

A lean, mean advertising machine

 By [Luca Gallarelli](#)

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If you haven't heard the expression 'Lean Advertising' yet, and you work in marketing, you soon will...

Noted Kiwi adman James Hurman is pushing this notion, building on the ubiquitous proposition of Lean Business developed by management guru Eric Ries.

Just as Ries urges business start-ups to abandon lengthy, expensive R&D and to quickly get into the real world of product trial, error, feedback and refinement, so Hurman says the ad industry must change. He wants us to forget about spending "months behind closed doors developing the strategy and creative work... and then testing it with consumers in research environments that bear no relation to the actual market".

He believes we are wasting millions on "production to create a perfectly finished, 'maximum viable' creative product" when what we should be doing is getting a far cheaper 'minimum viable product' into the marketplace and then working off the feedback and the business response to improve it.

The notion carries the seductive idea that marketing costs will somehow plummet in this brave, new, leaner world.

In response I would say "yes, no, maybe and ancient history".



Time is money and money, time... © ktsdesign – [123RF.com](https://www.123RF.com)

In a financial sense, to a very great degree the SA advertising industry is already very lean. The golden age of fat fees and even fatter lunches (which, by the way, produced some astonishingly good work) is in the dustbin and most agencies now operate on long hours and short margins. The demands of social media campaigns have driven the volume of agency outputs up and the ubiquitous client-side procurement officers have turned us into 'suppliers' who have to meet the same efficiency ratios as the cleaning services' labour brokers.

I don't expect much sympathy when I say it but the pips, long ago, started to squeak, and, anyway, very few SA clients these days have budgets which allow for substantive pre-launch audience testing for an ad.

And that same social media revolution, years back short-circuited many cumbersome agency/client processes. Good digital campaigns land with speed and can be constantly refined or even dropped after monitoring the feedback, which is an instant and constant feature of the medium. No agency worth its social salt these days is processing a post in the same way as it would a billboard although most of us would agree that we still have some way to go before we have really cracked the reactive marketing model.

My caution on the 'Lean Advertising' notion comes in several areas.

Firstly, not every individual piece of brand building can be, or should be, for a specific, measureable return. A big brand in any space needs an under-pinning of association with extrinsic and intrinsic qualities, which dispose the consumer towards choice. What we call 'The Big Ideal' has to be built in target market minds with quality and consideration.

Secondly, when everyone else is moving fast, the way to stand out is often to slow down, and, when everyone is machine gunning messaging across multiple platforms, doing less but doing it really well works a treat. Value over volume is an important mantra. And that valuable stuff still takes time and thought. A great strategic insight developed from genuine research can lead a creative team into brand new spaces (bad pun intended) in which, with time to refine, they can produce a thing of beauty and impact.

Finally, there is an encouraging re-awareness among brand custodians and consumers of the importance of craft. Design matters more than ever, the small details get noticed, style is appreciated and the sloppy stuff gets hammered.

Obviously we need to two-track this - speed up and use real-world feedback wherever we can and invest in the expensive

hours of creativity and testing where it really matters.

'Lean Advertising With A Bit of Tasty Fat Now and Then' doesn't sound quite so zippy but it more accurately reflects where the industry needs to be.

ABOUT LUCA GALLARELLI

Luca was appointed deputy managing director of Ogilvy & Mather Cape Town in 2012 and became MD on 1 November 2013. Since taking over the reins of South Africa's top ad agency, Luca has prioritised a successful drive for new business and finding fresh ways to ensure that the agency stays nimble and responsive to the dynamic digital environment.

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