

INSPIRATIONAL INFLUENCE

James Hilton, chief creative officer of digital agency AKQA, talks creative leadership, finding great talent, and brands being a force for good

IT'S NOT OFTEN THAT YOU'RE TEMPTED TO ASK FOR A JOB IN an industry that you know nothing about. But then, it's not often that you meet someone with an infectious enthusiasm for their vocation, and the motto "Make People Better." I'm catching up with James Hilton, who, 18 years ago, co-founded AKQA with Ajaz Ahmed, as "an ideas and innovation company that specialises in creating digital services and products." At first glance, it seems to be marketing and advertising – brands communicating with consumers – but Hilton is not keen on that comparison.

"Marketing and advertising is rife with people taking a simple proposition, making it complicated, adding measurement hocus-pocus, then charging a massive fee," he says, "It's exactly what the Charlatans did in the Middle Ages – take a soupçon of common sense and wrap it in pseudo-science."

"Ajaz and I saw a communications world filled with mediocrity and rubbish – there was a time when you could watch telly for great adverts, but then bad ads got in the way of good programming, advertising posters were everywhere, and brands were just telling us what to buy. We thought that brands must be able to contribute in a more meaningful way – there's got to be a better way to communicate."

The results suggest that AKQA have found that better way. Virgin was their founding client, and today they name Audi, Google and Nike amongst their roster. With 11 offices around the world, soon to include Brazil and India, their record for industry awards is unprecedented: in 2012 alone, they won seven separate *Agency Of The Year* awards, and the Rev Awards even named them their *Agency Of The Decade*. They became the biggest independently owned digital agency in the world and, last year WPP (the world's largest marketing services company) announced it was buying an eighty percent stake in a deal worth around US\$500 million. Hilton's creative leadership is central to the company's continued success.

"Curation is key. It's something that we do naturally all the time: we all know good and bad curators – friends who we trust implicitly for restaurant recommendations, but who have terrible taste in films. At AKQA, we curate inspiration for our talent – insight events and talks from leading artists or technologists. There's also the AKQA Academy, where we run textile courses, life-drawing courses, bake-offs – anything to get people thinking in a different way, or to consider things they didn't know about before."

"An undercurrent of art-for-art's sake is the primordial soup of creativity, the background radiation from which ideas are born – you need that for innovation in business and industry. What's changed is that previously, big organisations were needed to enable those ideas; but now people can go directly to their audience with platforms like Kickstarter. That technological disruption changes everything – it levels the playing field."

Hilton doesn't look at work by others in his industry – that's work conceived for the past, rather than the future. He finds inspiration elsewhere: playing with chemistry molecule kits, given to him by his parents as a boy (sat on his desk today is the "happy molecule," Serotonin); or looking through a telescope in his back garden.

"It's just amazing, man," he says of astronomy, "You're looking at Saturn or Andromeda – a different world or a galaxy. That's profoundly inspiring."

Inspiration and cross-pollination are central to AKQA's design philosophy: departments aren't separated, and designers sit next to technologists. Conversations flow and people find ideas from beyond their own area of expertise, discovering answers they would never have thought of alone.

Technology gave AKQA their opportunity 18 years ago, recognising that the internet allowed brands to communicate directly with customers. But, rather than selling brands shiny "digital landfill", Hilton and Ahmed brought a maturity of thought, imagining what a client's digital presence would be like ten years down the line.

"When clients come to us wanting an app or digital experience, our first question is, 'Why do you think you want that?' That's often the convenient or easy thing to solve, not the right thing," Hilton explains. "Solving an underlying problem will result in a better resolution, giving appropriate and relevant responses, rather than employing the latest technology or "innovation" to garner attention. When brands engage with customers digitally, they're being allowed privileged access into people's personal space. You have to solve a problem and make their lives better. Otherwise it's just an intrusion."

"Entrepreneurs and designers are one and the same: problem solvers. If you take any industry's aim, work it backwards on a blank piece of paper, and what you end up with is different to how that industry looks today, then you have an opportunity to disrupt that industry."

That's exactly what AKQA did. Rather than working for their clients, they work with them, helping make their client better in the future and investing in long-term relationships. ▾



FROM FAR LEFT: James Hilton's motto is "Make People Better"; at AKQA departments aren't separated, the result being cross-pollination and people finding ideas from beyond their own area of expertise.

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bookshop, or who've heard us lecture at university. You need to find and keep talent by any means necessary."

Which is why AKQA set up the Future Lions competition at the Cannes Lions International Festival Of Creativity. The brief is the same every year: connect a brand to its audience in a way that was impossible five years ago; the only pre-requisite is that applicants are in full-time education. In 2013, they had over 1,500 entries from around the world, with the five winners being taken to Cannes for a ceremony: recruiters were literally offering them jobs off the stage. And it clearly works – the team that won Future Lions five years ago went on to set up AKQA's Paris office.

Hilton believes that brands and businesses must contribute to society – they can be a force for good whilst becoming better businesses.

"Companies should make or do things that benefit society. Think of how banks could help encourage people to be more responsible, rather than get into debt. And they could make far more from customers investing in stocks and shares than they could in sending out fines to those who've gone overdrawn. It might take ten years to educate customers to the point that they're doing so, but that's investing in relationships. So making people better helps businesses too."

This can be seen in the products that AKQA make – the Nike Training Club App turns your mobile phone into a training device. It wasn't just made to show people Nike's products – it was designed to fill the need for people to be motivated to train, but eliminate the prohibitive cost of a personal trainer. The upshot for Nike is a genuine relationship with their customers.

I ask James what work he's most proud of and he pauses before giving me an unexpected answer.

"When work leaves our kitchen that I've had nothing to do with," he begins, "That's utterly beautiful. And seeing the teams receive their due recognition. That makes me proud, because we've created something that others are now using as a platform for creative expression: young, creative people, technologists or designers, using AKQA to create the best work of their lives, to service our clients. That didn't exist for me before."

It's then that I realise why James is such an inspirational leader, and AKQA so successful: integrity and congruence. James' belief in making people better filters down to AKQA's staff, their clients, and their end users. It benefits each of them.

I may not have come away with a job, but I do have a new motto: Solve problems; inspire; and make people better. 🌀

Ahmed and Stefan Olander, VP of Digital Sport at Nike, even co-authored *Velocity*, a book detailing their insights and management philosophy for a digital world. It's the first time an agency and client have teamed up in this way, a relationship that Hilton describes as an "incredibly inspiring experience."

Four key values – Service, Innovation, Quality and Thought – drive AKQA's work. Hilton admits that sticking to those values and demanding the very best can seem difficult and uncompromising, but he's adamant that it's worth it, whipping out his favourite quote from *The Beach Boys'* producer, Brian Wilson, as evidence: "Beware the lollipop of mediocrity. Lick it once and you'll suck forever."

Unlike some agencies that started around the same time as AKQA, Hilton and Ahmed always knew that they were in business, rather than having a "crazy, fun time in some kind of extended art college."

"We wanted to make a living from our skills and not just be poor struggling artists. We understood from day one, that in order to have a world-class product (and there's no point in making anything else), you needed a world-class business to back it up. So making sure our numbers are good is part of our DNA. We can only produce good numbers if we produce amazing products, and we can only do that if we have amazing talent. We need to nurture that talent and feed it with the inspiration to produce great products. They'll only stay with us if we can pay them a fair wage, and we can only do that if we've got a brilliant business."

"Finding and keeping good talent is one of the hardest parts of business. It tends to be serendipity to find them in every walk of life – people we got chatting to behind the cashpoint at a