

Boffo Blammo

National Post

Friday, April 29, 2011

Peter J. Thompson



"I've never been a person to stay with tradition," Alan Gee says. "Our industry constantly evolves and moves forward."

The Toronto ad agency that launched as Gee Jeffrey and Partners in 1991 and morphed into GJP at the beginning of the last decade went through a full-scale rebranding last November as Blammo Worldwide. But the transformation did not unfold in a typical fashion. Co-founder and chairman Alan Gee sent out announcements saying GJP was closing down and went on to star in a number of satirical YouTube videos promoting a "closing down liquidation fire sale." The agency's rebirth as Blammo followed a party in which items from the GJP office -from Cannes Lions awards to office chairs -were auctioned off for charity. Mr. Gee spoke recently with Hollie Shaw about the industry's evolution and "crazy" agency names.

Q What inspired the rebrand? Why did you need to?

A Part of the initial reason for rebranding had to do more with the fact that my partnership with Peter Jeffrey had ended and he decided to retire. But as we see the market evolving and changing we realized that we were more than just an ad agency, and it was always my goal to be more than an ad agency. One of my early discussions with [new partner title] was to be more of an 'idea agency' than an ad agency.

The expression "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail," is a summation of the traditional ad model for me. At the end of the day, most agencies will deliver ads, regardless of what [information] they have been presented with.

But the client does not always need an ad. We now know in the massive digital revolution going on that there are so many ways to connect with consumers beyond ads. Blammo wants to be involved in every aspect of a way a brand develops. With a retail business, for example, repackaging a brand can be more important than an ad campaign can be.

Q How was your quirky lead-up to the rebranding received?

A We wanted to signal that we weren't just evolving GJP -to just change the culture without changing the name. [The name change] was a symbol internally as much as it was externally. I also wanted to make sure that value of having a new name for new partners of the company helped them believe that it was theirs and not just something they were inheriting.

I've never been a person to stay with tradition. Our industry is one which constantly evolves and moves forward. It has been really good. We have legacy clients who we had to take through an explanation of what we were doing and our relationship with them does not change. The clients were very nice and said the name cautiously. I think we pre-empted [any issue] with them by explaining it in advance.

I got about a half-dozen legitimate calls from people wanting to pick up an agency. We [won business from] Dealuxe.ca, which is a wonderful new concept in e-tailing. And we are negotiating with two others, both digital-based clients, right now. Another thing about having a name like Blammo is that people are inquisitive. There are always new agencies [entering the industry].

Q What is behind the name "Blammo"?

A We all sat around trying to think of names of what this entity would be, and up came up with the name Blammo. I immediately loved that it sounded like that eureka moment, that, "This is it! I finally found the sweet spot." It was a metaphor for a high moment. Another thing I thought was important -I thought that because it was a crazy name that nobody would take it seriously initially. It was a bit of a rallying cry for us that when we did good work we would get credibility.

There was an internal pressure we put on ourselves to live up to the name and live up to the interesting crazy names out there among some [acclaimed] advertising agencies: Strawberry Frog, 72 and Sunny, Mother, Karmarama -I mean, that sounds like a rock band, not an ad agency!

Q Do agencies need to reinvent themselves when they have been in business for a certain amount of time?

A Most agencies change their name and they send out a press release about it and change their website. We decided we had to do something out of the box and different. Telling everyone we were closing up polarized the business 50-50. There were the cynics and there were the believers -those that thought that I was going off sailing and those who thought "Yeah, right."

We teased it out there for about a month and we got 10,000 hits on YouTube, which was crazy. It got picked up on blogs everywhere. I got calls from China and Russia and Brazil asking about what we did and how we did it. It got way more attention and traction than if we had just sent out a press release.

Q Who do you consider to be a good brand marketer?

A Everybody uses the example of the Apple brand [and its ability to hit] upon all the minute touch points; everything is consistent. I wish Apple would sell themselves as a branding company because their idea of branding is complete - they write the book on it. Their brand is a complete story. Brands need to realize that every single touch point where they interact with a consumer, whether it is sales floor or a web site is an opportunity to connect with the consumer.

Another example is Facebook. The ubiquity of that brand name now is incredible. It can help bring down governments and help promote ideas around the globe that is a profound change in terms of what we think brands can do.

hshaw@nationalpost.com