

Why Allan Mah and Andrew Bradley wanted to 'puke' when they got their IKEA brief

“There is an alchemy of storytelling, casting, acting, film, and sound that comes together in a delightfully ridiculous way that makes the spot memorable and watchable,” says Allan Mah, of their Campaign Cup winning ad.

by Emma Johnston-Wheeler May 17 2024



The inaugural Campaign Cup helped shine a spotlight on just some of the amazing creative produced in Canada in the last 24 years. And after 10 weeks and five rounds of voting, we crowned the best Canadian ad of the 21st century.

But to better understand the hard work, creativity and strategic vision behind the work, we spoke with some of the minds behind the final two ads in the final days of voting.

For “It’s not a mistake” AKA “Start the Car,” from IKEA and Zig, Campaign’s Emma Johnston-Wheeler spoke with Allan Mah and Andrew Bradley, the creative team behind the spot, to hear their thoughts about the longevity of the famous ad.

EJW: Can you talk me through how the idea for the script was conceived?

AB: In a short amount of time after winning the IKEA account, Zig had already produced a series of clever and funny spots. Each creative team got a kick at something because the IKEA calendar always had some kind of event coming (The Bedroom Event, The Kitchen Event). So I remember getting briefed, by our fabulous planning department headed up by Shelley Brown, and feeling two things— ‘Allan, I wanna puke. I don’t want to be the team that drops the ball.’ But also, ‘What the heck do we do with a sale event? What’s insightful here?’

AM: Knowing people look forward to the sale wasn’t enough. We like to know the why.

Knowing why, helped us link the sale with the excitement of getting a too good to be true deal that can be seen as a “mistake.” A universal feeling, albeit one that happens at IKEA a lot. Making the drama come to life with atypical characters was a must.

Developing the story arc of that particular spot came with a lot of role playing and fun in-office where we coined, and screamed, “Start the Car!” at each other a lot. It happened with a lot of laughs before it ever became a script on the written page.

One scene we knew we wanted to film in these early stages was the extra wide shot of our hero running across the parking lot, screaming “Start the car!” It was the ridiculousness of her determination that made me and Andrew laugh a lot.

EJW: Were there any hurdles that made the ad a tough sell?

AM: Finding the money was something we struggled with. [CDs] Elspeth Lynn and Lorraine Tao and [project manager] Christine Harron really made the money work for the client and the production. Zig was phenomenal at championing ideas.

AB: Without [Christine Harron] this spot, and so much at Zig, never gets made. The script was always well-loved by our client, Cass Hall, from the first presentation in the spring but it didn’t fit within the year’s budget of productions. So it was put aside and Allan I figured it was dead. Here’s Christine’s mad genius: For months, she stashed a bit of leftover money here and there from the other IKEA broadcast productions. And six months later, she told Cass ‘Remember that sale script we all love? Well, you have the money for it now.’ She dumped a metaphorical wheelbarrow of money at his feet and away we went.

EJW: Earlier in the Campaign Cup, Elspeth Lynn told us there were some challenges bringing the script to life in production. What was it like to watch this happen?

AB: I had no idea we were producing something that would be so well-loved. But I will say, I can’t recall a smoother production in my career. Director Mark Gilbert came on board and added so many little, and huge, touches— ‘They have to look like they would never break the law,’ for example and [lead actress] Lisa Horner just nailed her performance.

The biggest challenge was it being an overnight shoot. Comedy takes sleep, people! Shot in and around an actual IKEA, we waited til the store closed at 9

p.m. and then started prepping. The interiors were shot in the middle of the night and we slowly moved outside as the sun started to come up. It was pretty much shot in sequence. Our last shot, the 'whoo' moment in the car, was harrowing to get. A weather front was moving in fast and I think we only had time for a few minutes of driving around and Lisa euphorically screaming things we shouted at her. We wrapped and it immediately started snowing for a whole day and two feet.

We had the best and worst situation editing with Leo Zaharatos—we had too much good stuff and tried to cram in too much. We had an extra joke that involved our 'fugitive Lisa' jumping through the car window for a bank-robber style getaway. But it became obvious that the real emotional heart was her trying to keep her cool on the awkward walk to the car, and we cut the bit. But god bless that stunt person who jumped through the car window more than once. If you're out there, I'm sorry we cut your moment.

Music? Well, what can you say? RMW (now Vapor) put it over the top with the quirky track. Thank you, Ted Rosnick.

EJW: Allan, you've said that you've found the longevity of "Start the Car" hard to believe. Why do you think the ad has performed so well over time?

AM: It's hard to argue the results: It has run for 20 years in 13 countries, reshot frame for frame for France and Türkiye, embedded in culture, a phrase repeated by consumers, drives footfall at IKEA, and chosen by TIFF as one of the top 10 essential ads of Canadian Cinema History.

"Start the Car" haunts us in all the best ways. And while it is easy to point at all the concrete proof points that make it a success over two decades, there is an alchemy of storytelling, casting, acting, film, and sound that comes together in a delightfully ridiculous way that makes the spot memorable and watchable.

"Start the Car!" Is a single-minded phrase that has resonated with people for

two decades and with it is this underlying meaning that you're "getting away with a great deal." It applies even to this day and is usually accompanied by a smile, a laugh and perhaps even a fuller piggy bank. IKEA is a brand that's synonymous with making everyday life better for the many. The spot demonstrates the desire for that.

EJW: Andrew, you've written about the agency culture that allowed this ad to exist. Can you tell me more about that?

AB: I suppose I have a romantic and optimistic outlook on this. We don't work in marketing, we work in a business of ideas. I think what made everything so successful [at Zig] is that we were all together, in person, bringing our individual talents to create every day. Taxi, John St., Downtown Partners and other shops were doing fantastic work and we wanted to be as good. The culture was fun and we liked our clients. We wanted to do good work for them. Yes, we were afraid to fail, but it was an environment where we had permission to ask 'what if?' and not always know if it would work but go for it. Did we fail sometimes? For sure. But this alchemy attracted the best people. And when something hit, I think we soared. It's why so many of us from Zig are still impacting the industry today.