

Metamorphosis:

From AD School to Ravenous Mantis.

The road out of advertising school doesn't have to be straight and narrow, discovers Veronica Costi.

My entire family was huddled around all 13 inches of my Macbook. The Wifi connection was tripled checked and celebratory drinks were at the ready. It was mid lockdown and my household had seen first hand my emotional journey through Award School. The countless sleepless nights, the constant redrafting and incessant asking for and then ignoring other people's opinions - AWARD School graduation night had arrived and my career as a bona fide advertising creative was about to start, or so I thought.



After high praise from my tutors I talked myself and my parents into believing a state ranking was inevitable. And yet, as we sat there, six family members hiding party poppers in their hands, something very strange happened - my name was not called. Not once.

I closed the laptop awkwardly, told my family that I was going upstairs to enquire about what was clearly an admin error. I was devastated. What would be next? We were told from day one that the trajectory for young advertising students working for top agencies all hinged on being chosen in the top tier of AWARD school. As it turned out, I'd fallen short.

Days later I emerged from my room and considered putting on gumboots and an apron and heading into the family fishmonger business, until I received an intro email from my tutor. "Hey Veronica. Meet Ben from Ravenous Mantis". 'Ravawhat?', I thought. I trusted my tutors, they were smart people, so I took my folio and went to check it out.

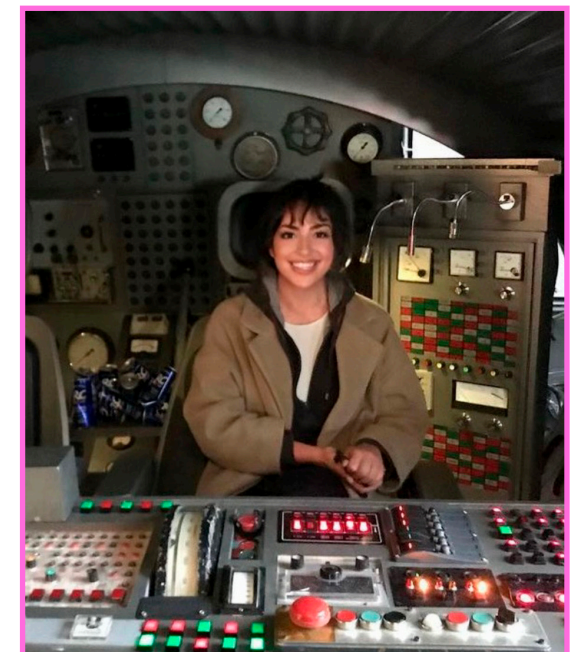
The next day I had a meeting at a place with a few desks, a bunch of laptops and an unmarked door. Where was the fancy office? Where was the giant fish tank in the foyer? Ravenous Mantis was anything but traditional, it was a creative accelerator that worked with startups (and as my luck would have it, some of the best creative agencies in town, too). Maybe it was because he liked my folio or maybe he was just too busy to find anyone else, but within an hour he offered me what no one else had - the opportunity to be thrown in the deep end. All the way in. The very next week.

First day as an art director I was asked to join a call with 'The Philippines'. I found myself sitting in on a pre-production for a television ad presenting to the CEO of RC Cola in the Philippines with a company called Media Brands. We were shooting with The Glue Society and the very first comment I heard in a meeting came hard and fast, "I don't know if the puppet should be a rabbit, or a dog?" And with that, my unexpected journey into the world of advertising had begun.

I got straight into watching how it all unfolded. Our team was writing and rewriting, four rounds of storyboarding, casting, designing and finally shooting. As I sat on the sidelines looking in, I nodded to foreign words like "end frames" and "DOP's" and even turned up to my first shoot weeks later without a jacket. Amateur!



Puppet Creation



On Set

Even though I was cold the entire time this world felt big and warm and popping with possibilities - not just because it was my first gig but because my fortunes had changed and somehow, I could be part of a team doing a big TV ad bound for the Americas, which involved burning the leg of a marionette rabbit puppet.

RC COLA 'WHY NOT?'



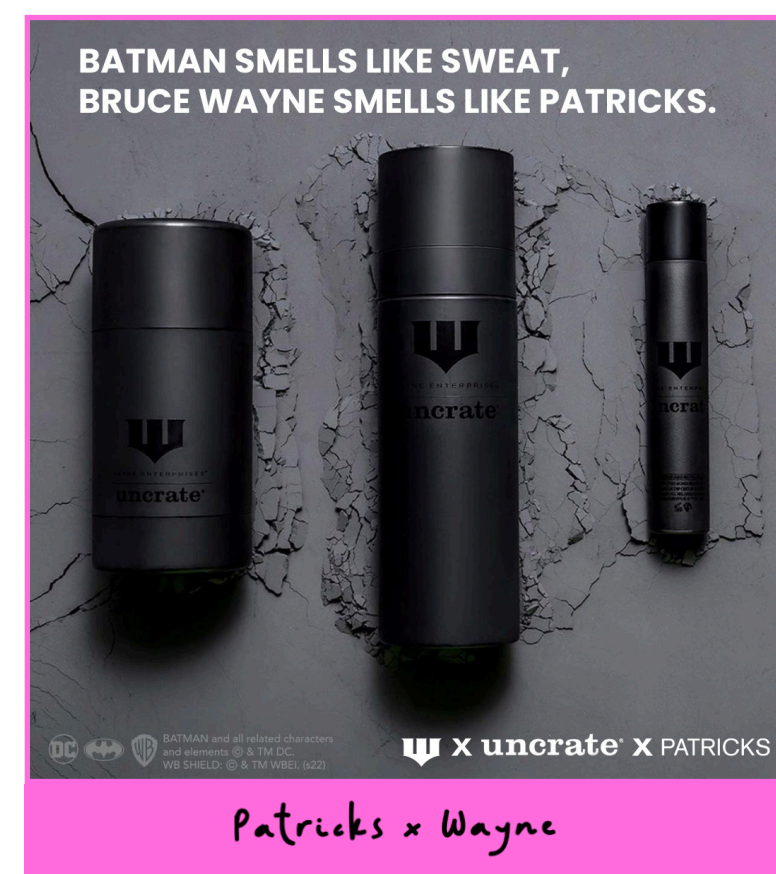
RC Cola 'Why Not'

Just a week later, we suddenly changed gears. I went from a big budget ad, to a small budget brief with the biggest ambitions.

I joined a Zoom call with a founder called Patrick. He was explaining his now established startup, 'Patricks', a men's grooming line going gangbusters in the US, with its sleek all chrome and black packaging and a product packed full of the good stuff. This was the first 'founder' call I had been on. We weren't even talking to the head of marketing, we were talking about ideas with the guy who started the whole damn thing. Just before I joined, we had just partnered with Wayne Enterprises (the Batman people) to do their new range of grooming stuff for men. But on this chat he wanted ideas to push sales for Black Friday in the US market and we needed ideas fast.

It was kind of like a brainstorm, or a working session with a creative partner. I don't know what to call it but the founder was there and he wanted to hear some ideas. Right there and then. 'Oh no, he's going to ask me what I think?', I thought to myself. Almost immediately after that, 'Veronica, what do you reckon we do?' he said. 'Ummmm. What if we just made all of your black products 25% off on Black Friday?'

I blurted it out and I couldn't take it back. He considered it for a while. 'fu>k, that's almost everything I sell', he said. Then, he responded with two more words, 'fu>k yeah!' My first idea had been approved and I had entirely three minutes to think of it.



From a long but fun approval process for a TV ad weeks ago, to a couple of minutes approval, it was at this point I knew the path I had chosen was going to be different, whether I like it or not.

An idea I had months ago for my favourite AWARD School brief (hypothetical briefs for students), which I was most excited for, was undoubtedly week 6 for the LEGO brand. As I slaved over a radio script all those weeks earlier, I wondered how long it would take me in the real world to work with a company as cool as LEGO. At first I thought it was a joke when an email from Ben came through, 'LEGO Agency brief Tuesday'. Before I knew it our little team was online meeting with the Global LEGO Agency team out of Denmark. 'Don't say Hej, don't say Hej,' I promised myself. 'Hej, nice to meet you all, I love LEGO.' Yeah, I could have done better, but I was getting loads of practice. It was an epic project full of confidential stuff that is still in the works with our Danish friends.

We had loads of 9pm and 8am meetings due to time zones and different accents from all around the world, but the LEGO geek in me loved all of it and I learned that a really good idea and insight was something that could translate in any language, anywhere in the world. Surely my career had peaked super early?

From really big to super small - that's how it seemed to go. From a great big agency gig one month, to what felt like a tiny startup project in comparison, the next, we were working hard, wherever we were needed in the world. No matter who we worked with, most projects were asking for the same thing - ideas that would resonate and punch above their weight, wherever they were at as a brand or company. It kept me on my game and maybe this was part of Ben's plan all along, where the startup gigs with small budgets and smaller timelines would help keep our 'teeth sharp' for the big brand jobs.

Swysh was next. A popular Cameo-style offering for Aussie sports stars where they could get a message from their favourite players. And to compete with the bigger brands around them (like Cameo), they needed something that would look and feel very different, without spending a whole lot on media. They had a small budget but wanted a big idea, too. This was a fun one. We had the idea of a 'silent Swysh', where their stars would learn sign language to send personalised messages to the hearing impaired fans out there as well. It was a way they could use their own stars and their own platform (I learned this was really important for tech and social startups to demonstrate what they actually did and offered people) to get some much needed attention and love online. We sent the idea across to the founders in a pretty presentation and crossed our fingers and toes. 'LOVE IT' was the one (or rather, two) word response. And just like that, the idea was over the line.



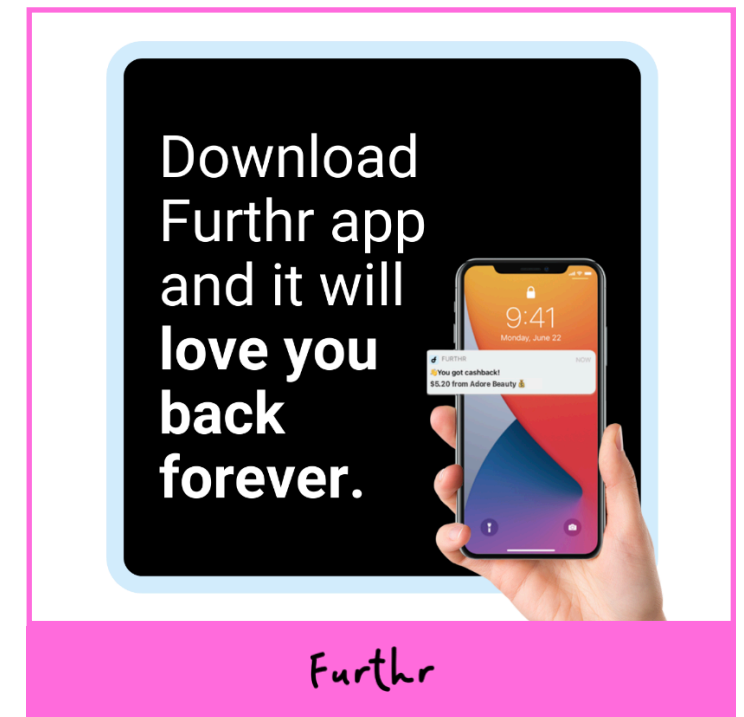
In just over a year of heading into a place with a ridiculous name, no kettle (though we've just got a nice new one) and a project list that was anything but predictable from week to week, I realised that the big brand world and the startup world clashed in the most epic way, and they could all learn something from one another. The startup world could learn from the discipline, consistency and strategies that big brands would stick to. On the flip side, the big brands could learn from the dynamic and entrepreneurial decisions that startups are forced to make so they can punch above their abilities and get attention, with no time or money to mess around.

I was beginning to understand that creativity did not start and stop with the actual advertising of a brand, either. A lot of the time we were using our skills to help startups raise capital and appeal to investors. Patricks, Furthr App and BTX Tech all used our crew to help their brands raise capital more easily, so they could either keep going or get bigger.

In the case of Furthr App, we helped the cashback startup develop the brand position

- 'Where the brands you love, love you back' to first help them successfully raise the \$1.5m seed round of investment, before it became their consumer facing position. In the same way we would help a brand sell a product to millions of people, sometimes it was more important to them to get a small group of investors excited, first. When this happened, we felt like we were a part of something great, something important that helped a brand exist in the first place, and we had not even made a single ad for them yet.

Another highlight on the startup side was realising the ideas we had couldn't just help a business get off the ground, but could completely change a business. Like helping carbon startup C2Zero get off the ground with their first client, where they helped social enterprise football company Park SCC get a branded team into FIFA 23, where we would lock away carbon whenever a goal was scored via the computer game. FIFA! This was a computer game played by half a million people a day and somehow we were locking away carbon every time someone scored with the Park SSC team.



A full year had passed in the blink of an eye. What I thought would have been the end of the world after not getting into the Top 10 of ad school, was actually just the beginning of a slightly different and unexpected path into a life of creativity. There was something to learn from every team and every agency and every startup we sat down with.

In just over a year I'd been on briefings with ceo's and brainstormed with founders, we even shared a sauna with a ECD! I had worked alongside great indie agencies like Emotive out of Coogee and massive companies like Accenture Song working with their Singapore teams. I revelled and panicked equally in the randomness of not knowing what brief would come in with a freelance company, or even if one would come in at all. But my biggest learning was looking at problems as opportunities, which often forces to try something different. We all have to do it, whether you're a big brand that needs change, a startup that needs to make it big, or a young woman who once upon a time, didn't quite make the cut from ad school.

Veronica Costi is an Art director and entrepreneur at startup accelerator and creative project company Ravenous Mantis.



The Team