

## **Review of the 2001 MRS Conference for the APG newsletter** **'Sharp Stick'**

Don't laugh, but I used to dream of going to an MRS conference.

Years ago, when I was but an Account Man of a lad, round about February time, the Planners amongst us began to get gaudy invitations, usually in the form of saucy seaside postcards or sticks of Brighton Rock, from research companies with impossibly exotic-sounding names like The Strategic Research Group or Davies Riley-Smith (yes, it was that long ago). These they would display ostentatiously amongst their piles of type-written data tables, or even bring them to the pub to wave under the noses of impressionable young account men, like some token of the power they held over these intellectual giants ("well, I suppose we *could* give Johnnie this Sherbet Fountains brief; that was an exceptionally fine Sancerre he rustled up at Wheeler's"). Come April and they would disappear off to Brighton for what seemed like a week, to return with their entire flats now furnished with the booty of a thousand freebies, and a need to drink Bloody Mary for a further week to let their livers down slowly.

But it can't have been the merry-go-round of corporate debauchery that convinced me that Planning was the future. It must have been the opportunity to rub brains with the Great Thinkers Of Our Time, to be part of an occasion that advanced human knowledge, which like some modern-day Vatican Council established advertising doctrine for decades to come. And I couldn't wait to be part of it...

Things have changed at the MRS conference. It's back in Brighton, but where are the planners? I counted five, and four of them were giving papers.

This is a shame, because in my view most planners are rather more fun than most researchers, and in the absence of planners researchers (who are still determined to party at the MRS conference – for many I would guess it's the equivalent of everyone else's summer party) are forced to buy each other drinks until they fall over, and to dance with each other at the 'nite spot' in a rather sad, school disco kind of way. Actually, they would do that anyway, so don't let me put you off with ideas of being dragged onto the floor by a data mining technician.

It is more of a shame because you're all missing something. Buried amongst the impenetrable titles (my favourite this year – 'In times of trial: methodological insights through deep sea exploration of pager potential') lie some genuine nuggets. The brains are still at work – you just have to look rather hard for the ones that are relevant to advertising.

Especially given some rather perverse scheduling. Given the vagaries of Thameslink on Thursday and an impressive 2cv - induced hangover on Friday, for me the 9.30 slot was never really a goer; hence I (and I suspect many others) will have to wait until the AQR's Advertising Research Seminar (June 21st, book now!) to hear Vaughan Flood of Ideas in Action and Stuart Armon and Richard Atkinson of 2cv (the non-hangover wing) share their respective views on researching creative ideas.

I did manage to catch some fascinating papers that also won awards: Malcolm Evans of Added Value and Michael Harvey of Guinness UDV did some interesting things using a sort of semiotic Happy Families to deconstruct the opposition's advertising, while Neil Coburn of TRBI and Merry Baskin (of Baskin Shark, of course) managed to be entertaining and thought-provoking at the same time while trying to bring planners and researchers together a little bit. They were part of an excellent afternoon of advertising papers chaired by Chris Forrest, which also included Mark Earls throwing down the gauntlet to researchers in the Creative Age and Warwick Cairns bringing down the house in an after-lunch spot worthy of Harry Hill.

And of course there was the APG debate, back this year by popular demand, featuring Miranda Forestier-Walker and myself against Neil Swann from TRBI and Susan Rogers from Dulux. We were robbed, of course, by a largely hostile audience, but at least it provoked some serious discussion afterwards.

So let me make two pleas: one to the MRS to go even further in grouping papers of interest to particular groups together - if all the advertising related papers were on one day, it would be far easier to get planners to take a day out to hear them all. And the second is to planners: to make the hour-long journey to Brighton next year. There'll be something there to make it worthwhile, and possibly even a researcher or two willing to buy you drinks.