



I went to Brand Camp and all I got was this dumb snack-food epiphany
We have seen the reality TV of the future, and it is 20 hipsters spending a loft weekend thinking about packaged goods.

By Ruth Shalit

Jan. 2, 2001 | It's become a cliché of the new prime time. A telegenic bunch of slackers is herded into a confined space and commanded to interact meaningfully. Surrounded by pool tables, PlayStations and other sassy props, the slackers feel liberated to be their playful selves, fighting, cuddling and otherwise engaging in wacky fun. Defenses are stripped away and basic truths affirmed. Alliances are formed and broken. When things threaten to get dull, a goatee-wearing rebel erupts defiantly.

This fall, the final, hundredth iteration of the reality-television theme comes not from the coolhunters in network programming, but from BBDO, one of the world's largest and most profitable ad agencies. Over the weekend of Oct. 13-15, acting at the behest of large institutional clients Pepsi, Wrigley and Hostess Frito Lay, the agency staff convened the first BBDO Brand Camp, in which 20 young visionaries were dispatched to a loft in Toronto, Ontario, for a weekend of deep thinking about brands. In a predictable twist, the 48-hour lockdown was videotaped, with portions broadcast live over the World Wide Web.

Clients loved it. "Some even expressed an interest in attending personally," says Aaron Hunter, who helped organize the event for BBDO. "That, unfortunately, was not possible. It would have been a little spooky for our campers to realize they were being watched by 20 men in suits."

According to Neale Halliday, senior vice president and head of brand planning for BBDO Toronto, Brand Camp was born out of a disillusionment with traditional focus groups. "The older I get, the more I need to connect with these young urban consumers in a very high-quality way," he told me. "We do not always consider focus groups to be a high-quality form of interaction." In search of a deeper connection, Halliday and his colleagues began to experiment with other modes of observation. "We've done all kinds of observational research," he says. "We've messed around with accompanied shops. We've gotten people to do diaries ... Then there's the option of moving into their homes. But two things mitigate against brand planners actually living with people. First, it's not practical. Second, they usually won't allow it."

Meanwhile, his packaged-goods clients were growing restless, demanding fresh intelligence from Gen X and Gen Y. Clients such as Wrigley and Hostess are "extremely interested in young urban consumers -- 20- to 25-year-olds," Halliday says. "But [these consumers] are notoriously mobile and itinerant. They don't have addresses. They can't be contacted by focus group recruiters ... Yet these are the people that set the food trends for the rest of the population." Just when BBDO was despairing of ever reaching these sought-after snackers, "along came the whole 'Survivor'/'Big Brother' phenomenon," he says. "And we thought, well, wait a minute. How about getting these participants into a space, a confined space, so that we can spend quality time with them in a way that can actually be recorded for client validation?"

In contrast to the jejune insights of the typical focus group, the snack-cake epiphanies from Brand Camp would be deep, fertile and genuine. "As planners, sitting behind that one-way mirror, we tend to get a little bit detached from the real relationships with brands that consumers have," says Hunter. "We don't want to be detached, which is why we undertake a project like this. To actually reach something authentic."

This effort to strike a blow for authenticity seems not to have been reflected in the "Camper Bios," several of which appear to have been fudged to increase the campers' cool quotient. Robin Jull, a 24-year-old film production researcher, is described as a "big jazz fan."

"I don't know where they drew that from," Jull complains. "I mean, I'll listen to jazz if I really have to. But it's far from my first choice of music." Slightly more disquieting was the fact that these young trend-setters, supposedly roused out of rave clubs and latte bars, turned out to bear a suspicious resemblance to their ad-agency observers. "A lot of us seemed to come from advertising-type backgrounds," reflected Matt Dell, 23. "There was a copywriter. There were a few visual designers. I work as an assistant editor of commercials at a company called Flashcut ... But I guess that's just where the hip people are."

Whatever the limitations of its respondent pool, BBDO spared no expense in creating an avant-garde space for Dell and his fellow visionaries. "It was all about this retro aesthetic," enthuses Jessica Waese, 23. "There were soft chairs, a TV, a fireplace, a kitchen. For the workspace, we had these retro work stations divided by translucent screens. I don't know if you're familiar with [Wallpaper magazine](#) ... It was just really well done." There was a [PlayStation](#), a DVD collection and a fridge stocked with cold beer. Sleeping arrangements consisted of Winnebagos and antique honey wagons parked out back. "Creative thinking demands a creative environment," says Hunter. "We tried to surround [the campers] with props that would make them comfortable. If you wanted ten Snickers bars for breakfast, you could have them. They were there."

When not staving off the effects of hypoglycemic shock, the campers attended discussion groups led by

BBDO "counselors" who probed their relationships with brands. "They were particularly interested in our early childhood memories of snack cakes," recalls Jeffery Pearson, 28. "What stuck in our heads? Was it the taste? The packaging? The jingle?"

Eager to expose their youthful palates to a range of taste sensations, staff counselors then escorted the campers to a replica of a convenience store. "There was chicken-flavored gum from Japan," says Neale Halliday. "Savory prawn chips from Taiwan. From Germany, we had cans of chilled sausage and milk. You can tear the top off, and just slurp." The counselors watched eagerly to see what products the campers would choose to sample. "They could stroll down the aisles and help themselves," says Hunter. "[By] watching their choices, we could then glean insights about what they wished for in the market."

Sadly, the campers' appraisal of the prawn chips and canned sausage was less than flattering. "A lot of people reacted negatively to the international product," laments Hunter. "They said things like, 'This is disgusting.'"

In a video distributed to reporters, the campers are captured in all the expected moments of slacker verité. A pale, tattooed bunch, they can be seen brushing their teeth, playing air guitar and trudging off to the showers, towels knotted around waists. But rather than accusing each other of racism or trading confessions of virginity, participants were caught musing on the benefits of sweet snack food. "With Twix, you've got the crunchiness of a candy bar," drawled a young woman with spiky blonde hair. "But in a way, it's more cookie than candy." A telegenic young man in a Scooby-Doo T-shirt wondered, "Can a snack food truly incorporate all the elements of a breakfast food?" Another inquired if "fruit juice can ever be a catalyst for flirtation, a catalyst for sexual activity." It's enough to make you long for [Richard Hatch](#).

Meanwhile, the real drama of the weekend was yet to come. Hoping to take the campers from snack-cake ruminations to actual product ideas, agency counselors divided participants into five tribes and asked them to create their own brands. For this purpose, the campers had at their disposal a complete multimedia studio equipped with all the latest graphic-design supplies. "We had all this dummy packaging set up for them," says Fiona McBride, senior vice president and group account director at the agency. "We had two A/V suites, with two Mac operators working round the clock. We wanted them to come up with novel and interesting product ideas, then finish them up to the very highest standard for presentation."

Neale Halliday and his group kept an anxious eye on the proceedings. "We knew we only had our campers for a weekend," he says. "We were keen to extract whatever value we could from them." The hope was that the prototypes would lead to commercially viable product ideas, or, failing that, at least provide a generalized sense of what young consumers were looking for. "The value wasn't just in the products they created," Halliday said. "By studying and analyzing the products they came up with, we could generalize about how this generation thinks about food and the marketplace."

Says Hunter: "The products that made it through to the final stage are symbolic of a whole process. They are symbolic of all the values, all the conscious or unconscious desires for food that our respondents harbor."

The products did indeed seem reflective of bottled-up hopes and yearnings. The campers' proposed product line included Wham Bam Wake-Up Jam, a squeezable caffeinated jam; U-Ho Ice Cream, a portable melt-proof ice cream; and something called "Fruit Snatch."

"It's a lunchtime meal in a tube," explains Matt Dell, who helped create the product. "There are two screw-off caps on either end. On one end is a sweet dip. On the other end is a savory dip. In the middle of the tube are chunks of fruit ... We call it Fruit Snatch, because you just snatch it, and go." Also pushing the envelope of inventiveness was the Smoothie Smacker, created by Robin Jull and his Hearty Meal group. "By smacking it,

you mix the juice and yogurt together," says Jull earnestly. "Our spokesperson would be a monkey ... Our marketing campaign would focus on 'Spanking the Monkey.'"

Will such emanations from the vox populi revitalize the flagging fortunes of Hostess Frito-Lay? Absolutely, says BBDO's Halliday. "Our campers are sending a clear message that young urban consumers want food that fits into their lifestyle," Halliday bravely contends. "These campers didn't ask conventional questions. They came up with unconventional food and packaging solutions. Our clients are very interested."

I wanted to check with Hostess, Pepsi and Wrigley to find out what they thought of some of these new product ideas. But BBDO said no. "The participating clients are bit nervous," McBride told me. "They're all market leaders in their own right. If good product ideas do come out of [Brand Camp], they want to make sure that information is theirs and theirs alone."

"We've been fairly careful about not going into a lot of detail about the learning," agrees Halliday. "This was an expensive project. There are clients who have paid for this information. We don't want to give away the farm ... What I *can* tell you is that everyone involved who has had a peek at the findings has had a really good feeling."

That feeling may be misplaced, according to Lew Berey, president and founder of New Product Insights, a firm based in Overland Park, Kan., that has brainstormed new-product ideas for Pillsbury, Healthy Choice and Hunt's ketchup. "I've been doing this for 30 years," Berey tells me. "And I must say, I consider this to be the worst possible approach. New products should be created by new-product professionals."

Asking consumers to come up with new-product ideas, he says, is like "doctors asking their patients to diagnose what's wrong with them. It's construction workers being asked to solve a problem of architectural design ... To think that consumers are themselves going to come up with a solution is really an abdication of responsibility on the part of the marketing professional."

Berey stresses that new-product development, far from being the province of zany creative types, is in fact an excruciatingly precise discipline. "There is a whole system devoted to this," he says. "We have a mega-brand model that we use. It involves something we call 'transfer analysis,' which looks deeply at brand architecture. We use video scenarios. There's some work we've done with Alvin Toffler."

But surely Berey doesn't dispute BBDO's top-line finding: that young urban consumers are looking for food that is "nutritious, convenient and packaged to be environmentally friendly"? The new-product maven scoffs. "When you talk to consumers, you need to have proprietary ways to get inside their mind, so that you get more than just, 'I want food that's convenient,'" he says. "I would never let my staffers accept that kind of high-level definition of need."

At New Product Insights, "we don't talk about convenience," Berey says. "We break it apart into 'makes life easier,' or 'saves time.' Then we start thinking about what possible ways to express 'makes life easier' exist in a particular category. And those insights can transfer very easily into new-product direction."

Not surprisingly, Berey throws cold water on caffeinated jam, go-anywhere ice cream and most of the other new food ideas coming out of Brand Camp. "These are consumers run amok," he says. "It looks like they've come up with ideas that don't have too much strategic merit."

Asked for his opinion of Fruit Snatch, Berey sighs deeply. "When I hear ideas like that, I think: What could possibly be the underlying strategy?" he says. "If someone wants health for lunch, they're going to go with

something nutritious and health-oriented. What you've described to me has nothing to do with an efficacious, nutritious product." Wham Bam Wake-up Jam also leaves him cold. "Are you a jam consumer that wants caffeine? Or are you a caffeine consumer who's tired of coffee? Either way, I can tell you from 30 years of studying the consumer, there are a lot better places to put caffeine than in jam."

Berey also turns up his nose at the campers' crown jewel: Groove in a Tube, an edible glitter body art. "We have come up with thousands of ideas just like that in our own brainstorming sessions," he says. "Immediately, we get rid of them. There is no purpose in that. Again, this is consumer creativity run amok."

Berey does like one of the campers' ideas: Apres Chow, a liqueur-flavored after-dinner gum. "If the underlying strategy is to have a portable alcoholic taste in your mouth after you leave dinner -- well, then that makes some sense," he says grudgingly. "There are already after-dinner drinks. But maybe you want it to be longer-lasting and slower-taking. I like it."

Of course, one might ask, if Lew Berey is so smart, then why didn't he think of green ketchup? Meeting no conceivable need state, identical to red ketchup in every aspect but its color, it has been flying off grocery shelves ever since its introduction, in October of 2000, by Hunt archrival H.J. Heinz. As the Wall Street Journal recently reported, green ketchup was created not by a new-product algorithm, but by a panel of 1,000 kids, who declared that "a new color" was what they would most like to see in their ketchup. And so, Berey's track record notwithstanding, the Green Ketchup proviso suggests that heretical new-product ideas may be the result not of transfer analysis and the collected works of Alvin B. Toffler, but of, well, consumer creativity run amok. Today, we scoff at Fruit Snatch. Six months from now, it will have replaced Slim Jim as the subversive snack option for today's on-the-go teen.

BBDO's Hunter, for one, remains a true believer. Whatever the outcome of the weekend, he says, it was a profound and moving experience to see a group of consumers engaged so deeply with brands. "They were pretty intense," he says of his sequestered hipsters. "They really got into it. They were struggling. They were investigating ... They didn't have the answers. They were searching." When Brand Camp ended, and it was time for the campers to pack up and head home, "some of them were almost disoriented," he marvels. "They had immersed themselves so deeply in their projects. It was like, 'Oh, we have to leave now?' It was like they were in a daze."

One of the campers, Jeffery Pearson, gently offers an alternative explanation. "We were smoking a lot of pot," he explains. "There were seven of us, all pot smokers. We hid in the honey wagons. I don't think they knew."

About the writer

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