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Colin Lloyd | January 05, 2009

How long? | 3-4 minutes

Sales promotion in the 70s - you couldn't get away with it now.

From the 250,000 goldfish posted in China, to the offer of a jet fighter in return for ring-pulls, promotions used to be rather less constrained than they are today. Colin Lloyd recalls his favourite campaigns.

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The last printed version of P&I deserves a look back to see if we could do in the future what we did in the past - and get away with it. Today we operate

in a bouillabaisse of a PC world, of compliance requirements, laws, best practice, environmental issues and corporate social responsibility kept in check by our friends from procurement. Promotional marketing has never been more scrutinised, procured, evaluated and documented.

I appreciate it is cold comfort to today's practitioners, but it wasn't always like this; not too long ago, it was definitely, as was described in a recent House of Commons debate with the ISP, 'the sex, drugs, and rock and roll of marketing'. So here's a fix from the past, most of which would never see the light of day today. Or would it?

Nothing epitomises what we got away with as much as the Free Goldfish promotion from Chivers Jellies in the early 70s. Around 250,000 goldfish were sourced from China in vast vats, packed individually in a bag of water, oxygenated and then packed in containers for distribution. The Post Office would not deliver them and it was left to British Rail to ensure they arrived. Amazingly, only a few goldfish died.

The golden age

Other classics include the Cadbury's Golden Egg promotion, which had thousands of people digging up great tranches of the English countryside trying to discover Golden Eggs that Triangle had buried. Today the environmentalists would pull their hair out. And the free piggy banks from Gales Honey, put together in a mental asylum in Devon, did not look like any animal that I have seen.

A Pepsi lifestyle promotion in the States offered a Mig Jet Fighter for millions of ring-pulls. Would you believe that some bright spark got a consortium together, collected the ring-pulls and claimed the Mig? Pepsi explained that it was just a bit of creative licence and the judge eventually

decided in its favour, though with a good telling off.

Not only did the agencies and clients have fun, but the promotional handling houses also saw life somewhat differently. Redemptions in the early days asked for postage and packing in cash or postal orders, which helped fund the staff Christmas party and many lunches in Mario and Franco's in Soho. Warehouses conveniently caught fire; promotional stock had what was known in the trade as 'slippage'. Premiums were recycled to client after client - a free wigs promotional stock was run at least five times by different clients until the stock was eventually 'knocked out' in London's East End. And so it went on.

The supermarket consolidation gathered pace in the late 70s, but before then there were thousands of retailers scattered throughout the land that needed individual servicing and merchandising. Heinz had 500 salesmen at one stage. Promotions fought for gondola ends and hot spots with retailer incentives - if that's what you call them. Promotional stock was merchandised in dump bins in retailers, and rainforests were destroyed in the interest of a never-ending supply of cardboard crafted by the long-lost skills of cardboard engineers.

Kangaroo Butter was launched by the Australian Food Commission with giant cardboard kangaroos hanging from Sainsbury's ceilings. Sadly, the product did not exactly jump off the shelves. Today, try and get a shelf talker into a retailer!

But it did work. Sure, it was a maverick existence, but the combination of creativity and entrepreneurialism produced some of the greatest promotions ever seen, with phenomenal effects on brand success. Above all, the clients had instinctive courage and let us get away with it. Shell Make Money was

my number one, and could be unbelievably successful in today's climate. The Andrex Puppy appeal from my agency broke new ground for that brand and continues today in various incarnations. Heinz led the way with charity promotions, and its incredibly successful Win a Car a Day. Reputations were made, and sometimes lost, in two great decades.

Looking forward

You have to be an optimist in our business, and I am optimistic. I'd like to believe we can probably do tomorrow what we did yesterday, albeit in a bit of a straitjacket.

However, clients need courage and agencies more entrepreneurial creativity. Sadly I have seen more creativity in contact reports than ever got to the brands. We also need to free up the constraints. Take the recent number one world promotion awarded at the MAAW Globes: a promotion that turned the lights out for an hour across Australia to support climate responsibility. The agency had courage, and the client the guts, to be unconstrained. It's coming to the UK next year.

My thanks to P&I for the past, and we all wish you every success in your digital future. Keep the lights on for us believers.

- Colin Lloyd is president of the Institute of Sales Promotion, a founder of 70s SP agency KLP, and co-author of a forthcoming book called BOGOF: The Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll of Marketing.

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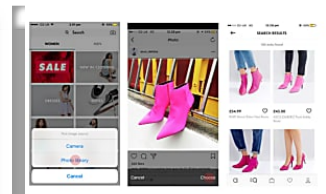
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