

The evolution of FOXP2

By Herman Manson

From start up to flat-broke, to a remarkable revival in fortune for one of South Africa's most creative young agencies



YOU AND TWO mates decide to go it alone and launch your own ad agency. You need to come up with a name. Simple. Hit Google and type in 'creativity.' Whoa, information overload, but as you wade through the entries something about a creativity gene catches your eye. It's called FoxP2.

Your first client is the father-in-law of one of the partners. Your first job is selling his high quality brass taps. This better work. Same partner's brother-in-law allows you to use the dining room table in his apartment in Sea Point as a base during start-up.

You move on up, get your own office space in the Bo-Kaap, next to a crack-house as it turns out. You meet clients 'for drinks' down the street to avoid them falling over your next door neighbours.

You've started to realise self-financing an agency start-up has its drawbacks. Pronto condoms gives you their entire budget. Of R50 000. You make a viral video that crashes their servers and scores a million views on YouTube.

National Geographic Kids lands you your first Cannes Lion Bronze six months into the new gig. But, you've got R75 bucks in your wallet. You've just shoplifted a pack of charcoal. Your name is Justin Gomes and along with partners, Andrew Whitehouse and Noel Cottrell, you are about to go bust...

IN THE BEGINNING

Justin Gomes and Andrew Whitehouse met in 1999 at Lowe Bull Johannesburg. Their first campaign together was for Spar-letta's bubble gum flavoured soft drink and it did remarkably well at the time (for them and for the

brand). The virtues of the drink itself doesn't come up for discussion.

Next up for the duo was the revolutionary Dulux campaign which would remake the fortunes for Dulux and provide a solid base for the creative partnership built by Gomes and Whitehouse. "Prompted awareness was 79% in a category where the norm is 23%," tells Gomes of the campaign's success. "In a declining market Dulux recorded a growth rate of 8.2%." The campaign increased sales for the brand by a remarkable 40% and delivered a return of R6.60 for every R1 spent on advertising.

"It was the campaign that showed us first hand how creativity can really get you a disproportionate return on your investment," says Gomes.

Gomes and Whitehouse were headhunted by TBWA Paris and later moved to Lowe New York. It's here that the

GREAT FOXP2 CAMPAIGNS: 2005 TO 2010

YEAR: 2005

CLIENT: National Geographic Kids Magazine

CREATIVE IDEA: Your kids don't have to learn the hard way

TEAM: Andrew Whitehouse, Justin Gomes

RESULTS: Since FoxP2 won the account in 2005, NG Kids Magazine has enjoyed 50% newsstand sales growth and over 65% subscription growth. The brand has also won awards that include five Loerie Golds, two Creative Circle Ads Of The Year, Finweek Magazine Campaign Of The Year and a Cannes Lion.



YEAR: 2006

CLIENT: Pronto Condoms

CREATIVE IDEA: Pronto Condoms is the quickest way to get it on (the quickest way to get a condom on that is)

TEAM: Andrew Whitehouse, Justin Gomes

RESULTS: This Loerie-winning viral campaign was the most successful to come out of South Africa in 2006 with over a million views on YouTube. Another million impressions were



seed was planted for the eventual birth of FoxP2. "New York taught me the dangers of red tape and bureaucracy," says Gomes. Little brave work ever made it before a client, being quickly weeded out by layers of management. According to Whitehouse the experience would help define the parameters of their future agency in that it made clear to them what they did not want. Later their NY experience would also help make clear that what they did want did not exist in SA.

They met up with Noel Cottrell, today executive creative director for New York-based Grey Worldwide, then head of Kirshenbaum Bond in San Francisco and known in South Africa as the founder of Joe Public take-away advertising. Homesick, the three returned to Cape Town to set up their agency in late 2005. Their first client was ISCA taps and the rest is advertising history.

Well nearly. In less than two years of operation, Gomes, Whitehouse and Cottrell would have to face the reality that their agency was on the verge of closure. It would take a hard-nosed businessman to turn it around. They needed a new partner.

"The easy option would have been to go our separate ways and get high paying CD roles in big agencies but we knew we had to support each other and stay in the game," Gomes tells me in a later email exchange. "We knew what FoxP2 had the potential to become and all we had to do was support each other till the momentum turned."

CROSSROADS

That momentum turned up in the person of Charl Thom, then business unit director at Grey Cape Town, where he ran the Heineken, Tanqueray and Captain Morgan Rum accounts for Brandhouse, which was also a client of FoxP2 at the time.

The trio and Gomez spent three to four months talking things through before Thom committed and became a partner in the business. At this stage Cottrell decided to return to the States and Gomes, Whitehouse and Thom got on with the business of bedding down the new agency.

"Charl's arrival was at a crucial time in the lifespan of the agency - it coincided with the Coronation Fund Managers win and he was able to take on a broader financial vision that gave the agency some sense

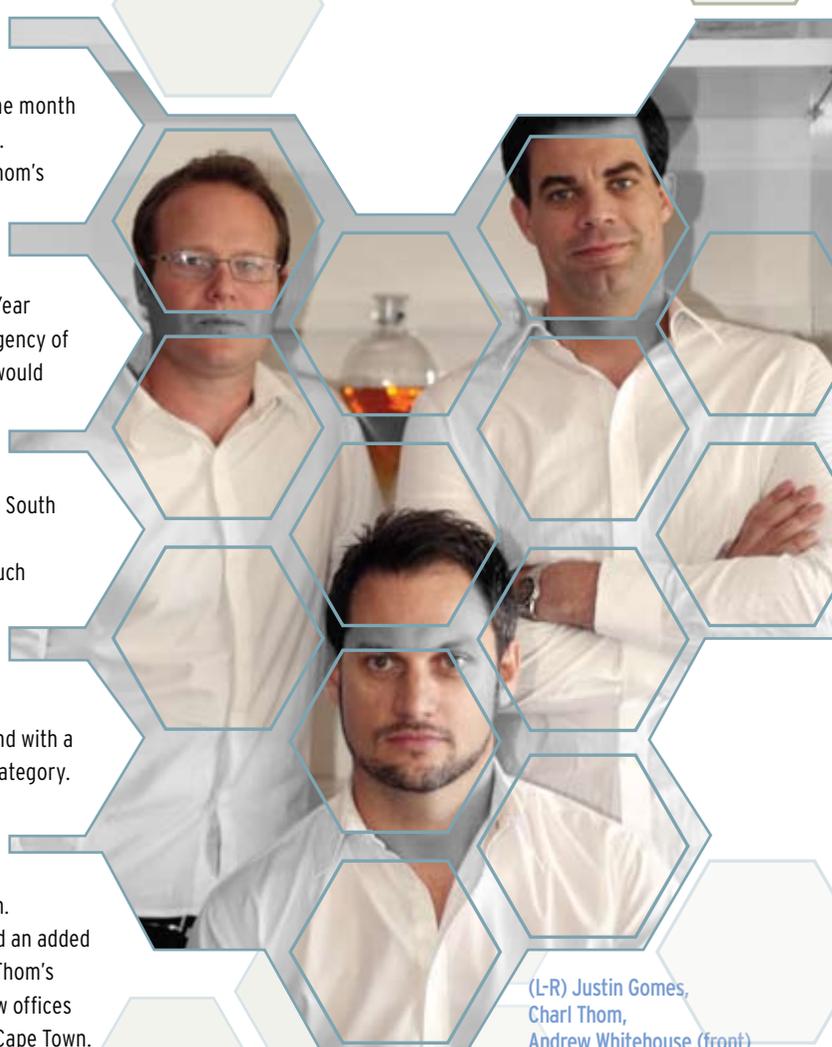
of stability rather than the mad rollercoaster of being in the black one month and in the red the next," says Gomes.

While the Coronation account win and Thom's efforts started to settle down the agency's financial woes, it received an added boost when it won the AdReview Newcomer Of The Year in 2007. It would go on to win Small Agency of the Year in 2008. In the same year it would be crowned AdFocus Agency of the Year. Its butterfly effect campaign for Coronation remains firmly imprinted in the minds of many South Africans.

Entyce Beverages brought the agency such brands as Five Roses Tea, Freshpak Herbal Teas, Frisco Instant Coffee, Ciro and House of Coffees. The "Tastes Like Home" campaign FoxP2 created turned the Frisco brand around with a 30% increase in sales in a declining category. The follow up "Shlurp" TV ad caused the factory to fall behind as it struggled to meet demand which in turned stalled the follow-up campaign.

With new account wins under its belt and an added sense of financial security thanks to Thom's efforts, the agency moved into its new offices in the Lifestyle Centre in Kloof Road, Cape Town. Thom describes the offices, which won a Grand Prix in the architecture and interior design category of the Loeries in 2009 to some grumbling from parts of the industry, as his firm's 30 second TV commercial. It's part of what sells the agency. It also plays an important role in creating a creative environment in which to function.

Visi, the only magazine in the country that might be too good for its own good, was quite beside itself in its review of the new office space. "The spatial divisions and work stations were designed to resemble clone-like cubicles that appear to continue endlessly," Visi writes. FoxP2 has 28 staffers spread over two levels - so much for endless lines of clone-like cubicles. The offices are friendly, practical with plenty of natural light and it is quite simply very smartly designed. The laboratory theme isn't overdone as some reviews (ahem) might suggest.



(L-R) Justin Gomes, Charl Thom, Andrew Whitehouse (front)

GROWTH SPURT

FoxP2's recent growth path underscores the success the agency has achieved since it managed its turn-around in 2007. A tally of actual project billings of new accounts gained over the past 18 months is quite impressive. The agency won MWeb (worth R65 million), Strongbow Cider (R25 million), Sure Pure (R2 million) and is launching a new financial services brand worth R50 million (details remained under wraps at the time of going to press). Total annualised new business billings stands at R142m which according to Thom makes FoxP2 the 6th biggest new business winner in South Africa when compared to all other agencies, including groups; and the biggest new business winner in Cape Town in 2009. On the

recorded on the prontocondoms.co.za website crashing the Hetzner server hosting it. Alexa.com measured the site as having the second highest increase in traffic in the world over the specified time period.

YEAR: 2007

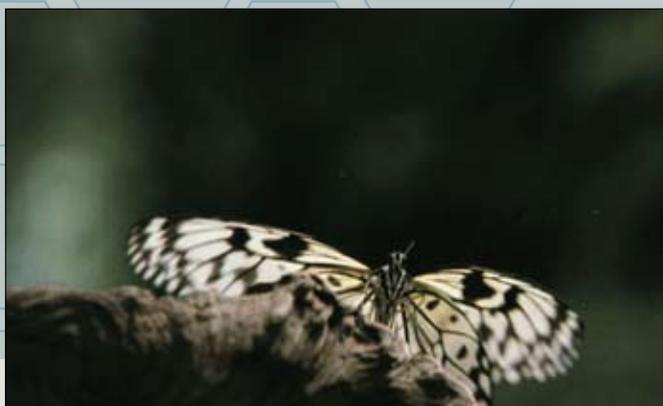
CLIENT: Coronation Fund Managers

CREATIVE IDEA: Realise Your Investment Potential

TEAM: Andrew Whitehouse, Justin Gomes

RESULTS: FoxP2's ongoing brand work for Coronation Fund Managers

has helped move the brand from 6th to 5th place in the rankings for largest Unit Trust company in South Africa when they overtook Stanlib.



YEAR: 2008

CLIENT: Frisco Coffee

CREATIVE IDEA: Frisco Coffee Tastes Like Home

TEAM: Andrew Whitehouse, Justin Gomes

RESULTS: The Loerie Gold winning 'Tastes Like Home' campaign realised a 30% increase in sales for Frisco Coffee in a declining market. The 'Shlurp' TV ad was so successful the factory couldn't keep up with demand and the flighting of the follow up ad had to be delayed.



FROM CRAZY MONKEY...

MWeb account win, Gomes notes that the agency was the only one in the pitch process brave enough to offer a whole new payoff line for the group's repositioning efforts. They believe in what they do, and what they can offer, says Gomes. FoxP2 saw no major account losses over the last 12 months according to Thom.

The number of full time staff employed grew from nine in December 2008 to 11 by December 2009. This has jumped to 28 as of June 2010. Thom says it would have been irresponsible to the quality of FoxP2's creative product to grow any faster.

The partners are all fiercely proud of the culture they have worked so hard to forge and this has led to a decision to cap agency expansion at 60 to 70 staffers. After that they believe the nature of the business changes into something that won't sit well with FoxP2's culture or structure.

Whitehouse offers a potential alternative for growth in his vision of a network of boutique style agencies - if the agency manages to duplicate its approach to creativity and down-to-earth culture effectively. Talk of a Johannesburg office has done the rounds for several years but some of the partners would need to move to Johannesburg if it is to replicate the success of Cape Town and nobody seems overly keen to pack their bags just yet.

FoxP2 has consistently produced creative work and ideas designed to improve, and where necessary change, business for their clients. They produce work that values craftsmanship and believe in the power of ideas (rather than say the power of ATL, or BTL).

Going from start-up to broke, getting on with picking up the pieces of their dream and reinventing their agency, is why the trio cherish what they have today. Net#work BBDO got competition, and then some.

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GAVIN WILLIAMS is best known as one of the guys who successfully pitched the Jackass-antithesis called Crazy Monkey to MTV. Williams, along with Brendan Jack, also co-wrote and 'starred' (his quotation marks) in the movie Straight Outta Benoni. "It did well, but not well enough for us to quit our day jobs," quips Williams. Williams has worked at The Jupiter Drawing Room as well as BBDO Cape Town and also edited the short-lived lads mag called Krew. Williams joined

FoxP2 in April 2010 as part of a senior creative team alongside Michael Lees-Rolfe.

A bit of a car fundi Williams still writes for www.overdrivetv.co.za. He describes it as a humorous read that knows nothing about the boot capacity of anything. Or what torque is.



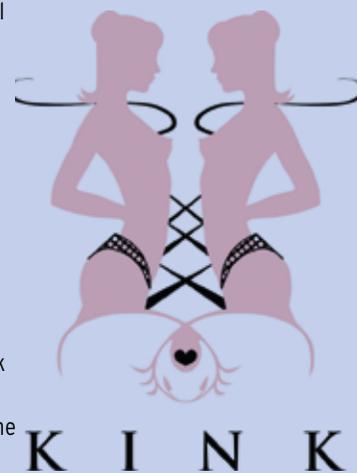
...TO SELLING KINK AND HIPPIE WATER

SHANNON DELAPORTE had always been in advertising when she saw a niche in the market and launched Kink, an erotic boutique store for women, in 2005. Kink was one of the first erotic shops aimed at women in the country. Three years in and with her boutique firmly established, Delaporte decided to re-enter the world of advertising. A six



month stint as a freelancer for FoxP2 turned into a permanent job as traffic and production manager. Juggling several balls, err jobs, for the next two years, Delaporte eventually sold Kink in 2010. She is already

onto her next side-project called wordsaffectwater, based on the concept that human speech or thoughts affect the quality of water, developed by Masaru Emoto in Japan. She will be taking time off to study with Emoto in Japan, only the second South African to do so. On her return as a certified HADO instructor, her new range of HADO water will be introduced in Cape Town. Delaporte says creativity comes in all shapes and sizes and advertising forms only one element of creativity for her. The fact that FoxP2 values her personal freedom to explore other facets of creativity is inspired, she says, and means she can bring that inspiration back to work when she returns to the agency.



GREAT FOXP2 CAMPAIGNS: 2005 TO 2010

YEAR: 2009

CLIENT: Brandhouse Drive Dry Initiative

CREATIVE IDEA: Drinking and Driving Wrecks Lives

TEAM: Reijer van der Vlugt, Justin Osborne

RESULTS: Part of the broader Drive Dry campaign, This Cannes Lion winning installation has helped increase awareness of the Drive Dry Initiative from 24% to 40% and the number of consumers who agree with the statement "it is socially acceptable to drive when over the legal limit" has decreased from 3.1% to 2.0%.



YEAR: 2010

CLIENT: MWEB

CREATIVE IDEA: Don't Get Cut Off From Your Online Movies/Music/Sport

TEAM: Reijer van der Vlugt, Justin Osborne

RESULTS: The award-winning campaign for MWEB Unlimited ADSL saw the MWEB Call Centre receive its highest call volume in over a decade. Brand managers rushed down from their offices to help field the influx of calls and the callcentre phone operators were discouraged from drinking water so they didn't have to go to the toilet! <

