



Mombasa on steroids



The Cinderella City of advertising plans a rebirth, writes *Lisa Witepski*

Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban – they're like an inseparable triad, always mentioned in the same breath in discussions around South Africa's major cities. Yet there's no denying that in Adland, Durban's the Cinderella of this trio, the one that struggles hardest to get its voice heard – and doesn't always succeed.

Dale Tomlinson of the Hardy Boys, arguably Durban's most prominent independent advertising agency, puts it perfectly when he likens Cape Town to Europe and calls Johannesburg a less charismatic New York. But where, then, does Durban fit in? "Durban is like Mombasa on steroids – contemporary and modern, but with a healthy dose of Africa proudly at its heart," he answers. That reply says a lot about the city and its creative status: on the one hand, it's a colourful and intriguing microcosm, and this gives it a flavour all of its own. On the other, there are a number of practical challenges that have inhibited that flavour from developing into a full-blown identity as a creative hub.

To understand the industry and its obstacles, it helps to look at its makeup. You'll find a number of satellite offices belonging to the leading multinational

agencies – think TBWA\Hunt Lascaris, Ogilvy, Y&R and Draftfcb –but the majority of Durban's industry is made up of independents (some of which, like Hardy Boys and the Flagship Group, are sizeable and have achieved local and international acclaim) and a significant number of small design shops.

Flagship's Craig Clay-Smith insists that this structure has worked to the industry's advantage, as the independents are able to make their own decisions without considering the dictates of the larger group structure. This has resulted in an entrepreneurial culture where they are free to design their own structures and products.

But there is a flipside. Many of the Durban agencies have extended their reach beyond the region – Flagship recently bagged the lucrative ICC account, while Hardy Boys is growing its presence in Africa, having completed campaigns for clients in Kenya, Lagos and Ghana – but, as Tomlinson admits, they generally cater to a smaller client pool. "Generally speaking, when it comes to national clients, the throne is in Johannesburg. Cape Town satellites manage to generate more revenue because everyone likes visiting the city, so business trips

frequently turn into mini vacations – but a Durban satellite may be more of a mosquito than an asset."

One of the reasons for this may be that people think of Durban as a coastal sleepy hollow – yet industry players counter this, saying they work just as hard, and put in as many hours, as their big city peers. Moreover, says Clay-Smith, the work coming out of Durban is anything but parochial; on the contrary, it's world class.

All the same, clients have put something of a brake on Durban's creativity, agree John Gale of Ogilvy and Garth Walker of Mister Walker. Gale puts it thus: "Although some Durban clients are willing to allow us to experiment, others don't give the same latitude. I've often pointed out the correlation between good creative work and sales, but the reality is that many Durban clients aren't turned on by creativity – they see it as self-serving." Walker, who is often credited with putting Durban design on the map, maintains that this is because cost is frequently considered a greater priority. "The Durban market is overtraded and price driven. As a result, when choosing a communications partner, clients don't ask how creative the agency is and how many awards it has



Lindsay Leppan

won, but rather, how much the work will cost. The job ultimately goes to those who can offer the lowest rate." Clay-Smith counters this, saying that he believes it's about being able to show client you're able to add the most value in the required area of expertise.

Even so, restricted creativity hardly a prospect to excite the young talent graduating from Durban's university and technikons. So, although the training received by these youngsters is considered to be of an excellent standard, and they'd be warmly welcomed by any of the local agencies, many choose to seek what they perceive as greater opportunities in other cities. This compounds the limitations upon the Durban industry, say Walker and Tomlinson. "Durban has never been strong in above-the-line, primarily because all the TV production expertise, along with equipment, resides in Jo'burg and Cape Town," Walker comments. Tomlinson, meanwhile, says that the proliferation of design shops serves to entrench the city's reputation as a design, rather than advertising, hot spot. "Design isn't as strategic as advertising. It requires only a small team – whereas, if you're working on above-the-line campaigns, you need skills for activation, pro-



John Gale

duction...it's more complex."

Apart from imposing restrictions on the type of work Durban is able to do well, the 'brain drain' has affected the industry in other ways, too: Gale says that many of the people who fled for the bright lights during the earlier part of the century are now at a senior stage of their careers. Having lost out on this band of talent, the industry lacks strong middle management skills. Clay-Smith concurs, noting that this poses questions for the industry's future: since most agencies and independents are run by 'mature' people, who is going to take the industry forward, innovate and create after their retirement?

And yet, in spite of these challenges, industry players insist that the city has much to offer from a creative point of view. They point to the city's distinctive design aesthetic, its famed architecture, and a milieu which gives itself naturally to creative thought. Says Walker, "Durban is a fruit salad of a city – it's highly integrated. The heat is also seems to be a natural incubator for ideas."

Anice Hassim of Immedia is particularly vocal on this point. In the past year, his app development company has created over 30 jobs, which points to the city's



Anice Hassim

potential as an app development hub. And in Hassim's mind, there's no reason why it shouldn't fulfil this potential and then some. "All you need for this industry is a laptop, good training and an internet connection. It doesn't matter where you are – so there's no reason why the next Amazon shouldn't come out of Durban. In fact, there's a good reason why it should: we need to be creating apps to suit the African context."

Hassim is the first to admit that Johannesburg and Cape Town industry members are quick to dismiss Durban's chances of becoming the industry capital, but he's just as quick to add that the very factors that Durban lacks, in comparison to its sister cities, are the ones that ensure it is poised for success. "App development requires a specific way of thinking. It's not the corporate mindset that Jo'burg and Cape Town are so hung up on – it's far more collaborative. You need a kind of counter culture to produce good apps, and Durban is all about the counter culture. Moreover, success in this area depends on pouring your passion into solving a problem that you find interesting, not chasing money." And if there's one thing Durban has in droves, Hassim says, its passion. "We have a

lot of highly talented people who have moved here from bigger cities. They want to be here. They're also not interested in paying lip service to clients. They're not afraid of telling them that they're wrong, and that's a key ingredient when you want to do well."

Clearly, then, Durban agencies have the raw material to turn the city into a design success – but what are they going to do with it?

For Lindsay Leppan, MD at Y&R's Durban offices, the question is one of creating industry cohesion. This will lend greater impetus to the city's attempts to ensure that its talent stays where it belongs. "We're all doing our best in this regard as individual agencies, but what we really need is to act as a collective; to present a unified front." Ideally, says Leppan, this body would comprise representatives from all the creative industries, from PR and media to digital.

The good news is that, while members of the media agency have already taken steps to form such a forum, the advertis-

ing industry is following hot on its heels. Gale reports that industry members recently met to discuss challenges around raising the city's creative profile so that clients around the country think Durban when they need a communications solution.

It's still in its early stages, but Justin McCarthy, MD of TBWA also believes that the establishment of a strong industry voice will help to transform its reputation. This has worked for Cape Town, he points out, where the establishment of the Design Indaba has required the input of the local industry as well as the local council. Indeed, the Cape municipality has played a key role in helping to market Cape Town as an arts and culture destination. Durban's industry would do well to strengthen its dialogue with the local council, McCarthy opines.

But, he adds, while striving for the collective effort, agencies shouldn't overlook the areas they can change in their own spheres of influence. For instance, as a market leader, TBWA is working

hard to raise its own standard of creativity – which, McCarthy maintains, will have a positive ripple effect on the competitiveness of the overall industry. He's also trying to use his standing as the Durban representative on the Advertising Communications Authority Board to use the body as a forum for the city's agencies.

Ultimately, though, neither Clay-Smith nor Tomlinson is convinced that the industry has to turn itself inside out in order to be a success. McCarthy holds the same opinion, insisting that Durban shouldn't try to emulate the others; instead, it should concentrate on carving its own niche. "Our industry doesn't have to be the same as everyone else's. All I need to deliver great work is to understand my clients' challenges and bring my available resources to bear to solve them. We don't need to be a Johannesburg or a Cape Town – I think they're cumbersome! We might not be a creative hub, but nor are we arrogant," Tomlinson concludes. **AR**



Some Leading Durban Agencies 2012

	Rev 2011 Rm	% ch	Staff 2011	% ch	Awards	Top clients	New clients	Net new biz Rm
TBWA Durban	80-100	4	137	5	Assegai: G & Leader; AdReview Baobab,	Spar, Tops Liquor, Build It, Unilever, Aquelle, Beier	Epic Canola, Little Green Bevs, First Exchange	
The Hardy Boys	58	12	79			Unilever, SA Home Loans, Rainbow Chicken, Diageo, Tedalex, Dube Transport	Smirnoff, Africa Innovations, Spirits Capability (Diageo); Radox, Geisha, Sunlight bath soap; Adcock Ingram.	2
Ogilvy Durban	15-20	4	31	0	Pyro promo winner	Unilever, Sun Int, Defy appliances, Marico, The Sharks, Boxer stores	Decorland	5
Y&R Durban	<20		14			Pick n Pay, Willowton Group	The Dolphins, Best Bread	

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Revenue = fee and commission income + interest (not billings)