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THIS WEEK



i-mode: 3G services at 2G ease?



Nike Plus lays down challenge in Hong Kong

Is SIA ready to welcome a new suitor?

Robin Hicks, 25 January 2007



Singapore Airlines...many argue that its advertising has lots its sparkle

Agencies had just 15 days to hit the request for information (RFI) deadline - 23 January - for the S\$100 million (US\$65 million) global creative review of Singapore Airlines, arguably Asia's most prestigious advertiser.

This, say sources, is an early sign of what SIA expects. It is a very efficient and well-run company. Its advertising agency should be too. But the pitch, even with R3 managing it, is expected to drag on for six months at least. This is hardly surprising.

SIA's insistence that the review is a "level playing field" and "cleaner than clean" will mean agency documents and presentations are meticulously scrutinised. And the airline's call for an agency with global reach, integrated credentials and a track record for building iconic brands could mean any network.

Which is why there's no sense speculating on early favourites. Everyone without an airline will pitch. And SIA likes to keep above- and below-the-line separate, so TBWA - which handles Krisflyer (SIA's loyalty business) - is by no means a shoe-in.

Even long-time incumbent Batey, which hasn't set the world alight with SIA advertising in recent years, has as good a chance as anyone. Partly because SIA is a very (some say blindly) loyal client who will be loathed to drop its agency of three decades which gave the world the Singapore Girl. And partly because SIA may not be ready to work with a new agency.

The review, say insiders, was called mainly because SIA's marketing department had run out of reasons for it not to be. As a publicly-listed company, SIA is obliged to periodically review all suppliers, from engines to sick bags.

So when Rick Scott-Blackhall, the last of the old guard (who co-founded Batey Ads with Ian Batey in 1972, with SIA as their founding client) left at the end of last year, it could no longer be argued that the people who made SIA great were still in place. A review became a fait accompli.

No, Singapore Airlines, despite its legendary reputation for business nous, is not renowned for the progressiveness of its marketers. Its advertising was good in the early years, says a former Batey man, because "Ian (Batey) used to fight bitterly for good creative - and would always win. Now the guys Batey used to boss around are running the show. Some have been there for over 20 years - and it shows in the work."

But now is their big chance to make their mark. While the airline continues to boast an enviable balance sheet (yearly profits still hit S\$1 billion), few - other than Batey CEO Alan Fairington - would argue this is thanks to the effectiveness of the advertising.

SIA's adspend has been static, overall, for the past decade. With cost-cutting a review priority, SIA's marketers will be looking for an agency that can deliver harder- working advertising.

Not least because the brand pillars that used to distinguish SIA - first class fleet, superior service and pretty flight crew - have been copied by its rivals. And its once-unassailable lead in the Business Travel Poll has slipped consistently in the past six years as Qantas, Malaysian Airlines, Thai Airways and Cathay Pacific have

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upped their game.

Singapore Airlines, says one source, "is a big company and a big brand - but it can be very small-minded. Let's just hope it'll be big enough to make the right appointment - and give SIA back its sparkle".

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