IAB Engage 2009

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And so, the mayhem begins. And the **?keep fit, be happy?** motif that the IAB doggedly maintains throughout **IAB Engage 2009** has already been compromised by the offer of free bacon sarnies and chocolates by Yahoo in the foyer. Nonetheless, the UK online ad industry?s biggest event of the year is here again and we?re all abuzz with excitement and the usual confusion about how exactly they discovered the venue.

Still, let?s get going?

?**Sir Guy Phillipson** is wearing a tracksuit! And a bad one. So attired he runs us through what?s been happening on the webnet this year. Cleverly he uses a slide put together by OMD/the IPA?s Matt Simpson to say that online display advertising is ripe for growth. What the slide actually tells us is what my former colleagues at Circus Street and I have been banging on about for ages - virtually ALL internet ads are direct response (search, CPA banners, affiliates), despite the web?s best efforts (especially the IAB) to tease brand cash from advertisers.

Still, Sir Guy has set the tone for the day - brand ads SHOULD now come to the web it is constantly argued - and, by the end of it, even I am half-convinced.

And thus the first speaker emerges into the lights and it?s? Heston Blumenthal! So striking is the similarity between web guru **Charlie Leadbeater** and the obsessive scientific super-chef, it?s hard to imagine it?s anyone else. So what the hell does Heston Blumenthal know about the web we wonder? Well, it turns out, quite a bit. His greatest nugget in a polished and relaxed performance (aside from listening to the sound of the sea while you?re eating a prawn cocktail) is that, to understand how to approach the next ten years, the key is to think about not doing things ?for? people, and definitely not ?to? them, but doing it ?with? them. Everyone looks suitably poignant and claps the Michelin-starred web commentator off stage.

Hot on his heels is **Jeff Levick**, AOL?s VP of something to do with strategy. He has a great voice and cuts a fine figure of a man - he clearly runs a lot. But, unfortunately, he doesn?t do the perception that AOL is a bit confused any harm with his own argument for why brand ads should come online. Big advertisers don?t want to advertise against reality TV and 60% of all prime-time telly is now reality TV, he says. Much as I?d like to believe him, a questioner makes the unhelpful point that the X Factor is drawing huge audiences and whopping great ad support too.

Levick also has a neat slide about how content and advertising WILL now work because technologies and skills exist to package them up together for delivery, rather than arriving from different worlds as they have in the past. It?s nice but not very specific. But, he?s still got a great voice.

And so? what, Guy?s back? He?s got a suit on now and he?s about to run us through UKCOM, the very long-awaited online planning currency. **Louise Ainsworth**, the lovely boss of Nielsen Online in the UK - and I imagine now a much happier woman, given they won the pitch for UKCOM against fierce rival ComScore - gives it all some credibility by running through the details. It all sounds pretty good and advertisers will have at last a planning tool that makes sense alongside all the other ones (BARB, RAJAR,

NRS, POSTAR). There is merit in the arguments - put by one audience member - that it doesn?t really make sense in online, particularly where we?re all moving to understanding and measuring ?engagement?, rather than audience reach and frequency. But, ?proper? advertisers need and want it. And here it is. Cracking. It also helps along the theme that maybe 2010 will be the year that brand cash makes its way to the web.

TEA! COFFEE!

Post-break, IAB action man **Kieron Matthews** is on stage to give his annual review of creative work in the sector. There are always problems with this bit because, while one has to accept Kieron?s credentials for performing such a task (he?s ex BBH and marketing director of Dare after all) he tends to adopt ?the training voice?. It is a voice this writer?s wife knows well and it winds her up no end. It has a level of instructive authority to it that gets people?s back up if they?re not actually in a training session - and Kieron does a lot of training.

Nonetheless, he makes a very excellent point: the standard of ?creativity? as we understand it (that is fancy web sites and ad campaigns) appears to have been low this year. He argues this is because we?re all focused on selling product (we?re back to the DR focus here) rather than understanding our customers. It?s an interesting one and I wonder if some thoughts I?ve explored before in a post on how digital planning doesn?t start with intense demographic segmentation (it?s more about their real journeys and language) isn?t related.

Anyway, good stuff and that tracksuit actually looks quite good.

So, next, how about a five-minute vision of our mobile futures from Telefonica/O2, presented by head of O2 Media Shaun Gregory? Actually, it wasn?t our futures on display but that of a pretty girl of unspecified age. It was a gigantic piece of marketing guff and did little except to force all the men in the audience to wonder if it was okay to fancy her.

Then, Dan Rosen, mobile dude at AKQA presents some work. Nike Photo ID is a bit old, one came from Japan (it was very cool mind) and the UN one is old too. This confirms suspicions that nothing has happened in mobile [advertising] in 2009, because everyone dropped cool stuff to do search even harder.

And so to the lowlight - the panels. The first is hosted by old media digital godfather **Bill Murray** and sees him giving a group of other old media digital chiefs (Indie, Mail Online, NYT, Bauer) the easiest grilling of their lives. ?You?re all doing brilliantly because you?re trusted brands with a great relationship with your customers and proper content right??. ?Yes, yes we are.? Thanks. Let?s move on then.

Let?s indeed. For **Mark Lund**, who I imagine we really should have heard of (it?s clear he?s ex-ad agency boss type) and is now chief exec of the [country's biggest advertiser] COI, is full of good lines, audience participation, energy, interesting subjects (how tackling climate change, obesity, binge-drinking, smoking and the like is really quite hard) and a commitment to digital, particularly social media. It?s all good and ends in a plea for the people in the room to help him do it all. We?re all virtually ready to walk out the conference with him and march to a better future. But we don?t, we go to lunch instead.

LUNCH!

And so we return to hear **Richard Eyre**, who really is a fine speech-maker, give his state of the nation address. Unfortunately, most of us are late, including your correspondent. So all I can really tell you is that he talked about how there should be more brand spend online than there is. Sorry.

Then he puts his considerable powers of introduction to **Matt Brittin**, UK MD of Google. It turns out most of the crowd - particularly the search dudes - have seen it all before (the bionic man slide is new apparently). But, he?s funny, confident and - notable plug for YouTube aside - not too salesy.

Next up is **Ashley Highfield**, former BBC new media czar and now top honcho at Microsoft UK. He loves TV, he gives a convincing argument for how the futuristic vision of the truly connected and video-enabled household is on its way and how MS has a claim to be in the middle of it all. At this stage, we?re starting to think that - given search spend has to peak somewhere and Twitter is emerging as a Google-killer - maybe Microsoft is looking good for a comeback.

We?re also starting to believe that if the internet TV/online TV thing really is now here, then (combined with the arrival of UKCOM) perhaps brand money really is coming our way next year, but probably the year after.

Then another panel. It was about behavioural targeting, NMA editor **Justin Pearse** used his alien hand to powerful effect and a bloke in the audience had a right go at the lot of them! In private conversation, Simon Rutherford of Toyota (an iCrossing client) makes an interesting point about how maybe behavioural hasn?t taken off because we?re all a little uncomfortable with the idea of it, which is quite heartening but threatens to put us seriously out of sync with the US.

COFFEE!

And that is it! All over. Oh no, apologies, some bloke called **Stephen Fry** sits down in a comfortable armchair opposite Richard Eyre and an entire audience is gripped with silent love and happiness. He chats idly and tangentially about smartphones, the computer on which TBL wrote the web, national journalists, Twitter, his own sensitivity to brutal web comment and probably more. We don?t care, we would have listened to him talk about socks if he?d wanted.

And lo! It really was over. Beer and canapés were consumed, working connections were reaffirmed, and the love felt for the web industry by those who work in the web industry was entirely apparent. No-one looked particularly fit, but they all looked happy. Good times.

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