

PART TWO: THE 1990s

THE RISE AND FALL OF MTV EUROPE

1. Risk Taking

‘These guys are about to take showbiz down the tubes. They have the ugliest fucking logo behind the stupidest idea you have ever seen.’

Account Executive, Ogilvy & Mather, on the subject of MTV¹

BARCELONA, NOVEMBER 2002

From the moment I disembark at Barcelona airport, it’s impossible not to notice that MTV is in town. The terminal building is plastered with posters of Robbie Williams, announcing that he’ll be in Barcelona for the 2002 MTV Awards. The airport’s arrival zone, right by customs, is occupied by MTV greeting desks, buzzing with young staff running around with clipboards and walkie-talkies, looking self-important. Their role is to meet the VIPs – albeit those who travel on public planes rather than private jets – and transfer them to their respective hotels. Around 700 accredited international journalists and about 100 photographers are also expected.

Held in a different European city each year since their 1994 inception in Berlin, the European Video Music Awards became MTV’s ‘tent pole’ event and one of the most high-profile annual happenings on the European entertainment calendar. During the few days surrounding the awards ceremony, all notions of reality seem to collapse in the microcosm of the inner circle. The host city ...

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A NEW KIND OF TELEVISION

The Big M

Justin Eade was 19 when he left school in 1990 to seek employment, joining a recruitment agency to increase his chances. His USP was knowledge of computer software, and graphics packages in particular, then in their infancy and only relevant in niche industries. Finding that first job would have been a struggle, were it not for a peculiar opening. 'Have you heard of a channel called MTV?' asked the recruitment agent. A question that may well sound like lunacy nowadays, it was perfectly appropriate to assume that one would not have heard of MTV in 1990, let alone seen it. The satellite TV uptake in the UK was still relatively low (around 1, 418, 299 homes connected at the end of 1990), hence knowledge of MTV was specialist.¹⁰ Happily, Justin was one of the initiated.

MTV's logo, or 'the big M' as Justin refers to it, had made an indelible impression on him. Passion for the visual medium ran in his blood; his paternal grandfather had produced pioneering advertisements while his father was interested in the concept of 'a brand' for his own business. In fact, Justin had just completed some 800 three-dimensional graphics for his father's *World Aid* report, including his pride and joy, a cover image of the Earth held by two hands. That was sophisticated back in the day, but nothing compared to MTV's logo, which had inspired it. Being a visual aficionado, Justin was particularly interested in the concept of the music video and the synergy between sound and vision. Unfortunately, there were very few outlets where music videos were played. 'You were lucky if you'd see three a week on television,' Justin recalls, which is why the discovery of MTV was so exciting. However, in terms of creative potential, 'the big M' was more than just music videos. Up until then, no television channel had had a 'personality'. MTV was about to change everything. Television was entering a new era and 'the big M' was its symbol. Had Justin heard of MTV indeed...

Armed with his 3D portfolio, Justin went for his interview. There was a job in 'traffic', which entailed scheduling MTV's own short promotional films between videos and advertising breaks. Traffic would later become media planning, a global media industry in its own right. Back then, traffic was part of MTV's advertising sales department (ad sales for short), which was in turn part of the finance department. Those were simpler days when anything to do with money (essentially a few people in ad sales and accounts) fell into this bracket. The rest

counted as ‘creative’. Even though technically Justin had the right skills for the job because he knew how to use the software, what tipped it for him was the moment when the interviewer from finance showed Justin MTV’s playlist. No matter what the position was, a passion for music was (at that time) a prerequisite for a job at MTV. Justin’s face lit up when he spotted post-punks Red Lorry Yellow Lorry on the list. You couldn’t hear that kind of music on mainstream radio. It also happened to be one of the interviewer’s favourite bands: ‘Congratulations Justin, you got the job.’ The three years that followed were, in Justin’s own words, ‘the best days in the most creative environment a young lad could work in with a passion’. He added that he felt like ‘part of music video history’.

What would indeed be a significant part of music and television history was the way MTV merged traffic scheduling (essentially the mechanical side of the job) with the creative side; a department within MTV that came to be known as ‘on air’. The on-air department comprised just one person at its inception: Peter Dougherty, who would go on to become MTV’s most senior executive in charge of the channel’s branding, from 1990 to 2001. The gist of Peter’s job was to turn music television (a generic format) into MTV (the brand that would go on to become the undisputed leader in European music television as it already was in the USA). Peter was in charge of commissioning the various short films that promoted all aspects of MTV. This was in turn part of MTV’s broader creative vision, which would become more strategic over time; ‘on air’ would later become the creative services department.

Justin effectively implemented that vision, mixing together short MTV films with video content. This was no longer a mechanical job, but involved a certain *savoir-faire*. It was about seamlessly blending the short films with music videos by synchronising the visuals from the film with those of the video. Looked at another way, it was about that little, elusive beat: what a joy for Justin when the last note of a video could be in tune with the first of MTV’s short film! Imagine, then, the lucky animation student who would pop into the MTV office to drop off his short film in the hope it might be played. You could do that in those days. There was no security, just one receptionist and a couple of affable ladies, Caroline and Tracy, who managed MTV’s production office upstairs (it was a lesser hurdle for European fans to get into MTV than it was for them to understand Caroline’s broad Ulster accent and Tracy’s Scouse vernacular). Justin was passing that day and noticed the animation student because he had ‘full-on dreadlocks and crusty, pre-grunge clothes’. Justin identified with him – he was

a raver, also on the scruffy side. The student's short film was entitled *Attack of the Killer Tea Bag*. It was just what Justin needed. He had been exasperated by a gap between the music video for the Butthole Surfers' cover of 'Hurdy Gurdy Man', played on MTV's alternative music show *120 Minutes*, and the advertising break. Bingo! *Attack of the Killer Tea Bag* fitted perfectly. Justin's attention to detail bordered on the obsessive. He embraced his role with zeal, until his skill became redundant sometime towards the end of 1993, when output became automated. This change was all part of MTV's maturation. Losing that human touch was just one of the many inevitable aspects of turning corporate, but at least there had been many happy and creative times before that shift.

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From Street to Boardroom

I first heard the word 'strategy' at MTV when I did an interview with Simon Guild in 1994, shortly after his appointment at the end of 1993, the year of change at MTV. As noted earlier, this shift in corporate practice was symbolically marked by a series of events including MTV's breaking even financially, moving to a proper television studio and gaining a rival in VIVA. Simon called himself the 'corporate paranoiac' and defined 'strategy' as worrying about what might go wrong. He was admittedly the only person worried about this. Simon would become MTV's CEO and even the top dog for a short period when Brent stepped down as president in 2006 (Guild, too, left MTV in January 2007). What struck me when I first met Simon was that he wore a striped shirt, the kind you buy at TM Lewin of Regent Street. He was the first person I'd met at MTV who dressed like he had a proper job. Until then, all MTV's executives, including Bill Roedy, who was above even Brent, were trendy. Brent himself fitted the 1960s hip business archetype down to the shaggy haircut, funky clothes and trainers. (It was the look that came to define 'cool executives' in the cool-marketing 1990s. Think also Richard Branson.)

When MTV left its experimental phase and entered its maturation phase (1994–1996), it partnered up with other mavericks to begin the creation of the corporate-cool powerhouse that would eventually influence every aspect of society. Out with old hierarchies, in with the new entrepreneurial businesses – this was a new ideas-led economy run by young Generation X executives and friendly non-suited CEOs. Cool marketing (targeting youth) thus spread into

‘new marketing’ (targeting everyone else).²⁴ The phenomenon of Cool Britannia in 1997 was the pinnacle of this trend. Britain led the way as mavericks touched upon every sector of society: cool art (YBAs), cool music (Britpop), cool fashion (Alexander McQueen), cool brand-communication agencies (maverick advertising agencies such as St Luke’s, media agencies such as Naked Communications and Michaelides & Bednash, brand development agencies such as Headlight Vision and the now-defunct Happy Dog), even cool education (Goldsmiths College) and cool politics (New Labour).

IKEA inaugurated this era in the mainstream with the ‘Chuck Out Your Chintz’ campaign, produced by the then new-cool advertising agency, St Luke’s. I befriended one of its founding members, John Grant, through an MTV conference, so I remember first-hand that IKEA was the agency’s first account. What they and MTV had in common was their rebellious and non-conformist attitude. They questioned everything. Nowadays IKEA is ubiquitous but back then modern furniture was not popular in the UK. Surveys showed that two thirds of people preferred ‘traditional’ English style. IKEA’s task was to develop a campaign that would literally start changing the tastes in home décor. That was how ‘Chuck Out Your Chintz’ was born. In true 1990s cool marketing style, the advert had an ironic tone. It featured housewives chucking out their doilies and floral prints in favour of a sleek, modern look. The advert never actually said anything about IKEA. Instead, it invited you to enter the world of IKEA, just as MTV invited viewers to dip into its environment and become cool by association. The case of IKEA and other brands is fully recounted in John’s book *The New Marketing Manifesto*, which is a great testament to this period. Minimalism would come to define cool design for the next decade, reaching its zenith with the loft-style aesthetic.

In the period post Cool Britannia, the segmentation that helped define MTV’s audience became the norm. It was not just the television industry that addressed its viewers as fragments bound by interest. The brand industry, more generally, came to think of the public in terms of consumption patterns and market trends rather than simply demographic classifications. Mass-marketing strategy thus moved towards category management, whereby the same marketing manager would look after a portfolio of related products (rather than individual products or brands). These mini-groupings or product categories were run as a ‘business unit’, as the marketing parlance goes. Category management entailed forging partnerships with distributors and retailers, as a result of which retail

environments were designed by 'categories', rather than organised by products or brands. For example, in a supermarket all the dairy products would be in one space, whether they were Danone or Kraft.

Innovation in the corporate sector became a marketing boardroom decision, which is a different matter from creation in the scientific laboratory. Marketing strategy underpinned with robust consumer and market research would lead new product or service development (in other words, whether your butter was low-fat or with added Omega 3). There are of course brands that manage to combine groundbreaking product invention with alluring design (Apple springs to mind). However, even then, some type of strategic element would underpin the brand positioning, simply because competition is fierce. Agencies with creative approaches towards unearthing unfulfilled consumer needs in increasingly saturated markets would come to be highly prized by clients, because they could combine the ability to come up with innovative products while managing risk. Consequently, we consumers were blessed with dozens of options when choosing cornflakes and as many different varieties of strawberry jam. This trend flourished in the first half of the noughties until we reached what Barry Schwartz described as the 'paradox of choice'. Here, a new opportunity began to take root. (Hold this thought for noughties' mavericks, later on.)

However, for all the success of cool marketing in promoting a consumerist vision of life, we must not forget that cool's original appeal is that it struck a chord with consumers: MTV spoke to its viewers not because they were a well-defined advertising segment, but because MTV was genuinely relevant to them. Viewers did not want any old music television. They wanted their MTV.^{25...}

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