

BEST CREATIVE AGENCY (SMALL)



Jim Winslet

Neil Christie and below, an example of the agency's work for Nike, contrasting the freedom of running with the restrictions of London's congestion charge

Preferring to be better than bigger

"Cog," the extraordinary Heath-Robinson style commercial created by Wieden+Kennedy for the Honda Accord was the most critically acclaimed ad of last year. It won Gold at Cannes, The One Show and The Clios, silver at D&AD, a Grandy at the Andys, Best of Show at the British Television Advertising awards and bags full of swag at every other award going.

As if that was not enough, two more by Wieden+Kennedy for the Honda Civic, "Everyday" and "Sense," came equal fourth in the world rankings.

The agency also picked up two more golds – for advertising effectiveness from the IPA in November for its work on Honda. All the evidence suggests the gold rush is not over. Although it has won a handful of awards so far, critical reaction to "Grrr," the feel-good animation for Honda's i-CTDi diesel car, suggests it may fare even better than its predecessors.

And now W+K can add the accolade "best small agency" in the IPA's Bob awards to its list.

To create one world-beating ad in a campaign is fortunate. But to create four classics in the same campaign within two years, suggests more than luck is involved. How did they do it? And if they are so brilliant, why does the agency have only three significant accounts?

Talking to Neil Christie, W+K managing director and an astute, down-to-earth Scot, it quickly becomes apparent that, perhaps surprisingly, there is a formula – of sorts – to explain W+K's success. "I buck against the idea that there is a magic process that explains how and why we have been successful. But if you pushed me, I suppose I would put it down to our culture, our methodology and our relationships."

It tells you everything and nothing. On closer inspection it seems to offer a plausible explanation of W+K's creative success. It also offers the beginnings of an explanation for what many would consider W+K's commercial underachievement. Every agency in the world claims it is

engineered for creativity. But creativity really does seem to be hard-wired into W+K. "It goes right back to W+K's inception," says Mr Christie. "The London agency is one of six offices in the Wieden+Kennedy 'organisation' which was founded by two creatives, Dan Wieden and his less well-known partner David Kennedy 22 years ago in Portland Oregon."

The agency has built a reputation as one of the world's most creative on the back of a string of consistently outstanding commercials for Nike, its biggest client.

W+K remains the only network founded and managed predominantly by creatives. This model, with two creatives at the top, has been replicated at all its offices, explains Mr Christie. "Our senior management team, like those in every other W+K office, consists of two creative directors, Kim Papworth and Tony Davidson – and one suit, me."

Unlike most other companies in its competitive set, W+K has remained determinedly independent. The result is a greater focus on creativity, without having to worry about the distractions of quarterly financial reporting and double-digit growth.

"I do have to meet profit margins and targets," says Mr Christie, "but we have a different attitude to money compared to



public companies that have to do whatever is necessary to hit targets. There's no pressure here for growth for growth's sake. But what does turn Dan [Wieden] on is fantastic work. So that's my key 'metric' if you like."

Being small and independent has also left W+K free to develop its own highly collaborative and open way of working. "We don't have that business where the client briefs the account team who brief the planner who briefs the creatives who go away for weeks and then present to the account team who in turn present to the client in a great dramatic 'reveal'. Instead we, and that includes the client, collectively swarm over every point," says Mr Christie.

What is more, W+K tends not to write formal creative briefs at all. Rather it produces a sort of tone of voice document. So for Honda, W+K produced "The Book Of Dreams" a collection of references that summarises the look, feel and vocabulary of its advertising.

And just in case you did not think the whole thing was woolly enough already, the agency rejects pre-testing as a matter of principle.

Mr Christie admits it is a way of working that would fail a time and motion study. "The whole process is hugely inefficient and time-consuming. But it is highly effective." The facts support his assertion. In three years sales of Honda cars are up 58 per cent with an unchanged media budget, and softer measures such as "desire to own a Honda" have increased by 36 per cent.

For all this, even Mr Christie admits W+K could not produce work of such a high calibre for just any client. Cultural compatibility is the key. "I don't think we could do it for everybody. A major reason we work so well together is that we have very similar cultures."

His observation is backed up by Mat Coombes, Honda's marketing communications manager. "The fact that both companies are independent free thinkers, dedicated to our craft and

risk-takers is vital to our collaboration," he says. W+K may have been brilliant at building Honda's business but it has been less than scintillating when it comes to building its own. True, it now bills £50m and it is a top 30 agency.

But after seven years it still has only three big clients – Nike, Aiwa and Honda. There is a general feeling that given the agency's heritage, it has underperformed. "Somehow they've never quite got it together on the new business front. They don't seem to be able to get their business model to run across a wide range of clients," says one rival agency manager.

There are a variety of theories on offer to explain this. One has it that W+K's establishment in London seven years ago was a defensive move by the parent company to protect its Nike business in the UK.

Others suggest the proximity of a far larger and more vigorous Amsterdam office in the W+K network somehow took the wind out of its sails. A third strand of thought has it that the Americans were too arrogant. "They thought they could come over here and do it their way. But London is very different and what works in the US doesn't necessarily work here."

What is certain is that in its first four years, W+K London had four changes of senior management. Only in the past couple of years does it seem to have acquired stability at the top. "There is a need to bring in new clients if only to present new challenges to the people here," says Mr Christie.

But he rejects suggestions that W+K has not succeeded. "The fact is that we work in our own way. We place a greater emphasis on quality. And by that yardstick we have done very well indeed."

However he admits that the agency does need to improve its new business record – if only to provide its staff with a broader range of challenges. "We'd rather be better than bigger," he smiles. "But a bit bigger would be good too."

Alex Benady