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In Virtual Strike, Belgium's Ad Agencies Close Their Sites

Marketers Ignore Pitch Rules, Leading Shops to Protest and Host Open Letter

Posted by [Laurel Wentz](#) on [02.10.10 @ 03:41 PM](#)



NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- Belgium's ad agencies started a one-week virtual strike today to protest the way clients conduct pitches in their country.

Many advertisers in Belgium have stopped following an industry charter that sets norms ranging from an acceptable number of agencies in a pitch (no more than three) to contributing to agencies' pitch costs. So far, almost 20 agencies have closed their websites except for displaying one paragraph each of an open letter to clients that runs across their home pages, from one agency's site to the next ([famous.be](#)).



The letter begins: "Dear visitor, As you can see, we have replaced our regular website with this letter. It's going to stay up one week to express our discontent. Allow us to explain..." A link at the bottom of the screen says "Continue reading at" and links to the next agency's site and an explanation of the charter, why it exists, and how it is being violated.

"Because of the [economic] crisis, advertisers were getting aggressive and not following the rules, and it

only works if everyone sticks to the charter," said Luc De Leersnyder, CEO of the ACC, Belgium's association of communication companies, which masterminded the strike. "I wrote a letter to members [saying] if you're called into a pitch and know there are six or seven other guys and that you'll spend 80,000 euros on the pitch, you have a better chance at a casino."

It all started when the Belgian government's own national lottery invited 10 agencies to pitch, then made a shortlist of four agencies to re-pitch.

"Advertisers thought, 'If the lottery can do it, why not me?'" Mr. De Leersnyder said. In the last few months, two major pitches have had shortlists of more than 10 agencies, he said.

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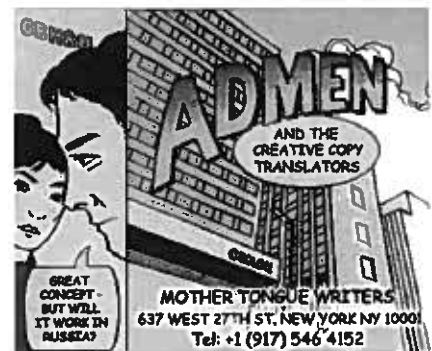
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When he proposed the virtual strike, a number of agencies wanted to post the letter, yet still keep their sites up, but Mr. De Leersnyder told them, "You're either on or off."

Earlier this week a few agencies began to post the letter, and when the strike officially began today there were almost 20, including JWT, Ogilvy, BBDO, Saatchi & Saatchi, McCann, and local shops such as Happiness, Famous, Tagora, Boondoogle, 7beaufort and Kunstmaan. In a cool feature, the letter is divided in sections according to the number of agencies participating. If there are six agencies, the letter is split into six pieces, and starts from the beginning no matter which agency's site is accessed. Mr. De Leersnyder said about six more agencies want to participate and will be added to the chain.

The letter is in English, which appears to be a PR gambit because neither of Belgium's two official languages is English, but most Belgian agencies' websites use English to avoid the expense and duplication of posting everything in both Flemish and French in such a small market. The phrase "The virtual strike is an initiative of ACC" appears on every page.

Mr. De Leersnyder said the virtual strike got 156 tweets in its first two hours, and is popping up on Facebook.

In other action, the ACC is meeting with the Belgian government about setting up a system for government advertising similar to that of the U.K., where a roster of agencies, reviewed every three years, pitches for government accounts.

1 Comment

By Michael G | Atlanta, GA February 10, 2010 09:45:30 pm:

On December 22, 1944, US Army General Anthony McAuliffe of the 101st Airborne Division was completely surrounded and vastly outnumbered by the German army at Bastogne, Belgium in what became famously known as the "Battle of the Bulge". He was asked to surrender or be annihilated. His response: "Nuts!" will forever go down in history for its courage and boldness in the face of overwhelming odds.

It is symbolic, that in the spirit of the General Tony McAuliffe's "Bastards of Bastogne", the ad agencies of Belgium have stood up and said: "Non bastardis carborundum" to would-be overpowering clients. In plain English: "Nuts!"

Never, never give up.

Mike McDonald
Co-founder, McDonald & Little, Atlanta
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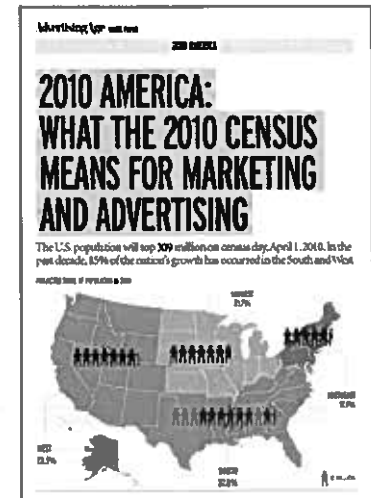
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Marketing

Belgian agencies strike over pitching process
10.02.2010
In a protest against the pitching process, Belgian ad agencies – including VVL BBDO, Saatchi, Famous, McCann Lowe, Kunstmaan, Bubka, and Ogilvy – have joined together in a week-long virtual strike.

In place of their standard websites, the agencies are hosting an open letter explaining their problems with the process and the fact that a charter agreed by the UBA (Union of Belgian Advertisers) and the ACC (Association of Communication Companies) in the 1990s, whereby no more than three agencies should be entitled to compete for a single piece of business, is now being ignored.

The letter appears in instalments across the front pages of each of the sites. To read the full contents of the letter, visitors need to click from site to site.

It is understood that the agencies have also pulled all of their ads today and are not communicating with any clients.

The virtual strike is an initiative of the ACC.

Click here to read an article by Michael Killeen of Dialogue, outlining his suggestions for improving the Irish pitching process.

Dear visitor,

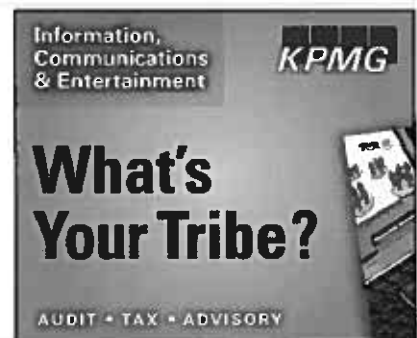
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DameWallis's Blog

Belgian Ad Agencies Virtual Strike

February 10, 2010 at 5:26 pm (General)

I caught wind of this via Twitter today. A group of Belgian advertising agencies (McCann Lowe, Kunstmaan, VVL BBDO, Saatchi, Punta Linea, VVL and Famous) have shut down their websites and have posted an open letter to clients, voicing their discontent with the state of advertising pitches. Basically, they are sick of pitching for business against multiple other agencies.

I transcribed the letter so I could post it for you here:

Dear visitor,

As you can see, we have replaced our regular website with this letter. It's going to stay up one week to express our discontent. Allow us to explain...

In the 1990's, the UBA and the ACC developed a charter. All the major players signed up to it, and it defined the rules of the game for agency pitches for over a decade. There's not much left of that charter now. For example, one of the things it states is that no more than three agencies (plus the incumbent) should ever be invited to pitch on any piece of business. But in recent competitions, we've sometimes seen more than 10 agencies throwing their names into the ring.

Why does that matter? Well, pitches, like boxing, work in rounds. You get through one round, and go on to the next. Last man standing wins. Unlike boxing, however, pitches rely on the participants punching themselves in the head. A big pitch can cost an agency upwards of 80000 euro. Just getting into the second round takes huge amounts of energy. And if you're lucky enough to get that far, you then have to invest even more resources just to have a chance of getting something out of it. And if 10 agencies are taking part, that's a 90% percent chance that you're taking a bruising for nothing.

If that were the end of it, who would care? Nobody's going to lose any sleep if there are a few less advertising agencies in the world but the thing is, it's not us who'll suffer: it's you were worried about. Pitches use up energy. Energy an agency would normally use to provide its existing, paying customers with the best possible work. So the logical conclusion of the system as it now stands is that at some point you will become a victim of it yourself.

The day will eventually come when your agency has to divert the creative and strategic energy you're paying it for into a pitch for some else's business. Our idea of a sane world is where you do your best work for the clients you do have. Not the ones you don't. So, we think it's in everyone's interests to get back to where we started: the charter.

The charter that was put together by wise men not to protect themselves but to protect their industry. The charter that makes sure a downturn doesn't turn into the demise of Belgian communications. The charter that ensures advertisers are matched with the agency they need. And that agencies are protected from their instinctive hunger not to miss out on opportunities. Besides, judging an agency isn't rocket science. Our work is on every street corner, and all over the internet, every day. (Except today, of course.)

Our reputation, our beliefs and our individual visions aren't exactly trade secrets. And our awards... well, if you haven't heard about them yet, you soon will. Talk to an agency and

you'll know right away if they see things the same way you do. But don't delude yourself. Asking an agency to pitch is not the same as briefing one. In a pitch, the only target audience is you. The only question an agency can ask itself is, "What do we need to do to get the client?" But it's never too late to change.

We recently confronted a major advertiser with how they were running their pitch. And they changed their speculative competition into a much more motivating and lower cost procedure. Great idea. Great result. But we didn't think of it. It was just in the charter. So let's not all lose hope just yet. Thanks for listening.

View the competition charter here. <http://bit.ly/adKLOG>

I never really worked on any pitches, but I watched them from behind my budget control reports. I'm not sure where I fall in terms opinion on a: this protest and b: the charter. But considering the changes and growth within our industry over the past few decades, would it really be advantageous to go back and rely on a charter that was created for another era?

Furthermore, you have banded together to voice your discontent through this strike. But as a large group of prominent agencies, why not police yourselves instead of putting your expectations of change onto previous, current and future clients? They are the clients. Why is it their responsibility to make sure you all play fair?

Business is business. Thoughts?



NOT FAIR!!!

Link: <http://bit.ly/bZQ0L3>

Feb
10

Belgian design agencies shutter websites in virtual 'strike' against spec work

Steve Douglas on February 10th, 2010

Over the next week, if you visit the website of any leading design or advertising agency in Belgium, you're likely to find a white screen and message that looks something like this:



A spec work manifesto?

Interesting stuff. Seems a group of Belgian advertising and design firms have banded together in a 'virtual strike' to protest spec work (speculative pitches in which the agency or designer performs an entire unpaid design gig, in the hopes of getting selected FOR the gig). The websites are linked together, and each 'page' of the online manifesto takes you to another participating website (the image above is the introduction). The HTML title tags of the websites now state "Website Closed". You can start reading about the campaign on the Ogilvy (Belgium) website.

The online protest was organized by some outfit called ACC (the Association of Communication Companies), a self-regulating body whose goal, at least according to their mission statement, is to "upgrade, promote and defend the profession (creative communication)". At issue here is our old bugaboo spec work, more specifically protection for the unpaid intellectual property involved and companies ignoring an earlier agreement that limited the number of firms participating in high-profile spec pitches. It's a noble effort, but unlikely to have much in the way of resonance with anyone BUT people already in the choir, as is usually the case with any anti-spec initiative. There's the usual push-back too, with some quarters accusing the participating agencies as 'whining'.

Worthwhile effort or publicity stunt?

Arguably, the virtual 'strike' is a publicity stunt (I would have thought a good one too) but so far, the mainstream media has been relatively silent about the effort. Will it have much of an impact? It's unlikely, but have to applaud participating firms for putting their 'virtual' money where their mouth is, even though the real impact on their actual bottom line is probably pretty minor. Don't think many of these players, Ogilvy and Saatchi for example, get much in the way of surf-in business. Also gotta give them kudos for managing to get so many design firms and advertising agencies, competing ones at that, on board. At the same time even. Organizing creative types is notoriously difficult, and has often been referred to as 'herding cats'.

Who's participating?

Decent turnout for a relatively small European country. Participating agencies include VVL BBDO, Boondoggle, Famous, Punta Linea, LDV, AIR, N-BBDO, Saatchi, Open Here, Fe Online, Kunstmaan, Bubka, Polygone Group, Tagora, Mccann-Lowe, JWT, LBI and Ogilvy.

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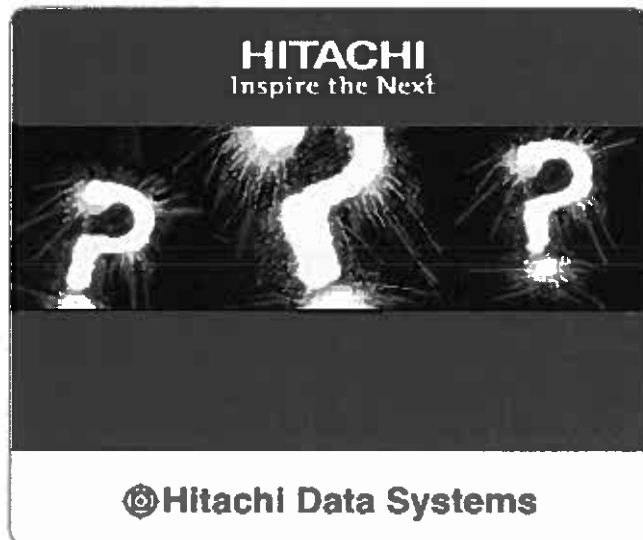
February 10, 2010

Saatchi, BBDO and other agencies go on virtual strike

Belgian companies remove their websites in pitch dispute

By Richard Plant [ShareThis](#)

Belgian ad agencies have launched a week long campaign to change the rules governing the process of bidding for new business.



The agencies, including global names like BBDO, McCann Lowe, Saatchi and Ogilvy, have closed their websites to normal traffic, and instead point visitors to an open letter criticising the current practice in bidding for advertising contracts.

The letter complains that companies have deviated from the process set up in the 1980's by advertising trade body UBA and the Association of Communication Companies (ACC). These rules state that no more than four agencies, including the current contract holder, should be allowed to pitch for any new business.

However, the letter states, this standard has been eroded in recent years, leading to a more competitive bidding process with as many as ten agencies involved. The companies complain that this consumes time and money for the losing bidders, diverting resources away from providing services for their existing clients.

The agencies claim that a return to the original principles in the charter would result in better advertising for both existing and new clients. The charter can be read on the ACC website.

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Allow us to explain....



WED 10 FEB 2010

Belgian ad agencies begin strike against pitching pro

Advertising / UK

The advertising agencies of Belgium have launched a virtual strike to change the number of agencies being asked to pitch.

The week-long virtual strike is being held by advertising agencies McCann Lowe, Kunstmaan, VVL BBDO, Saatchi, and Punta Li Famous, which have closed their sites to host an open letter that runs across the front page of each of their websites, from now on.

The virtual strike has taken place to highlight that the agencies do not want to agree and abide by a rule that no more than three agencies are invited to pitch for a single piece of business.

The charter is found at the end of the online trail which is shared together with the association of advertisers UBA, the Association of Advertisers of Conduct in case of a competition. It is a joint guidance document for agencies and advertisers describing the best practice in the management of the pitching process.

The results will be interesting for the rest of the international advertising community.

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Anonymous

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Anonymous Wed 10 Feb 2010 16:05

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Re

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It was me - I work from my bedroom hence have no overheads on price.

Re

Giles Moffatt

W

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