

Playing in culture with TBWA\Hunt\Lascaris

 By Leigh Andrews

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In the third session of the second digital agency showcase, held at Red & Yellow School on 16 May 2019, alumnus Johann Schwella, now digital creative director at TBWA\Hunt\Lascaris, said the drive is no longer just to be best in class but only in class. Agencies today are not competing with other agencies but with culture, making it harder than ever to stand out. Here's how to do so.

“ We're back from recess!

Creative Director [@johannschwella](#) representing [@TBWAHunts](#) touches on using cultural insights to make your work relevant [#DigitalAgencyShowcase](#) [pic.twitter.com/eY2zpRaIDY](#)— Virgil Abloh's Other Son [@dopingwonga](#) [May 16, 2019](#) ”

Schwella started by setting the context: Media channels have changed, meaning agencies now need to figure out how to compete with cat videos that garner 180m views.

He says we need to not only work faster but also adapt faster and plan better. Many say this is their modus operandi, but few quantify what it means.

Disrupt to work at the speed of culture

We tend to give the creatives a few weeks with the brief and apply pressure when the deadline looms. This is the fundamental starting point of the change. Instead, apply that pressure on the creative to conceptualise faster.

The agency put this to action well with their 'Breaking Ballet' work for Joburg Ballet.

They effectively took what was seen as “swans and Disney stuff,” and used it as a medium to tackle pop culture and societal issues.

The key principle is to play in culture, to kill boring.

“ *“Generic content makes generic brands. Kill the boring.”* [@TBWAHunts #DigitalAgencyShowcase](#)— Deen Schroeder ([@DeenSchroeder](#)) [May 16, 2019](#) ”

For disruptive work to work, timing is everything

Schwella took this further when he addressed attendees, “The boring content in your news feed is our (ad agencies’) fault, we’re doing a disservice to the trade so need to adapt the approach. The structure hasn’t fundamentally changed, but we need to disrupt the core functions and pillars of what we do.”

“ *To work at the speed of culture, you can’t wait to react to a brief. Instead, we create a mission statement or single-minded purpose so that we don’t need to waste time approving every little thing with the client and planning everything to a content calendar. That old format is what leads to generic content, as you miss the timeliness.* ”

Schwella said that working this way requires client trust.

“ *Incredible insights and agile thinking and approach from* [@johannschwella @TBWAHunts #DigitalAgencyShowcase pic.twitter.com/NILpYkgl1d](#)— Red & YellowSchool ([@RedAndYellowEd](#)) [May 16, 2019](#) ”

Agencies have sold themselves down the river with the word ‘proactive’. Schwella says this can be reframed by adding a ‘reactive budget’, so the agency can react to culture.



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Big data is a buzzword for the industry as a whole but we’re hard pressed to actually use it in our work – that’s not to say it can’t be done, though there needs to be a focus on insights rather than the raw data to do so correctly.

Striking fast and minimising the risk of disruptive work

There’s definitely risk involved in this way of work, but remember that if done correctly, failure in content will simply mean you’re not getting noticed, because, with a well-formed mission statement, the worst that can happen is a quick flick of the thumb. For the agency, that means the work is not watched, but you’ll have learnings to take home.

In addition, social media has a very short memory, so if you understand the brand’s intention, the only mistake you can make is in the relevance of the work.



Schwella says doing truly disruptive work boils down to doing the brave thing.

That's on the whole team in 2019, as the days of the creatives shying away from the client's problems are over. They need to be fully involved in the full process from brainstorming at the start to analysing data and tweaking the campaign as a result.

To illustrate this, Schwella points out that the 'Breaking ballet' campaign didn't get much traction when it was called 'Bite-size ballet'. The team realised this, made the change and saw the results.



#NewCampaign: TBWA, Joburg Ballet launch series of little ballets inspired by big social stories

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Schwella concluded that the creative process is still there, it's just about getting it done faster – at the speed of culture.

That's why the TBWA\Hunt\Lascaris agency manifesto is not to do the right thing or the thing that's good enough, as that's not enough. They rather do the brave thing, the thing that troubles your sleep. To do the right thing or not is a choice, to disrupt or not is a choice – so, do the brave thing.

Schwella says to convince the brands we work with that disruption is the way ahead, and that there's a difference between being provocative and disrupting the status quo just for the sake of it. It still comes down to being relevant. Being brave and being relevant is the most important thing in advertising today.



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Let's hope for more brave, disruptive work from all corners. The Red & Yellow School's Digital Agency Showcase turns the spotlight on the six top-ranked digital agencies from the [IAB SA's Bookmark Awards](#). Watch for more of my [#DigitalAgencyShowcase](#) coverage, and follow [Red & Yellow School](#) and [Lascaris](#) on Twitter for the latest updates.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of

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