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Compare the market /

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Fame and fortune, simples / How a meerkat rocked the markets / By Richard Reynolds /



On 20th February 13 of TV's biggest advertising stars gathered in a London boardroom to mastermind a campaign for Red Nose Day, an annual UK-based, televised fundraising event. Amongst the monsters and martians in this viral ad for a big charity telethon was Aleksandr Orlov, a meerkat from Moscow. Yet seven weeks earlier this silken-gowned oligarch was unheard of. Meerkat's ascent to the high table of the UK's commercial comedic characters is mirrored by the success of the business he was (inadvertently) promoting.

comparethemarket.com's rapid rise to become the category's most famous brand has super-charged visit volumes up 80% and cost per visit down 73% after just nine weeks – smashing through targets set for 12 months ahead. The Meerkat campaign is a demonstration of how rapid fame and fortune can be achieved through creating the UK's first truly social brand mascot. But why and how was that done?

Clutter & confusion

Online insurance aggregators had once been almost exciting. Within minutes anyone could get numerous competitive quotes on all sorts of products and avoid a wild and repetitive goose chase for a deal via a series of call centres or websites. But when every man and his dog launched a comparison website they soon

became very dull. The category's advertising drummed on with heavy media weight about generic benefits and customers became confused about more than insurance. comparethemarket.com was lost in the snake pit, eager for a bite of the business but without the big budgets of rivals GoCompare.com, MoneySupermarket.com and Confused.com.

Web businesses want customers to come direct, but very few achieve the privileged status of being bookmarked, and the infrequent need for insurance makes that highly unlikely for anyone in the sector. **So marketing needs to be focused on optimising online search – no logo, it is all about your domain name, a brief description and its prominence on the page. You can pay for this, but it's cheaper if you naturally rise to the top.** In this context fame is essential. This helps customer search get closer to your name and makes your brand resonate amongst the listings. Yet for comparethemarket.com the fame-game initially seemed challenging; brand awareness trailed fourth in category in line with media spend. VCCP was briefed to increase visit volumes and reduce cost per visit.

Our first strategic breakthrough was inspired by the confusion in the market already. People accidentally jumbled up the names of rival brands and the brands exacerbated this problem by deliberately distracting searchers with descriptions that used the names of

their competitors! This sometimes sounded funny – ConfusedSupermarket.com for example – but if it was funnier it could also be famous. Within the scrabble of brand names the word compare was easily remembered so the word market needed to be made more memorable – with confusion as our inspiration market became meerkat.

Fame, fortune & fur

We needed a meerkat. Not just another furry mascot. If he was to become truly famous our meerkat needed to live beyond the traditional territory of a TV campaign and corporate logo.

During the creative development process two different meerkat routes were explored. Both were based on the idea that there was confusion between comparethemarket.com and comparethameerkat.com and both campaigns were set in a land of meerkats as business people but one shone brighter in research groups than the other, and looking back now, it's clear to see why.

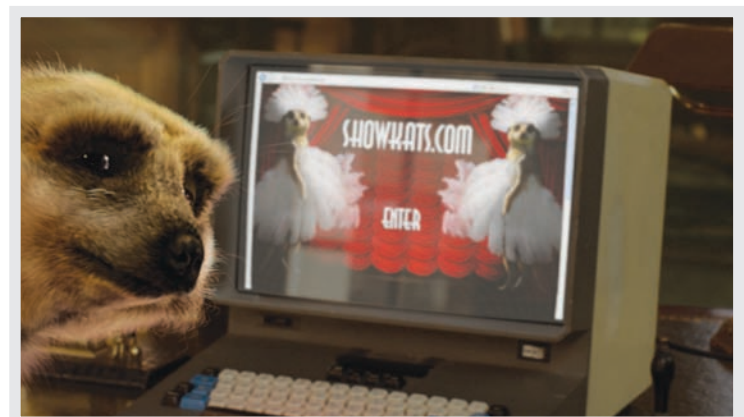
In the rejected campaign, the confusion between the two similar sounding websites was dramatised by the unfortunate confusion of having offices side by side. Employees at comparethemarket.com were seen to accidentally walk into the lobby of comparethameerkat.com and become startled at seeing the place bustling with besuited meerkats before realising their mistake. The confusion and competitiveness between the two offices, based in an ordinary English office park, was to become the basis of the campaign. But qualitative research by George Everett, the VCCP planner assigned to the account, revealed this script would only partially address the objective of making the brand name famous. It paled in comparison with the eventual route. Our meerkats needed a stronger and more believable purpose than just being characters in a comedic advertising setting, a reason that would give the campaign a creative springboard for content in social media.

More than ever, the famous are known for what they do away from their natural platform (stages, studios, stadium). After the after party and in social networks, offline and online our fantasies are satiated by devouring celebrities' real lives. The more a celebrity feeds our interest, the bigger they become, even without huge presence or investment in their traditional platform – Madonna maintains our interest between album releases with news of her latest adoption, be it a fitness regime, faith or child. Our meerkat had to do the same. (Had a famous meerkat existed at this point we might have hired him, but he didn't so we had to create one.) Meerkat needed a big public stage but also a back-story, a world outside his ads and a personality that

would thrive on the potential rise to stardom. Meerkat had to become the first truly social brand mascot. In this way comparethemarket.com would benefit from media efficiency of peer-to-peer marketing and become famous amongst the huge audience of people who need insurance. By deeply engaging with a few, our message would be taken to the many.

Russian retaliation

Step forward our celebrity meerkat, Aleksandr Orlov, the Russian owner of a meerkat comparison website who is frustrated that his business comparethameerkat.com is being confused with comparethemarket.com. His solution is that of a headstrong entrepreneur – he's chosen to appear in and fund a TV campaign to tidy things up. Inevitably, comparethemarket.com benefits from his campaign. For a business that is a virtual computer, the campaign's off the wall humour reflects surprising corporate humanity. But it is the campaign's creative investment in the life of Aleksandr away from his public stage of TV advertising that sets this campaign apart from other traditional mascot marketing. He's no cardboard cut out. George Everett sums this up: 'The strength of the idea comes from his depth of character. He is neither obviously bad nor obviously good and his frustration at the confusion is a real one. The strength of Aleksandr is that his engaging (if a little bad tempered) personality creates a level of emotional engagement that means that people are prepared to forgive what is a very simple play on words.' This was of huge contrast to the bombardment of more rational campaigns from competitors. *The Daily Telegraph* appreciated the difference of meerkat: 'Some bright spark at financial comparison site comparethemarket.com has finally twigged to the idea that however credit-crunched we are, customers get a bit fed up with price, price, price.' Mark Vile, marketing director of comparethemarket.com, also credits the brand and agency's strong relationship: 'An honest and collaborative approach has helped push our marketing strategy forward.'





Meet your meerkat

To start with comparethameerkat.com had to be real. It is more than just a domain name or single landing page, it is an almost fully functioning comparison website that enables the review of 1,440 different meerkat character combinations such as sporty Frisbeekat of Honolulu and paint-balling Splatkat in Cairo. Although visitors are nudged to leave and visit comparethemarket.com (and Aleksandr sells his bête noir banner ads) the content and structure allows exploration and play.

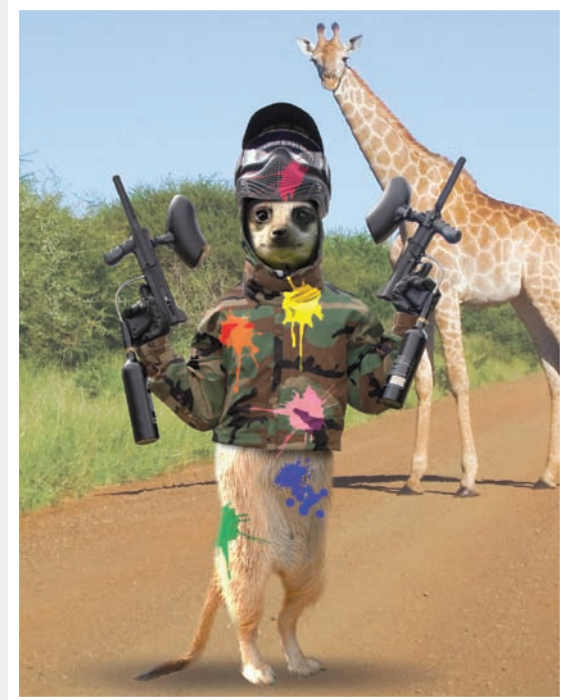
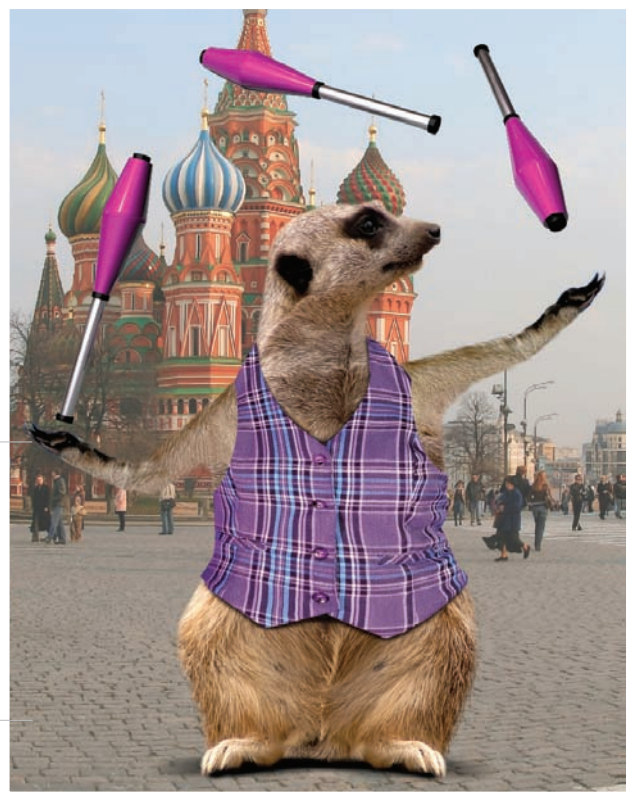
But like every leading digital businessman, particularly one who has a sense for the value of celebrity, Aleksandr knows a big TV campaign is not enough to turn things around for him (or indeed for comparethemarket.com). He uses every social marketing tool at his disposal to get his message out there to build his business, and earn respect and adoration. Aleksandr has a Facebook page where he currently has 366,777 fans – they spread the word just by signing on. He also has 13,917 followers on Twitter – more than Manchester United footballer Wayne Rooney and pop star Cheryl Cole combined, several newspapers have just reported! Aleksandr is a social media superstar. On both platforms he talks of his campaign and he talks of his life: of IT stress, his noble heritage, jacuzzis and his fractious relationship with Sergei, his head of IT. It is a dialogue. He seeks both business advice, ('I am looking to expand my meerkat database to new and never before suspected level of distinction. Are there any particular hobbies that you would be interested to compare?'), and enjoys chitchat – there have been more than 800 Twitter updates written by our dedicated pair of creatives Clem and Rich. We call this content 'chatalysts'. It sustains interest, deepens emotional involvement and makes our audience more likely to spread news of the campaign.

The content Aleksandr's fans create, whether as conversation in social networking space, customised

Twitpics or even as catchphrases on prime time TV, is monitored as feedback that can rapidly influence what we create. Our content inspires user transmission and involvement but is in turn shaped by their contribution. So the meerkat database has been expanded and updated and the outpourings of appreciation for Aleksandr (having flattered his vanity) have persuaded him to reveal a reel of bloopers from the making of his TV ad, building both his celebrity and inevitably the fame of comparethemarket.com. The interest in Sergei, Aleksandr's Head of IT from followers and fans has led to developing him as a character in the latest TV ad, increasing the depth and fame of a new character and building the richness of Aleksandr's world.

A social brand mascot requires ongoing, open and obsessive campaign content. Without this, the appeal for customers to participate fades, peer-to-peer promotion peters out, fame is short lived and fortune seldom follows. So now you know. Simples. ☺

Richard Reynolds is a planner at VCCP, London
www.vccp.com



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