hard to be liked that they were not acknowledging changing lifestyles. Inspired by Henry's approach, the agency ran ads simultaneously on ITV and Channel 4 for First Direct, asking viewers to choose the version they preferred.

In 1994, Henry led HHCL into interactive advertising with a commercial for Mazda. Viewers could adjust the volume on their TVs to hear the sales pitch or video the spot to read rapidly moving text. Naresh Ramchandani is a creative who learned his craft under Henry. He says: “What I learnt from Steve is that every opportunity, no matter how small, was an opportunity to do something great. He's incredibly nurturing and always interested in the next, not the now.”

Among HHCL's most controversial ads were those for Fuji photographic film. They featured socially marginalised people – including an Asian mother shunned at the school gates and a mentally handicapped supermarket worker – that pre-dated Benetton's strategy by several years. The campaign provoked allegations that social issues had been hijacked for commercial gain. But Henry still defends it. Sure the ads were made to boost sales, but they also raised issues such as racism in a form likely to be seen by many more people than would watch a TV documentary on the subject, he insists.

Many believe HHCL blazed the trail that the likes of St Luke's and Mother were to follow. “I think that 50 per cent of the people working in advertising today are doing so because of that agency,” Robert Saville, one of Mother's founding partners, says. “Steve can take much of the credit for that. He's an unrivalled creator of culture.”

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