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The advertising industry's in crisis. But it's got the Cannes-do to survive

Cannes Lions diary

Paul Fisher

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Ben Johnson on stage at the Cannes Lions

Like many of my fellow Englishmen, I flew to France recently fuelled by apprehension and hostility.

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Unlike some of my compatriots, however, my feelings were not related to football or meted out on innocent street furniture.

My destination was the Cannes Lions, and my debut at a festival that I'd long viewed from afar with a degree of suspicion. The event is frequently referred to as adland's Oscars, an orgy of backslapping on the French Riviera. Glitz, glamour, gongs, an industry lost up its own proverbial... right?

And yet, advertising is an industry in crisis. Agencies struggle to recover a fair value for work, we're losing too much talent to tech giants, and those same giants are inventing ways to shield people from the fruits of adland's labours.

But consider me a Cannes convert. I've learned that the festival's purpose is not just celebration - it's inspiration.

The minute you step on to La Croisette, you're joined by 15,000 advertisers looking for ways to know more and do better. To turn advertising from an interruption, and into entertainment. Last Saturday and Sunday saw this symposium come alive with inspiration from every corner of the planet. Snask, a Swedish creative shop, kicked the festival off with a session that was more Glastonbury than TED. It was a giddy 45 minutes of jokes, memes and rock-and-roll. Snask are less an agency, more a band, and a reminder of the magic that can happen when talent is given free reign to follow its own path.

Calmer yet no less captivating, UK creative propagandists Taylor Herring outlined the commercial impact of remarkable publicity stunts. Managing partners James Herring and Pete Mountstevens are terrific storytellers, but the real star of the show was the unforgettable spectacle of their mechanical polar bear roaming the Palais.

Charismatic SKINS chairman Jaimie Fuller enthralled the Lumiere Theatre with a partnership between his sportswear brand, agency BBD Perfect Storm, and infamous Olympic sprinter Ben Johnson. SKINS have built a brand by campaigning on sports ethics. Their story is a remarkable illustration of how a business can prosper in a saturated market by standing for a cause.

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Feedback

This brief taste of Cannes was a welcome reminder of what brought us to the industry the first place. We wanted to spend our 9-to-5s making great things that people love.

I fly home from France before the big finale. Yes, yes, just like my fellow Englishmen. A delegation of 80 from Ireland's adland will fly the flag from here on out.

I leave a Cannes evangelist, with renewed optimism of this industry's ability to turn crisis into opportunity.

Paul Fisher is chief strategy officer and deputy managing director of Target McConnells.

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