

"Marketing's common sense - anyone can do it." Well, maybe not.

 By [Sharon Keith](#)

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When you see the finished object - the advertising campaign, the packaging, the new flavour, the shiny social media campaign, it's tempting to think that these things are relatively simple and straightforward to plan and execute.

But those of us "in the know" know. It's a long hard slog. It involves hours of analytics, consumer safaris, competitive intelligence gathering, furious debate and days of navel-gazing, followed by panic and frenetic middle-of-the-night calls as the deadlines loom. Followed by more furious debate - over semantics, phrases and word choices. And that's just writing a halfway-decent brief.

It's like going to visit gorillas in the Ruwenzori mountains - you slog along uphill in sweaty, prickly heat, with undergrowth grabbing your ankles and insects burrowing into every conceivable nook and cranny, your camera bag and your water bottle cutting into your shoulder, and you think This. Will. Never. End. And then suddenly there they are, as cute as the National Geographic documentaries. And it's all worth it.

Lots think we can shortcut the process

But lots of us think that we can shortcut the process, and do it painlessly. The phone rings at Agency X, and it's the client on the line.

"Hi," she says, "how's it going? Listen. I need you to make me a new ad. For summer. And Christmas. And to help us launch that new variant. And to ease through the January price increase. And we think the competition have got something up their sleeve - so we want to pip them to the post. You know the brand backwards - you'll ace it."

And as you recover from the sharp intake of breath she adds, "Can you get something to me by next Friday? Our big boss is coming over for a quarterly review and I want to show him some progress."

Sound familiar? It happens more often than you'd think. Largely because our more inexperienced marketers don't know what they don't know, and because our inexperienced agency people are so anxious to keep their clients happy that they don't push back. And it results in massive frustration, rushed work, ill-informed strategists and creatives, and endless reverts and rework.

Pedestrian work that doesn't do the job

And ultimately we end up with pedestrian work that doesn't really do the job. Plus frayed relationships between people who really aren't sure if they're crazy about working with each other again.

It's amazing that our brands survive this kind of systematic abuse and our consumers keep loyally buying them.

But what if we could build the kind of marketing and creative nous that enables marketers to set their agencies up in such a way as to inspire great work? What are the basics that we're missing? What's getting in the way?

We've got to go slow in order to go fast - we've got to instill the kinds of discipline that mean everyone understands their role in the process and everyone plays their part perfectly. We spend as much time on the planning and the preparation as we do on the execution. These are all skills that can be learned, and they are all skills that need to be practiced to the point of mastery. Malcolm Gladwell's oft-repeated maxim of 10 000 hours - that's what it takes.

Lucky, not gifted

If you hit a home run first time out you're *lucky*, not gifted. It's the consistency that counts. That's what builds brands and garners brand advocacy.

The point of all of this ranting is that we marketers need to own our skills gaps, and we need to do something about addressing them, so that we deliver world-class marketing and world-class advertising for our brands and our businesses. We will potentially lose the privilege of a place at the top table and could be viewed as a "nice-to-have", rather than as an essential business driver in the cut-throat economic times we live in.

Marketers must step up to the plate and spend their marketing dollars wisely - we can't afford to waste those resources.

The average FMCG marketer probably gets to make one or two ads a year, if they're lucky. They might develop and launch a new variant or flavor or product format every couple of years, and they might redesign a brand's visual language once or twice in their careers.

Safe environment to learn fast, fail cheap

So, in order to develop confidence and proficiency in these areas, we've got to find ways that we can simulate these situations and accelerate the acquisition of these skills. We need to provide a "safe" environment where marketers can learn fast and fail cheap, outside of the harsh and unforgiving spotlight that is the real world.

Other highly regarded professions (medicine, law, accountancy) require regular attendance at seminars, the ongoing reading of industry journals, publishing of white papers, sitting exams, and so on, to hone skills and knowledge. I'd hate to discover that the surgeon about to perform intricate keyhole surgery on me hasn't actually performed this particular procedure in the last five years and is a bit rusty on the steps!

But isn't that the way us marketers tackle some of the projects that come our way? We bluff a little, muddle our way through, and work out how to make it someone else's problem... in many instances, the hapless agency is left trying to figure it out.

ABOUT SHARON KEITH

Gillian Rightford and Sharon Keith, in a project collaboration with Adtherapy, have developed a set of modular workshops aimed at closing these skills gaps - insight generation, briefing, creative development, creative judgement, building great relationships - all of the essential skill-sets that separate the memorable from the miserable. Contact Gillian@adtherapy.co.za or sharonkeith@me.com to find out more about the Creative Fitness programme and get the benefit of their collective 92 000 hours (and counting) in these fields.

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