

Belgium's ad shops show world-class potential

A major haul of Cannes Lion awards reflects the growing international respect for Belgium's ad agencies. By Mark Tungate

Many Belgian advertising professionals remember a night just over a decade ago when they stood around at a Cannes beach party asking themselves: "How the hell do we win a Lion?"

"In those days, we used to celebrate just because a few Belgian ads had made it on to the shortlist," one of them recalls.

"Those days" are apparently over. At this year's Cannes festival, Belgian agencies scooped no less than 28 Lions, 11 of them gold. The haul made Belgium the biggest European winner after the UK. And what's more, the biggest prizes went to nimble, quirky little agencies with names such as Boondogle and Happiness.

So what's behind this new wave of Belgian creativity? You only have to dig a little to unearth one source: Duval Guillaume.

With few exceptions, the founders of the agencies that are winning prizes have either passed through or been inspired by this pioneering Belgian shop.

"Duval Guillaume was the agency that showed us we could do things differently," Stef Selfslagh, the creative director of Boondogle, says. "We were stuck in a typically Belgian mindset of self-deprecation. We either tried to imitate work being done in other markets, or just complained that we couldn't be creative because we didn't have the budget."

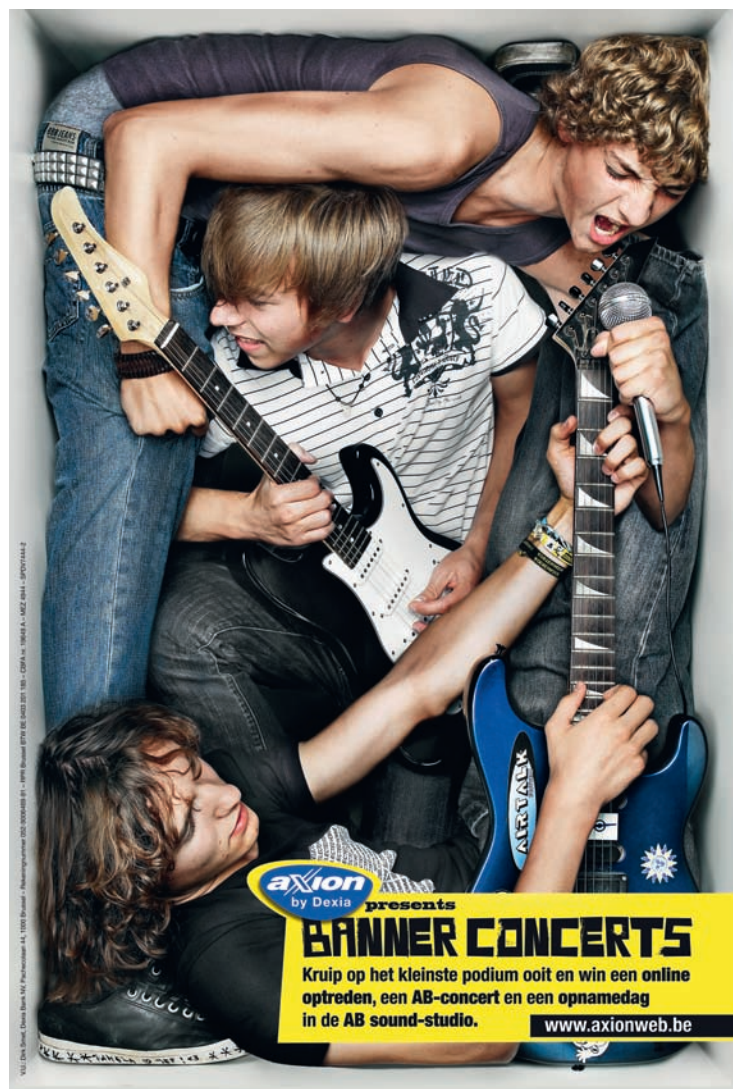
Guillaume Van der Stighelen (pictured, below right), who founded his agency in 1996 with André Duval (pictured, below left), confirms that the pair set out to change the game. "We were in a perfect position to be creative, because we had no choice. We were a small agency, in a tiny market, working in three languages, with no money. And we were tired of people complaining about the lack of budget and the conservative Belgian approach."

In fact, Van der Stighelen felt that Belgians had an aptitude for creativity on a shoestring. "We're famous for making comicbooks. What are they if not Hollywood on a budget?"

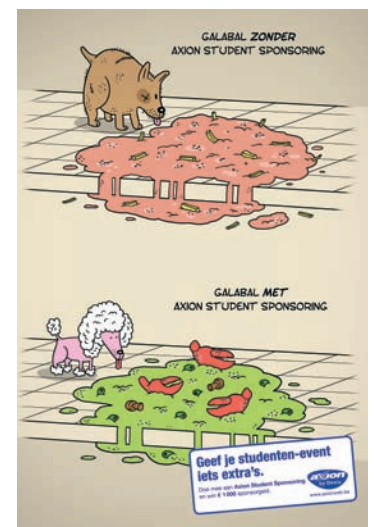
He was also inspired by Belgium's fashion industry. Designers such as Martin Margiela and Dries van Noten had emerged from Antwerp to take the fashion world by storm. "They proved that Belgians could not only be creative, but could shake up an entire industry."

Joeri Van den Broeck, a creative director at the Belgian agency Famous (who was on the Film jury at Cannes) confirms that the success of Duval Guillaume encouraged a new school of thinking. But he identifies what he thinks is another important factor.

"Partly because of a lack of budget, Belgian creatives very rapidly embraced the possibilities of the internet. Combined with a simple,



Engaging content... (clockwise from left) 'banner concert' for Axion, 'student sponsoring' for Axion, and 'car dance party' for Toyota



humorous approach, that has suddenly put our kind of advertising at the forefront of the industry. It parallels the way the business is going."

Selfslagh agrees. "It's no surprise we've come into our own in the middle of a recession, because we've always had to work in tough circumstances."

This has frequently meant turning to cheaper, non-traditional media, he says. "If you analyse our wins in Cannes, they're largely in areas growing in importance, such as digital and direct. Boondogle started out as a digital agency before it decided to embrace all media platforms, because now they're merging."

Boondogle's media gold Lion, for best use of media, went to the "banner concert" for Axion youth banking.

The agency built a box the same shape as a banner ad and recorded budding rock bands playing live in the cramped space. The banner-shaped videos were placed on popular sites. Visitors who watched the performances could click through to see other concerts. They could then vote for their favourite

band. The campaign connected the bank with youth and gave a bunch of young musicians a boost.

"It was a simple, amusing idea that had a slightly surrealistic feel to it," Selfslagh says. "In other words, it was very Belgian."

Another small agency, the 30-strong Happiness, founded four years ago, won two media golds with its "car dance party" for Toyota's Aygo Music runabout. The campaign featured two Russian "car dancers" called Boris and Uri, who showed viewers how to dance in their cars via TV, viral, banners and posters. Consumers were in-

vited to post their own "car dance" videos on YouTube. The best competitors would be invited to an outdoor event where they stood a chance of winning the car.

The campaign saw 2,900 videos posted in the first month. The clips attracted 793,000 unique views in total. "Car dance party" became a summer hit with its audience and Toyota reached its sales target.

Karen Corrigan, the Happiness chief executive, says there's no great secret to Belgium's recent success. "It's an understanding of media, a no-nonsense approach and the ability to surprise people. To a certain extent, we're not making advertising. We're not into storytelling. I don't think you need a narrative – you just have to give people a good moment."

Corrigan adds that Happiness is a great believer in user-generated content. "Everyone is media these days, so you have to find ways of connecting with people."

She employs in-house trendspotters to monitor popular culture on- and offline in search of inspiration. "It's no use waiting for other people to tell you what's going on. You need to catch trends early and get involved in them. I'm always

looking for people who have that kind of vision."

Happiness has developed other smart ways of working, too. As well as the Belgian agency, it has established a small production company called Bliss Interactive in Vietnam. "Bliss is one step further than Happiness," Corrigan jokes. But the move gives her access to seriously talented – and economical – producers of content.

Given its position at the centre of Europe, Belgium suffers from a surprising lack of international clients. But could it be about to have an Amsterdam moment?

"It certainly deserves one," Van der Stighelen says. "Belgium used to be known for making the most boring advertising in Europe, but that's certainly no longer the case. And it's quite possible that these awards will attract creative talent from other markets, giving Belgian an even more international feel."

He adds that clients should not assume Belgian agencies are now biased towards digital. "If we think a client would get better results through a radio or a newspaper ad, we will help them. But the point is that we're not locked into any one solution."

Corrigan believes that the recession could give Belgium a valuable window of opportunity. "Tell them all to come here," she says, referring to clients. "We can do it faster, cheaper and better."

