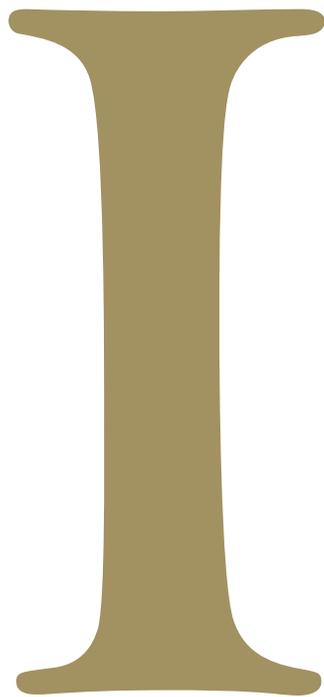


*“...put
multi-
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out of its
misery...”*

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AJAZ AHMED

EXECUTIVE INSIGHT



I love the fact you're shooting with old-fashioned film," says Ajaz Ahmed as *Think Quarterly's* photographer clicks, whirrs and winds through a roll of portrait shots in an East London studio. It's an unlikely thing for the 38-year-old founder and chairman of creative agency AKQA to say. He is, after all, a digital pioneer who understood that the future of media was online when the internet was still in its infancy. Ahmed seemed to sense instinctively that the new technology would democratize media, change the way people communicate, and galvanize a new era of self-expression and creativity. And he understood that these changes would have a profound effect on the way brands were advertised.

Ahmed apologizes for being tired, although it's hardly noticeable. When you're the head of a global organization (AKQA has eight offices in six time zones) it's not practical to stick to regular working hours, and he was on the job until the middle of the night. "I'm lucky that I work with organizations I love, and I'm passionate about it," he says, fending off the suggestion that he works too hard. "Working until 4am isn't a problem when it still feels like a labor of love." ➔

Ajaz Ahmed, founder and chairman of award-winning creative agency AKQA, explains how the innovative use of digital tools can connect your brand to an audience like never before.

WORDS BY *Matthew Lee*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Spencer Murphy*

Ahmed's passion is evidently shared by his colleagues, and has helped AKQA win more awards than any other digital advertising agency in the world. It was named US and UK Agency of the Year by both *Adweek* and *Campaign* in 2011, receiving acclaim for innovations such as a Heineken app that lets soccer fans predict scores during European Champions League games, and a Nike app that turns an iPhone into a personal trainer. Other clients on the roster include blue-chip brands like Audi, Visa, Volkswagen, Gap, Unilever, and Ferrari.

While Ahmed's journey from the Thames Valley to Silicon Valley is certainly some achievement, it's not the improbable leap it may at first appear. For an English teenager with an interest in computing, the western edge of London was a great place to be in the mid-'90s. Some of the biggest tech companies in the world had their UK offices in the region, and

"It's never been easier to skip, filter or avoid advertising so the best ideas are the ones that respect that the audience needs to get something out of the work; it should inspire, satisfy, or motivate them. You can't just bombard people with messages any more."

Ahmed worked for three of them – first at dBASE developer Ashton-Tate, followed by a stint at entertainment giant Ocean, and finally Apple. He left London to study business in the sleepy spa town of Bath, only to find himself missing the dynamism and fast pace of the tech industry.

It was while he was away, however, that Ahmed was struck by the realization that everything was changing. "A friend said he wanted to show me something in the computer lab at university," he explains. "I headed over and he showed me a picture. I asked what was so special about it and he told me he'd downloaded it from America. Something clicked. It was the convergence of media and technology that Apple had been talking about when I was there. I felt I needed to leave university and start a company that would help brands navigate this landscape."

Ahmed launched AKQA in 1994 at the ripe old age of 21 – the company ➤



name is based on his initials. He hit the ground running, rapidly earning a reputation for being able to successfully steer brands through this strange new world. Typically, websites in the mid-'90s were 'brochureware' – static sites that failed to take advantage of the web's potential to engage audiences in creative and interactive ways. "The difference with us was that we saw the web as software," Ahmed explains. "We wanted to put multimedocrity out of its misery and use technology to celebrate the spirit of our clients."

In 2001, the agency announced a merger with companies from North America and Singapore, significantly expanding its global reach – in terms of both clients and markets – along with its ability to find new ways to explore the full marketing potential of the evolving technology. Eleven years after the merger, Ahmed believes that "digital has now become the visible expression of a brand."

The 1960s is often referred to as advertising's 'golden age,' and yet by Ahmed's reckoning, we're in it right now. You only have to watch an episode of *Mad Men* to see how creatively limited the industry was when restricted to print, radio, and TV. Companies delivered blunt messages in broad terms to a homogeneous audience. By comparison, Ahmed says, digital offers an extraordinary canvas. A brand can use social media such as Twitter or Google+ to engage directly with its customers and develop relationships; it can upload videos to YouTube that users can share with their friends; it can create a mobile app able to tap into the needs and desires of a local community.

"Advertising used to be about interrupting people's days with messages," Ahmed says. "But now it's never been easier for audiences to skip, filter, or avoid advertising, so the best ideas are the ones that respect that the audience needs to get something out of the work; it should inspire, satisfy,

"Small ideas when nurtured well can go from being embryos to giants. The magic is in the product, the values, and the spirit of the brand, so it must seek to amplify these truths in an interesting, consistent voice across all customer touchpoints."

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The key for brands is to transform themselves from message-pushers into storytellers. "It used to be that the press or TV ad was the most visible expression of a brand. Today, the customer journey will start on mobile, YouTube, or a social platform. That means all brands are going to have to become better storytellers, using digital to convey their message as it's the most effective and powerful way to connect with audiences," Ahmed says. Like any good story, if people like it, they'll share it. Thus minimal paid media is converted into highly valuable earned media on social platforms.

"The most compelling stories are told by brands that use the inherent properties of social media to do something that can't be done in another media," he continues, citing AKQA's work for Nike in which they used Facebook as a platform to search for talented footballers around the world. Seventy-five thousand soccer players competed for places at the Nike Academy, and over five million people viewed the videos. It was an astonishingly successful campaign that took advantage of the functionality of social media to push Nike's 25-year-old message, 'Just Do It.' "We use social media to bring brands closer to their audiences," Ahmed says. "We want to turn conversations into relationships and contribute to communities with inspirational work."

The increased sales of smart-phones equipped with GPS technology suggests that mobile advertising is likely to play a large role in AKQA's future work. "Trying to retro-fit a TV advert on a cell phone probably won't succeed, but if you think about using location-based ideas that can't be done on the web or TV, then it will likely achieve better results," he says. ➤

Practicing what they preach, AKQA developed a successful mobile app for Gap that allowed customers in San Francisco to receive vouchers automatically for nearby stores. Once inside, the app enabled those customers to photograph themselves to see what they'd look like wearing the styles on sale. And if they weren't sure whether they liked what they saw, they could share the pictures via social media for instant feedback from friends and the wider Gap community. AKQA has also worked on location-based services for the likes of USPS (on-the-go access to postal services in your area) and Delta (including a useful app to locate your car after landing).

Digital makes it easier to assess what does and doesn't work, with analytics software telling you everything you need to know about web traffic and the effectiveness of your marketing. In turn, it becomes easier for clients to assess the agency's contribution. "There are four ways of measuring the success of our work," Ahmed says. "Have we increased the brand equity of the client? Have we generated additional sales? Have we generated additional shareholder value? Have we lowered our clients' costs by increasing efficiency?"

A celebrated AKQA campaign that certainly succeeded was a 2006 video made for Coca-Cola in which English soccer star Wayne Rooney appeared nonchalantly doing juggling tricks with an empty Coke can. It was a great example of digital advertising that consumers felt compelled to share, and was viewed over eight million times.

Where do simple but brilliant ideas like this come from? When you have the best and brightest creative minds in eight cities worldwide, Ahmed says, the ideas can come from anywhere. And with digital's potential to reach out to many different customers in many different ways, there's no longer an imperative to land the single big idea.

"Big ideas are courageous, ambitious, revolutionary, and rare," he explains.

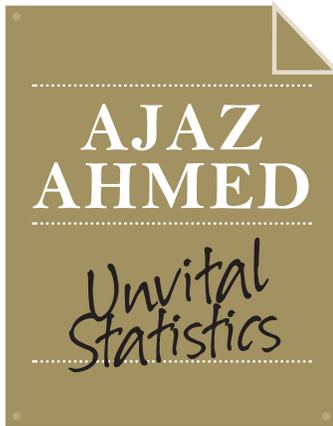


"But the 'big idea' is a cliché; an identikit term that's become deprived of feeling." Instead, Ahmed suggests, brands should be looking for ideas that can go viral. "The only ideas that matter are the ones that people want to share, because the built-in digital infrastructure has accelerated the velocity of distribution, whether through social networks, ecommerce, or an app store," he explains.

In this context, it doesn't really matter if an idea is big or small. "Small ideas when nurtured well can go from being embryos to giants," says Ahmed. "What's important is that agencies respect audiences and be artful. The magic is in the product, the values, and the spirit of the brand, so it must

seek to amplify these truths in an interesting, consistent voice across all customer touchpoints."

Ahmed points to YouTube as an example: "YouTube provides multiple formats for advertising. One that's incredibly accessible for a brand is to have an ad at the beginning of a video. An agency's responsibility is to make that ad artful and creative so a viewer doesn't want to skip it. You've got to use the inherent properties of digital – be creative and interactive, use multimedia, don't be linear. Instead of using formats that existed in the old media and trying to refit them, the challenge is to be innovative with the new technology to tell a client's story in a better way." ©



Which piece of music alters your state of mind?

Most recently, songs from Ed Sheeran, Adele, The xx, and Florence and the Machine. Every now and then I go back to listening to Bob Dylan, The Streets, and Kings of Leon because their tunes remind me of an important moment in my life.

Who is your inspiration?

My parents. Their stories are an extraordinary and beautiful adventure in serendipity.

What do you want to be when you're older?

Someone who has nothing left to give.

What is your earliest memory?

Aged four, running around like crazy trying to keep even younger cousins entertained.

When was your last moment of clarity?

Realizing that not having your spirit crushed is the key to all motivation.

What does success look like to you?

Getting anything that crushes your spirit out of the way.

What's your signature dish?

Jamie Oliver's '20 Minute Meals' app.

What was your greatest mistake?

I've been working since I was 15. I've made mistakes, observed others, and hopefully learned not to repeat them. But I look forward to making plenty of new ones.

What is your greatest extravagance?

I've opted for a simple life. There will always be someone else with more.

When did you last let yourself go?

When I was 14.

How much is enough?

When it's the fuel for progress, never.

What gets you out of bed in the morning?

Knowing the best days are when you get to see the sunrise and the worst days are when you don't get up early enough.

If you had to stay in one place, where would it be?

Tokyo.

Tell us a joke.

Stream my two favorite films – *Airplane!* and *Zoolander* – they have much better jokes than I can tell.

What is your biggest failure?

Not being able to get a private jet.

What do you want that you can't have?

A private jet. Especially when delayed for five hours waiting for an internal flight in the US like I am now.

What do you see in the mirror?

My father's son 🍷