



AdAsia 2005: Managing sensitivities the creative way

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Since advertising was what brought everyone to Singapore, a discussion on the pitfalls it faces across the world was bound to be interesting. And as it turned out at Ad Asia 2005, even lawyers became interesting when they talked on the subject.

The lawyer in question here was Douglas Wood of the Global Advertising Lawyers Association.

Woods cautioned the audience against the ‘mothering syndrome’ that was spreading globally, especially in those countries where the regulators were controlled by the government. With their key constituency being consumers, it was perhaps also normal to expect them to try and do more to justify their jobs. Woods illustrated his talk with a set of examples that left even the seasoned audience bemused at times, as people tried to guess why each ad he presented would have been banned or run foul of the regulators. It became pretty clear that a standard set of rules would not work globally.

Thus, while one country (the Czech Republic) banned an ad because it demeaned blondes, another country banned an ad because it did not include anyone from a particular community.

Several other interesting facts were also discussed at the seminar. For instance, an Axe ad was banned in a country because women might have been influenced to practise the things shown in the ad. A Benetton ad was banned in France because a tattoo saying ‘HIV Positive’ appeared to stoke memories of the holocaust.

Talking about the change in mindsets, where the consumer, from being ‘intrusive’, is practically expected to invite advertising into his mind, Woods referred to the need for self-regulation as the most desirable way to start to manage this tide of regulatory interference in deciding good and acceptable advertising.

He also said that the self-regulatory bodies needed to have the credibility and trust of the governing authorities or the key constituents such as media companies themselves, who eventually ended up carrying the ads.

An Indian delegate couldn’t resist touting the success that the advertising industry back in India has had with the ASCI. This success was ascribed to the fact that its panel has been well populated with representatives of most of the interest groups – such as women’s

advocacy groups and child rights groups – that are most likely to resent specific ads.

Coming as it did on the back of a discussion on ‘irreverence in advertising’, the threat to creativity from the mothering syndrome was probably understood by everyone present at the seminar.

In fact, looking at the way things are moving, one would be tempted to think that in coming times, the difference between a ‘good’ and a ‘great’ ad will depend on the regulators’ opinion, especially since a majority of the ‘irreverent’ (and mostly great) ads, which the audience had seen earlier, would have run into trouble with the authorities in one or the other country.

Undoubtedly, the host country also brought the ‘Singapore Girl’ campaign to everyone’s minds, with loud speculation on whether it would pass muster with women’s rights groups in the US. Something for the host country to ponder over?