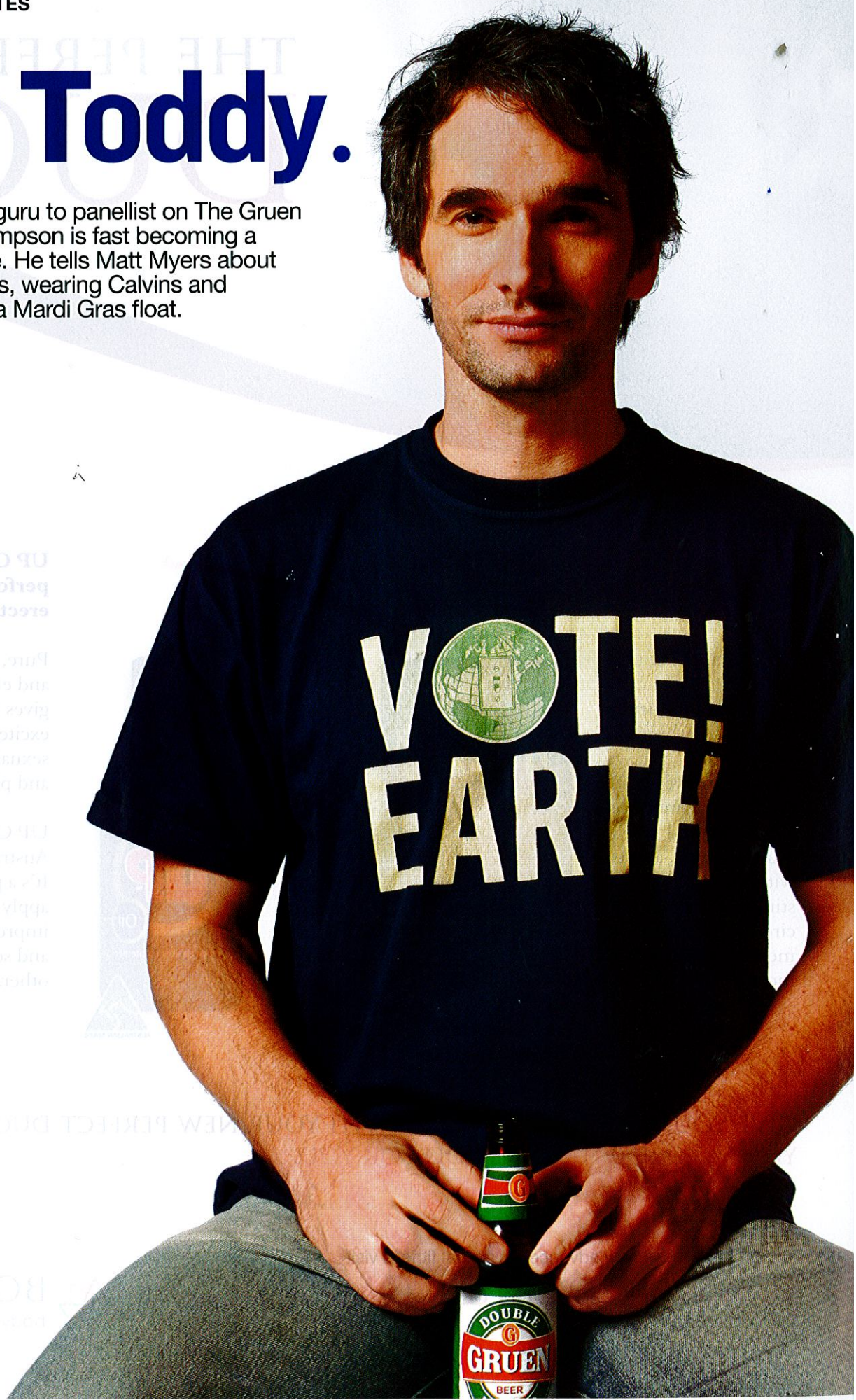


OUR STRAIGHT MATES

With Matthew Myers

Hot Toddy.

From advertising guru to panellist on The Gruen Transfer, Todd Sampson is fast becoming a pop culture fixture. He tells Matt Myers about advertising to gays, wearing Calvins and wanting to be on a Mardi Gras float.



DNA: The Gruen Transfer has made you into a household name. Do you feel like a successfully marketed product?

Todd Sampson: No, I don't. All I think about every day is that I'm one step closer to being that guy that was on television.

Last year the Snickers 'Get Some Nuts' TV ad with Mr T was pulled from US screens after a human rights organisation complained it was homophobic. Was that an over-reaction?

I don't know what the issue is around that brand but it's become a hyper politically sensitive issue for some reason. I didn't see it as homophobic. I thought it was being overly masculine and dialling up Mr T's manliness. I don't think the intent was to go the other way.

The other Snickers commercial with the two mechanics kissing was pulled from the US Super Bowl. What were your thoughts on that?

For a lot of advertisers, if they want to cut through and stand out in the market, one option is to do something politically charged. The obvious thing to start with is something gay. It's unfortunate because it's a stereotype and in many cases they're using it as a vehicle to get attention. We can't help ourselves to go straight to stereotypes, but it's not a gay specific thing. In advertising we tend to focus on stereotypes because it's a shorthand way of communicating. Brands such as Dolce & Gabbana, IKEA and Levi's have made gay-specific TV commercials but they don't seem to appear on Australian TV. Do you know why?

I don't know. I also didn't know IKEA was gay – it all makes sense now. I guess this is quite a blokey, tough and conservative society we live in. Gay specific TV commercials could polarise and people are not willing to take that risk. Now that I think about it even the Mardi Gras ads are not very gay. I think it will take another generation before Australian TV really loosens up.

In the United States they have commercials for things like HIV medication. You wouldn't see that on Australian TV.

Americans have realised that the pink dollar is huge. They see the discerning shoppers, high disposable income, fashion consciousness and a willing to pay premium price. This is a market that, from a commercial point of view, provides lots of opportunities for companies.

A lot of corporate advertisers are afraid of spending in gay media because they "don't want to alienate their straight customers". Is it just us or is that stupid?

No, that is stupid. Again, it's a conservative society we're in and people believe that if you associate your product with the gay market then people will think in black and white terms. "Oh, that's a product for gay people, it's not for me." That is dumb! It's fear. But I don't get what the fear is of. It's not like you're signing up to the Ku Klux Klan. **You once told a story about how a guy at your gym thought you were gay because you were wearing Calvin Klein underwear. Do advertisers also associate certain products with gayness?**

I don't think advertisers do but I think some products are associated with being gay. It's

getting harder now because fashion brands and luxury brands are blurring the lines between straight and gay. I guess that's what happened back in the days of Calvins.

The Calvins obviously sent a message.

I was surprised because he came up to me while I was training and asked me out on a date. I was flattered but a bit shocked. I said, "What made you think that I was gay?" and he said, "Because you always wear Calvins."

How much does Russell Howcroft [The Gruen Transfer] infuriate you?

Russell definitely has a touch of gayness in him! When I first met him I thought he... well, you know how some guys have got this overly masculine thing going on? And then I met his PA, who is a lovely gay man. I thought, "There's the connection!"

Russell seems very old school but you're quite the opposite.

I look so far left because Russell swings so far right. It's a relative thing. What I'm doing is just bringing in what I believe. We're not asked to ham it up and no one gives us any direction. I try not to get overly charged-up but sometimes I can't help myself. Russell knows how to rile me up, and we are very different. We often come to similar conclusions but we get there in a

something I'd like to do. In my life I've achieved some big things and some small things. I've climbed Mount Everest, run long-distance ultra marathons, been the CEO of a company, but the one thing that I've never been able to tick off my list is to be on a Mardi Gras float!

That can be arranged... You climbed Mount Everest? Did it live up to your expectations?

While I was up there I was too shagged to think about it much but when it was over it did live up to my expectations. At 8,000 metres I got caught in what they call the "death zone". There was a huge snowstorm and I was trapped in my tent for two nights with a sherpa called Pemba. But Pemba didn't bring a sleeping bag! So we were at minus whatever, in 120km/h winds, and had to cuddle up together in one sleeping bag to get warm!

A lot of guys think you're hot. Could it be the facial hair?

I'm flattered! But I think it must be their televisions. Clearly they don't have HD!

Who would you turn gay for?

Ellen Degeneres [laughs]! Well, I've got a bit of a thing for Scotty Cam [Domestic Blitz]. I reckon I'd be better than him in bed but he'd sort out my garden.

How good is your gaydar?

I used to think it was really good. I reckon

"The secret to success in advertising is sex, dogs and small children."

completely different way.

Have you seen the TV series Mad Men?

I've just started to look at it. Apparently there's been a comparison between me and some guy on that show, so I've got to figure out who it is! **Does it make you want to smoke and drink in the office and pat secretaries on the arse?** Oh, those were the days! No, it doesn't, but it does make me think how different it would have been to be in advertising back in the '60s. These days you wouldn't pat anyone on the arse, unless you're on the sporting field – that's okay!

Can sex sell anything?

I reckon you'd struggle to get sex to sell the Liberal Party, but it can help with most things. They have this saying in the industry, which I always laugh about – the secret to success in advertising is sex, dogs and small children. It has proven to be a very effective strategy in a lot of different categories.

Could straight guys be convinced into gay sex by an ad campaign?

It's powerful but I don't know if it's that powerful! I think you're better off to use drugs for that one! If it's in you it's in you and the ad may just bring it out. It would probably not increase gay sex. It would probably increase anger because people wouldn't cope with it. **Apart from the incident at the gym, do you ever get mistaken as gay?**

Not really, but once at Mardi Gras... oh, that's

I'm on to it with Russell but as I get older it's becoming less acute. I assume everyone's gay and work backwards.

What's your favourite commercial?

Hands down, it's a really old one by Apple called *Here's To The Crazy Ones*. It's worth checking out online. It's old now but it was the launch of "think different" back in the day. It talks about people in society that went their own way.

If you could invite any famous gay person, living or dead, to a dinner party, who would you ask?

Oscar Wilde would be brilliant! The thing is, you'd spend so much time trying to work out what the fuck he was saying. Then when you'd get it, you'd be like, "That's really insightful!"

What is your porn name [your first pet and the street where you grew up]?

Lucky Rotary!

You were in the partnership behind Earth Hour, which is taking off around the world. How big could this get?

It's unbelievably huge and has gone beyond our expectations. I reckon it has infinite possibilities because it's not about how big it actually is, but about people participating and doing something in their everyday lives. It's gone from two million to 50 million to almost a billion people. How many people are there left on the planet?

The Gruen Transfer is on ABC1, 9.00pm Wednesdays.