

In the sixth year of D&AD's Creativity Works Programme, we continue to analyse the business and creative strands of some of the most successful campaigns of recent times. In this issue, we examine Sony's 'Balls' project for the Bravia television.

Case Study 3

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Sony 'Balls'

David Patton (vice president of marketing communications, Sony Europe)

Mark Sinnock (planner, Fallon London)

'Balls' may not have hit our screens until 6 November 2005, but the two and a half minutes of award-winning film that made up the final ad were the result of a strategic process that began back in 2002, when Fallon first began working with Sony. There had already been an evolution from 'Go Create' to 'You Make It A Sony'. Now, a further rethink of the company's brand strategy, in particular its strapline, identified a need to reclarify the individual nature and uniqueness of the Sony brand and its products.

'Sony felt the need to impose itself back on the market with a more confident line, which is where "Like No Other" came from,' recalls Mark Sinnock, Fallon planner. 'What was great for us, particularly in Europe, was that we were then able to work out how the component elements of each sub-brand fitted into that.' This was achieved by making a statement based on the human benefit of each product, which ensured each of Sony's sub-brands had a strong top-tier claim to its audience. For example, 'Colour Like No Other' sums up the human benefit of the technology within the Bravia. 'This not only gave each of the sub-brands a very strong position but also built on the equity of "Like No Other", in the same way that the sum of the parts add up to the whole,' notes Sinnock. It was then up to the team at Fallon to explore the creativity around this claim line.

Being positioned, and accepted, as an entertainment brand in a technology market also helped the brand's claims to remain benefit-focused and consumer-centric, rather than obsessing over pixel resolutions and the like, which has been

the mainstay of the technology market for years. 'That's a big convention that we've tried to overturn and David Patton in particular has been very supportive of that,' says Sinnock.

The original brief to Fallon was written in summer 2004 and focused on key product features: the Bravia's processing power, which delivered a sharper, higher quality picture. This was because, at the time, technological features were deemed the main factor that influenced purchasing decisions. 'We then undertook some extensive research which clearly showed that, in the eyes of the European consumer, there was a lack of perceived differentiation within the market place – all the key players were offering comparable quality and strikingly similar design features,' recalls David Patton, vice president of marketing communications for Sony Europe. 'Also, in this world of parity, price was becoming a key consideration for many purchasers – a major consideration for us, because Sony products are on average more expensive than its competitors.'

It was at this point that the focus began to shift. In a marketplace focused on and obsessed by the latest technical innovation, and at a time when technology is commoditised and innovations become obsolete so rapidly, Sony made the bold move of striking out alone. Rather than following the crowd, it opted instead to focus on building strong sub-brands based on consumer benefit and the sense of enhanced entertainment that Sony can deliver. 'We agreed with Fallon that we needed to rise above the existing battlefield and connect with consumers at an emotional level while providing a rational justification,' continues Patton. 'This is when the brief changed. The proposition became "Sony Bravia Brings Incredible Colour Into Your Life".'

'In a sense, the claim line became the brief, which is quite different because normally you would expect the brief to be born from a technical innovation and a new product launch,' adds Sinnock.

At this time, there was also a real sense of confusion as consumer momentum began to build around the concept of high definition and all the technology brands attempted to provide answers. For the team at Fallon, the combination of Bravia's need to push a new message into the market, Sony's new strategy ('Like No Other') and the obvious need for consumer guidance and leadership led them away from the confusion and towards a very simple concept centred around the brand's strapline: 'Colour Like No Other'.

There was also an ongoing debate about the use of the word 'colour' in the claim line. While everyone was comfortable with having 'a word', it had to be the right word, as Sinnock recalls. 'We looked at some consumer research which justified colour as the shortcut for consumers when they go shopping for a television. It also provided a shortcut for dealers to convey the product's strengths to customers: this one has the best colour. In the end, colour was felt to be the most motivating principle on which we could build the brand.'

'Balls' was just one of a number of ideas the team came up with ('Paint', which would be the next Bravia ad, was another). Because this was fresh territory for Fallon, ideas ranged from the abstract to the conventional. Yet, while there was much scope for creative thinking, there was no room for error. As television sales make up the majority of Sony's electronics business, this would be a defining campaign for the company and, as such, was a big deal. Getting it wrong simply wasn't an option.

'What we needed to do as a creative partner was show Sony a number of different directions and channels, and the notions behind them,' says Sinnock. 'We were fortunate in that we had already sold in the strategy and the direction for them to be comfortable with that as a fundamental claim line – and it married to the technology story they were looking to tell: that Bravia televisions deliver the best picture quality.' 'Like No Other' also became a guiding principle for the creatives, who used it as a benchmark against which to measure their own ideas and concepts for the brand. This was a high standard to set, but one they were determined to achieve.

'I saw several ideas from a number of different creative teams just before Christmas 2004 but there was only one script that the agency was truly excited about and it was the only one that stood out for me,' continues Patton. 'It was by some distance the most ambitious, and I admit it made me feel uncomfortable at the time, but I was irresistibly drawn to it. It was possibly the shortest script ever written. It simply said: "We go to San Francisco and let a million brightly coloured balls loose down the steep hills of the city. Title: Colour Like No Other".' A further justifying principle put forward by the creatives was 'if Bravia has the best colour then we need to create a test to prove that' – and a million brightly coloured bouncy balls flying at 60mph down a hill was a great test.

Location was critical to this project. San Francisco not only provided a recognisable location and, thus, a context, it also gave the ad its 'west coast'

status. There was much discussion about whether or not people should feature, although this was more of a post-production debate.

Although Patton liked the concept, Fallon still had some way to go to convince him it was actually possible; not least that the authorities in San Francisco could be persuaded to let them unleash the balls on the city. But Fallon wasted no time in finding a production company and a director who were prepared to take on the challenge, in the form of Nicolai Fuglsig at MJZ.

This was the first time that Juan Cabral, now creative director at Fallon, had worked on the Sony account since joining the agency in 2003. His ability to think differently and provide truly original creative solutions was initially evidenced by 'Balls', which he developed with Richard Flintham, the agency's executive creative director. Patton was impressed. 'Since then he's gone on to oversee much of our creative output, often working with Richard, including on "Paint", the successor to "Balls". He's a vital part of the team and I truly value his continued ability to keep surprising me with his creativity.'

Reassured over the logistics, Patton presented the idea to various Sony stakeholders. Although he received a generally positive reaction, some were keen to understand how the product and the technology would be incorporated.

Thereafter, Patton met with the Fallon team on a regular basis until the shoot began to progress.

Having come up with the idea, the biggest challenge for the team was actually getting hold of one million rubber balls. They found a factory in China that could supply the balls, but this would have taken three months, plus a further month to ship them to San Francisco. 'This affected our timings so seriously that we had to consider alternative scripts as a contingency,' remembers Patton. However, the production company managed to overcome the problem by buying up most of the bouncy balls in the US, a total of around 250,000, which was deemed sufficient to go ahead with the shoot. The Mill post-production house was invited to attend in case any fill-in with CG balls was required but this turned out to be unnecessary. In order to capture the vibrant reality of the balls and the way they moved, every single frame was shot on camera. No computer graphics were used at all.

Despite the scale of 'Balls' it still came in on budget, although there were more versions of the ad than had initially been predicted. A significant part of the budget was spent on making 12 cannons, each of which could fire 5,000 balls high into the air. These were crucial to the success of the project, as they ensured the

balls gained height rather than rolling along the ground. Prior to the shoot all drains were covered and, afterwards, students on roller skates collected up the bouncy balls and gave them away to local kids who had turned up to watch.

For Patton, the most memorable part of the project was the first morning of the two-day shoot in San Francisco. Some tests had been done in Los Angeles the previous week, but these were small-scale and only gave the team a few clues as to whether everything would work out as envisaged. An entire block in San Francisco was closed off for the event. The main sequence involved a 23-man camera crew with only one chance to get it right. 'The atmosphere was quite tense as we waited patiently for the cannons to be loaded. Finally the shout of "action!" went up and the cannons were fired,' Patton recalls. 'The balls came flying down Filbert Street at such high speed that the camera crew needed body armour and riot shields to protect themselves. But on the monitor I was watching, I saw them as captured by the slow motion Photosonics camera, and I knew then that it was going to work.'

Patton says that there is very little he would change. 'The main thing would have been to have shot the commercial earlier in the year and then we would have been able to use more of the fantastic stills we captured in other media, such as press and poster advertising, point-of-sale materials and brochures. This would have led to an even more tightly integrated campaign.'

In the planning stages, the principle behind the creative concept was that the ad needed to be incredibly fast and energetic. It wasn't until the team began looking at the rushes that they realised it could also be very beautiful. 'That was very much an organic conversation because no one knew quite how the balls were going to behave,' says Sinnock. 'I don't think even we, as an account team, knew exactly what the end result was going to feel like, but I remember seeing the cut as it was, straight off the rushes, and that was virtually as it went on air. Nothing was tampered with, which is quite impressive.'

Another memorable moment for Patton was seeing the rough edit of the commercial for the first time, back in London. This was the first time he had heard the agency's recommendation for the accompanying music – 'Heartbeats' by José González. Fallon initially presented a two-and-a-half minute version of the ad, using the entire song. This wasn't planned, but so much good footage had been captured that it became possible.

The campaign was launched in the UK with this version on 6 November 2005, when Sony bought an entire commercial break on Sky Sports 1 just prior to the kick-off of the biggest football game of that season: Manchester United versus Chelsea. A display of the bouncing balls was also created on the digital perimeter boards during the match and a 60-second version of the ad ran during the half-time commercial break.

Although 'Balls' was a great success, it was also a learning curve. 'You like to think all the rules have been set but there is still always plenty to learn – and we're learning again now for the next one,' says Sinnock. The project also taught the team how to harness the power of the internet. As a result, the campaign really began on the first day of the shoot, when local residents began shooting Handycam footage of the shoot and posting it on websites such as YouTube and Google Video. 'We would return to our hotel after a day of shooting, log on, and receive emails from places as far away as London and Buenos Aires with QuickTime movies attached that showed what we'd been shooting that day,' remembers Patton. These Handycam films, which were being uploaded and travelling around the world at incredible speed, meant the film became famous before it had even gone to air, even in countries such as the US where it never actually ran on television. This became an important part of the campaign's success.

'The fact that the ad was done for real and the shoot was an event in itself meant we achieved unprecedented word-of-mouth coverage,' concludes Patton. 'I learned that creativity really does work. A big idea, executed in a simple, bold and iconic way across a range of different media, directly contributed to the success of the Bravia business in 2005/2006.'