

Management & Leadership

Pack leader in the hunt for new ways of thinking

John Hunt of global advertising agency TBWA tells Doug Gordon about the art of the idea

WHEN TBWA Hunt Lascaris relocated to Sandown last February, the movers broke down co-chairman John Hunt's desk and an electronic bug fell out.

It was a legacy of an era when he worked on the African National Congress's (ANC's) campaign for the 1994 elections, when bomb threats and "third force" ops sabotaged the path of change for even the most maverick agency in the advertising industry.

"The bug was rusted and long out of service, and it disappeared with the rest of the junk that's discarded when you move on," says Hunt. "I should have kept it and had it framed as a memento of those crazy days. Then again, times right now are just as interesting. Change means new ideas, and if they're any good they always make people nervous."

At 54, the kid who dropped out of Wits university by lunchtime on his first day still lives by his instincts when it comes to making decisions. Picasso could draw a complete picture — a bull, a horse — with a single line, and Hunt's book, *The Art of the Idea* (Zebra Press), takes an equally direct approach to finding simple ideas upon which megabuck advertising campaigns are created.

It can apply to decision-making at every level of business. In 20 crisp chapters, the book cuts through the endless brushwork of "creative discussion", in which innovative ideas can be sidetracked by agendas that favour comfort zones. Resistance to new ideas is part of our makeup, Hunt warns, and a tough sell is often a sign of an idea worth following up.

While this hardcore approach might defy conventional wisdom and business practice, he adds, "I've never seen an idea brown-nosed to greatness".

Expediency was the last thing on the mind of Hunt and his colleague, Reg Lascaris (his co-chairman today) back in 1992 when they met Nelson Mandela for the first time at the offices of a cinema group in Johannesburg's Carlton Centre. They were nervous. They were there to discuss an election campaign, which would become the greatest example of product placement in advertising history. And the world's most celebrated former political prisoner kept them waiting for 20 minutes while he listened carefully to a cleaning lady's advice on the matter.

"There were no cameras around, no media, but Madiba is

old school," says Hunt. "His bearing and manners were shaped in the 1950s. He was emerging from jail as a modern African messiah and stepping on to the media platform to lead his country and his people to a free society. The rule is that politicians are better off as media creations than in real life, but Mandela defied that convention. He was the real deal: a man of the people who happened to be a media phenomenon."

At the time, Hunt and Lascaris were still relative newcomers in their industry, with a growing reputation for their ability to reach every corner of the national consumer market with indelible punchlines. They'd set the pace with their first winning idea, Nashua's Saving You Time, Saving You Money, Putting You First.

"It broke the rule that slogans must be set in one line, not three," says Hunt. "It was counterintuitive but the client backed us up. In 1983 we were in the midst of a deep and gloomy recession, much as we are now, but I find that all of our agencies that are doing well globally have emerged from a market downturn with stronger and more innovative ideas."

A flak jacket might have helped too, as Hunt Lascaris decided during the final decade of apartheid to be the first South African agency to become a global player. They did it by teaming up with worldwide giant TBWA, a move that made them seem even more rascally as far as the National Party government and the advertising industry establishment was concerned.

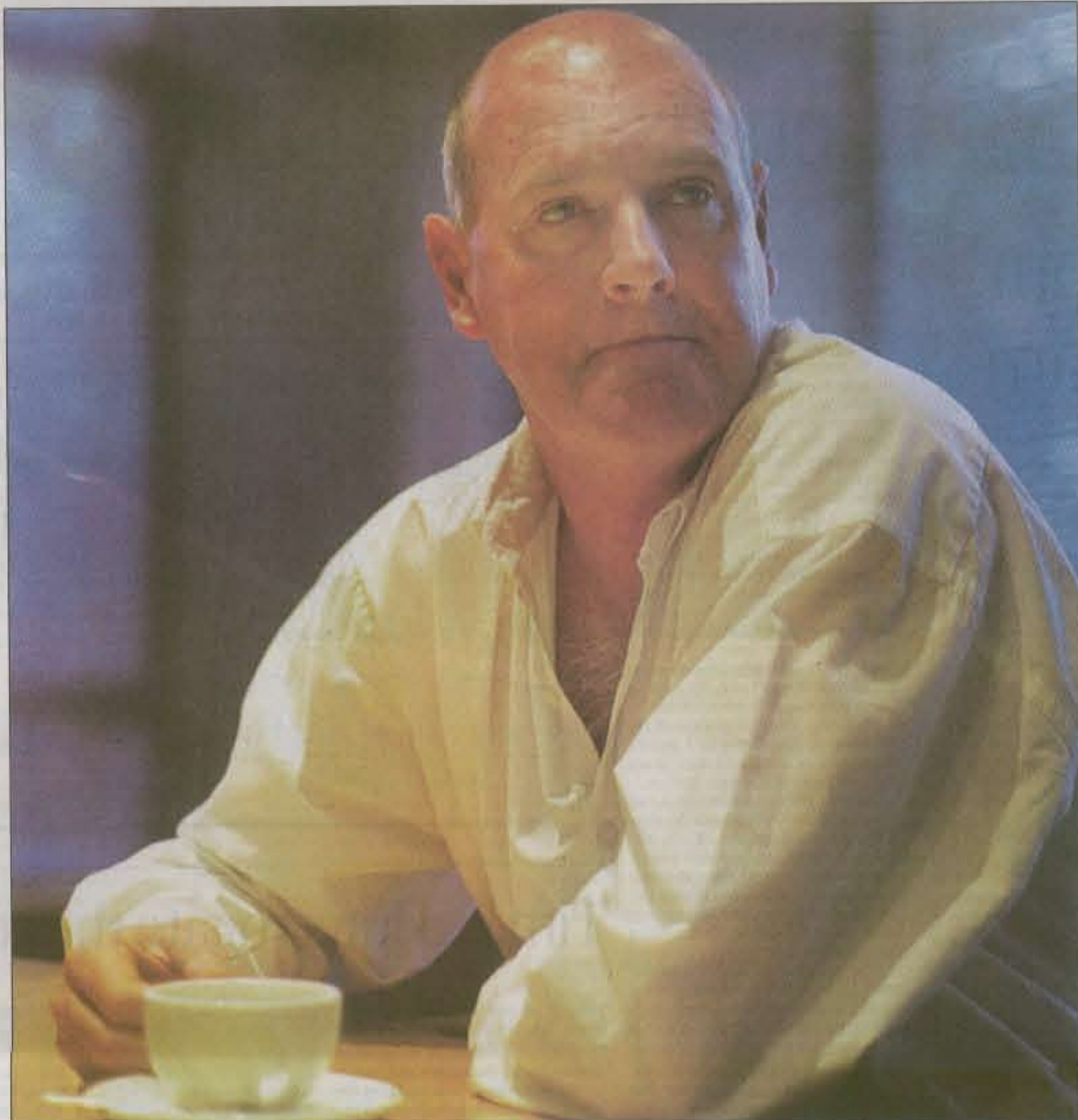
"We weren't brash, but from day one we wanted to be the first world-class agency out of Africa," says Hunt.

"We were creating successful campaigns but still seen as outsiders. The industry 25 years ago was mostly an old boys' network, the agencies and clients. We were iconoclastic — asking to be judged by our ideas rather than by our connections. A little 'voor op die waen' (presumptuous), as they say."

Their self-assurance did attract like-minded clients, such as Nando's. The linkage resonated with a public eager to embrace brands that cheerfully cocked a snoot at the old order.

"When we took over, there were three Nando's outlets and they weren't paying their bills," Hunt grins.

"Culturally, we were a match. That was the tipping point for us. The first few years were tough



CUP AND SORCERER: John Hunt of TBWA Hunt Lascaris ... 'I've never seen an idea brown-nosed to greatness'. Picture: MARIANNE PRETORIUS

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because the market wasn't sure if we were different because we were right or because we were wrong. But we didn't doubt our instincts for a moment."

Despite an unbroken run of success in selling commercial products, the agency has also maintained its street cred on community issues across all party lines. Their iconic blue-and-white dove logo for the Peace campaign struck a chord during the turbulent '80s, and may have swung the balance towards Hunt and Lascaris being chosen as media consultants for the ANC's debut run for government.

It coincided with their move to a large new premises in Weirda Valley, then a tranquil, gardened haven down the road from Sandton City.

That didn't last long. Within weeks of announcing the ANC account, the agency became the

first to install a "safe zone" within its building to prevent its planning sessions from being tapped. Then the client's own security experts uncovered plans to bomb the agency, which they countered by erecting a green, high-security fence around the property.

It became routine that the staff's phones were tapped. The safe zone was staffed in shifts and operated 24 hours a day, headed by Gavin Heron, now the MD of the agency.

"The hostility towards us was surprising," Hunt reflects. "We weren't even running attacks on the client's election rivals. We tested a few negative ads, and the feedback was that the past was over and the voters wanted to look to the future. The only campaign that aired briefly was a send-up of the old minister of police; his nose would grow longer every time he uttered one of the familiar government lines. It wasn't nasty in the hard-hitting style of American election ads."

The essence of the ANC's campaign depended on central issues like its charismatic leader, human rights, housing, employment and education. There are strong echoes of that election strategy in 1992 in Barack Obama's run for the White House last year, and Hunt agrees that their work with Mandela elevated the South

African agency's status as a multinational player.

It proved to be significant rainmaker, too. Today, 44 agencies in the TBWA network report to the Sandton headquarters, 28 in Africa and the others in the Middle East.

Working on a level, democratic playing field has sharpened Hunt's appetite for fresh ideas to a razor edge. Campaigns for brand leaders such as Nando's and BMW have set down markers for today's clients such as Standard Bank and Nissan in the consumer culture.

His team collects annual advertising awards like Barcelona wins football trophies, but the hallelujahs are still balanced by an ongoing investment in the community, here and increasingly elsewhere in the rest of Africa.

It's a productive mix. This year, Hunt, TBWA's worldwide creative director, helped devise a \$3 000 campaign for a beleaguered independent newspaper, The Zimbabwean, using another simple idea to scoop the most comprehensive victory in the annals of the Cannes Lions awards.

Most of that meagre budget was spent on buying up worthless Zimbabwe bank notes by the sackload from street vendors around Johannesburg, which were then plastered across billboards over the slogan: "Thanks to

Mugabe, This Money Is Wallpaper". Motorists uploaded photos of it online, publications such as the New York Times and Washington Post ran the pictures, and hits on The Zimbabwean's website went up from 2 000 a week to 2-million.

"Sure, it's a buzz to win the Grand Prix at Cannes and all the other golds and silvers," says Hunt. "But it's even more exciting to come up with an idea that sparked an immediate reaction among the global media community. So much of what we said in the ANC's election campaign 15 years ago, like freedom of speech and human rights, underlies The Zimbabwean campaign."

Creating a campaign to make Zimbabwe itself as welcome to the world is not on the table yet, though. Not until Robert Mugabe is history, anyway.

"We've been approached once or twice by states in Africa," Hunt admits, "and I'd love to do those sort of projects. Advertising has been traditionally approached to sell products like baked beans, but more and more it's becoming a new avenue of communication. It promotes causes as well as products, where you can make a difference. I'd love the opportunity of running a campaign for Zimbabwe's first elections in a post-Mugabe era."