

# SIA's snub gives WPP serious pause for thought

## PERSPECTIVE



Has WPP's star fallen in Asia? Perhaps not, but a wobbly few weeks for its agencies would suggest that its stars aren't nearly as aligned as it would have hoped.

Indeed, recent events haven't been kind to the most creative, respected and, let's face it, feared agencies in Asia. In a high profile snub — and a move that stunned the industry — WPP found its agencies cut from the Singapore Airlines shortlist — 35-year incumbent Batey, Y&R and the newly-created Bates-Ogilvy unit, Gold.

For the holding company, a humiliating blow. For Asia, a sad day, one when the fate of its oldest and youngest creative shops was sealed in a single pitch.

Much of the attention is now focused on the final contenders — DDB, TBWA and Publicis. The odds appear to be evenly split between the Omnicom pair. DDB for one brings strong SIA knowledge, local understanding and ex-Batey staffers — all the makings of a safe bet.

Emirates aside, TBWA may still have the upper hand on its sibling. Its success with Krisflyer speaks for itself, talent is strong, integration respected and relationships solid. Its only drawback, however, could be its brand. While TBWA is edgy, ballsy and, well, disruptive, SIA is cautious and conventional. The pair

would make interesting bedfellows — and could give SIA creativity the spark it clearly needs.

Then, of course, there's Publicis, the dark horse. The agency is keeping its cards suspiciously close to its chest. Even in an industry that loves to natter, delving into overseas resources for its presentation is unclear. What's curious, however, is its inclusion on the shortlist. After all, who can forget that rather embarrassing full-page ad the agency placed in *The Straits Times* requesting a meeting with the airline's management? In the form of a letter to SIA, the ad read:

"For your information, Mr Levy-Lambert, who has just won the prize of regional agency head of the year 2004 at last night's *Media* awards in Hong Kong, has been a loyal and very happy Solitaire PPS member for more than 10 years." Whether it's sheer inquisitiveness or genuine interest that has Publicis in the final pitch is debatable.

But, back to WPP. The Gold offering — spawned at the eleventh hour (perhaps out of a need for familiarity, or a frantic bid to bolster Bates' airline experience) — was arguably a bad fit from the start. Neither could SIA have taken kindly to some of the public criticism of its creative work. (Ironically, the criticism came at a time when Ogilvy Singapore's own creative star was falling, with the agency losing ground in regional cre-

ative rankings to rivals and dropping from first to third place.)

So was WPP's bid doomed from the start? Sources suggest that SIA was clear in its initial opposition to and, later, dissatisfaction with the Batey acquisition. As a brand whose DNA was so intricately linked to an independent, the carrier understandably fought loyally to protect that impartiality.

That said, WPP must not be entirely held accountable for Batey's fate. Several factors will have, over the years, contributed to its demise, and for that Batey too must take some of the responsibility. A lack of vision, failure to deliver on creative and adapt to the new media environment would surely have helped drive those final nails in the coffin.

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**Mark Clifford may have only spent** a year as editor-in-chief at the *South China Morning Post*, but he will be remembered, albeit for the wrong reasons. The newsroom, under his guard, was plagued by senior departures. Editor Fanny Fung, managing editor Pauline Loong, business editor Stuart

Jackson, *Post Magazine* editor Desiree Au and Sunday paper editor Niall Fraser all walked in the last six months. After a no-confidence vote in Clifford from staff late last year, few should be surprised by his exit.

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