

Surprise choices reach SIA pitch final

TBWA, Publicis and DDB in final pitch showdown as they bid for a piece of Asian advertising history. By Robin Hicks

SIA LOWDOWN

The shortlist for the first round of the Singapore Airlines (SIA) global creative review, announced on 12 February, did not surprise anyone. The list for the final round, revealed by *Media* on 9 March, was a genuine shock.

Three of Asia's youngest networks — TBWA, Publicis and DDB — were chosen ahead of well-established contenders from the region's most powerful communications group, WPP.

Out went Gold — an agency created especially for SIA staffed by big-hitters from Ogilvy and Bates — as did Y&R, along with Publicis Groupe's Saatchi & Saatchi and Leo Burnett. But the real bombshell was that long-time incumbent Batey was denied one last chance to prove it could repeat past glories. SIA walked away from the agency which, over 34 years of service, has made it into one of the world's most revered brands, and clouds now hang over Batey's future.

The new era Batey's exclusion proves that this is more than a tyre-kicking exercise. SIA wants to start afresh. But the names in the final round suggest the airline isn't looking for a dramatic creative overhaul.



SIA...to be positioned as "the brand for air travel now, and the for next 10 years"

The iconic Singapore Girl must live on, the client has insisted. The question is how she is updated.

All three will have produced strong creative ideas to come this far. It's now a question of cultural fit and having a local "ground crew". Pitch teams must consist of people who will go straight to work on the business — and stick around. "SIA wants a 10-year plan that covers people as

well as strategy," notes one observer. "It is not impressed by network hotshots who'll disappear. Yes, SIA is a global brand, but a more local company is hard to find."

The brief Agencies have been tasked to position SIA as 'the brand for air travel now, and for the next 10 years' under the existing banner 'A great way to fly'. Key will be interpreting SIA's brand pillars — a high-

tech fleet, superior service and attractive air stewardesses — and to do so with a budget that is not expected to grow. So the winner will need to show how it will make savings and deliver harder-working advertising.

An emphasis will also fall on digital capability: SIA wants to capture growth in online booking sales and increase online revenues by 20 per cent.

The client The pitch has been efficiently run (by R3) and marketing chief Huang Cheng Eng has placed transparency high on the agenda. The process has been speedier than expected, and the final round is expected on 9 and 10 April — 12 weeks after the review was called.

Quiet and conservative, SIA's marketing team is not known for its flamboyance; educated at Singapore's old universities, most members are engineers turned marketers. Nor is it fond of taking risks. Some believe SIA would have happily stayed with Batey indefinitely had a review been avoidable.

But, notes one source: "It has a passion for product and brand that is rare in clients. It is obsessive, and will expect suitable rigour from its new agency."

SIA has shown another rare trait in client circles: dignity. Agencies knocked out of the final round were informed in person, one by one.

Word on the street

In a major bombshell, Batey Advertising was dropped from the Singapore Airlines shortlist after 35 years of service. Asia's homegrown agency helped build one of the most respected Asian brands in the world. Now, as its future hangs in the balance, two industry watchers have their say:

"Hats off to Ian Batey and his team, who did a truly remarkable job. It has to be said that their brand communication and positioning enabled the airline to become one of the most respected in the world today."

Ogilvy & Mather Asia-Pacific co-chairman Tham Khai Meng.

"The advertising doesn't feel as contemporary as the brand, and has become too warm, fuzzy and predictable. I'm not saying the Singapore Girl should go, but people are no longer surprised by SIA's advertising."

Linda Locke, regional creative director, Leo Burnett

TBWA



Brett...ten years experience building TBWA in Singapore

Strengths Krisflyer relationship, digital, integration
Weaknesses Light on locals, Emirates connection

Tequila handles SIA's loyalty business, Krisflyer — and does a good job. But this could prove a curse not a blessing for sibling TBWA. SIA likes to keep above- and below-the-line separate — and it will take a convincing argument to persuade the client otherwise. Digital could prove a better trump card. With creative integrator Graham Kelly comfortable in any medium, and digital CD Jeff Cheong in support, TBWA looks a better bet than its rivals, none of which are particularly good at digital.

A perceived weakness is a lack of locals. But Phil Brett, the chairman, has spent 10 years in Singapore — and always with one agency. More of a worry for the team, which includes group MD Dan Paris, planning director Robin Nayak and the tenacious business development director Lou Dela Pena, is that SIA doesn't find TBWA's Disruption mantra too rich for its blood. And will TBWA's ties with Emirates not offend?

DDB



Johnson...reputation for no-nonsense creative

Strengths Very local, SIA experience, effectiveness
Weaknesses unglamorous creative, patchy network

DDB Singapore has a reputation for no-nonsense, effective advertising. This suits SIA. Pitching with Interbrand (run by DDB worldwide CEO Chuck Brymer) will appeal to SIA's desire to find better ways to value and measure its brand.

But it is the localness of its work, clients and people that give DDB its edge. David Tang, big on effectiveness, is unlikely to tire of reminding the client that he is the only Singaporean CEO of a top 10 agency. Neil Johnson has built a nine-year partnership with Tang, and has worked on both global and local accounts as ECD. Tim Evill has 12 years' Singapore experience, most of them as CD of Batey. Simon Lockyer comes in with experience account managing British Airways and Cathay Pacific, plus a stint as a client at Air Canada. Milo Chao provides the planning brains while Adam Good, president of Tribal DDB Asia-Pacific, jets in from China to provide digital know-how.

Publicis



Soh...widely-respected veteran of Singapore's ad scene

Strengths Soh/Godfrey partnership, fresh network offer
Weaknesses Unknown quantity, digital offering

Publicis is an improving creative force led by Calvin Soh, a veteran of Singapore's ad scene and widely liked and respected. Just as important is COO Matthew Godfrey, who has more than a decade's experience in Asia, and is regarded as one of the best suits in the region. Account man Dan Hardy, strategy chief George Singleton and digital head Arlene Ang are also believed to be involved. And rumours swirl that talent from Fallon London with airline experience have flown in to help.

Publicis is the dark horse, and has kept its cards to its chest. Wisely so. *That open letter in The Straits Times* three years ago, from Publicis regional chairman Guillaume Levy-Lambert to Chew Choon Seng (inviting the SIA CEO 'to share some exciting and wonderful business ideas') was considered a public embarrassment for the airline. Publicis will be hoping that all has been forgotten.

AGENCY, BRAND & MEDIA FINDER

21 Communications.....6	BBC.....13	Carlsberg.....1	Coca-Cola.....6,8	Eye.....13	HP.....5
ADK.....8	BBDO.....3	Cathay Pacific.....2,3	Courts.....3	FedEx.....3	HSBC.....5
Arc.....1	BBH.....3	China Airlines.....19	DDB.....1,2,5	Google.....1	Interstudio.....27
Baidu.com.....13	BMW.....5	China Media Exchange.....8	Delmonte.....3	Grey.....3	IPG.....8
Bank of China.....18	British Airways.....2	China Mobile.....18	Dentsu.....8	GroupM.....8	Johnson & Johnson.....3
Bates.....1,3	Budweiser.....1	Chris Pan.....6,20	DraftFCB.....3,20	Hakuhodo.....8	JWT.....5,8
Batey.....3	BusinessWeek.....20	CNBC.....8	Euro RSCG.....8	Heineken.....1	KTF mhow.....3