

How Absolut innovates with tech

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Spotlight on Absolut's Afdhel Aziz: Online innovation around an offline product

Absolut Vodka has remained relatively unchanged over the past 137 years, but Afdhel Aziz works to keep it innovative through the creation of Absolut Labs.

Vodka is vodka. It's traditionally made by distilling fermented winter wheat, and the process hasn't changed much over the past few centuries. What has changed – besides the flavors, we suppose; surely none of the 17th Century Polish nobility drank birthday cake vodka – is the world around it.

Names like **Netflix**, **Uber** and **Airbnb** are frequently cited as [disruptors](#). But in **Afdhel Aziz's** opinion, it's *technology* that's the real disruptor. And as the **brand** director for **Absolut** Labs, it's his job to make sure his **brand** keeps up with it, no matter how constant his product remains.

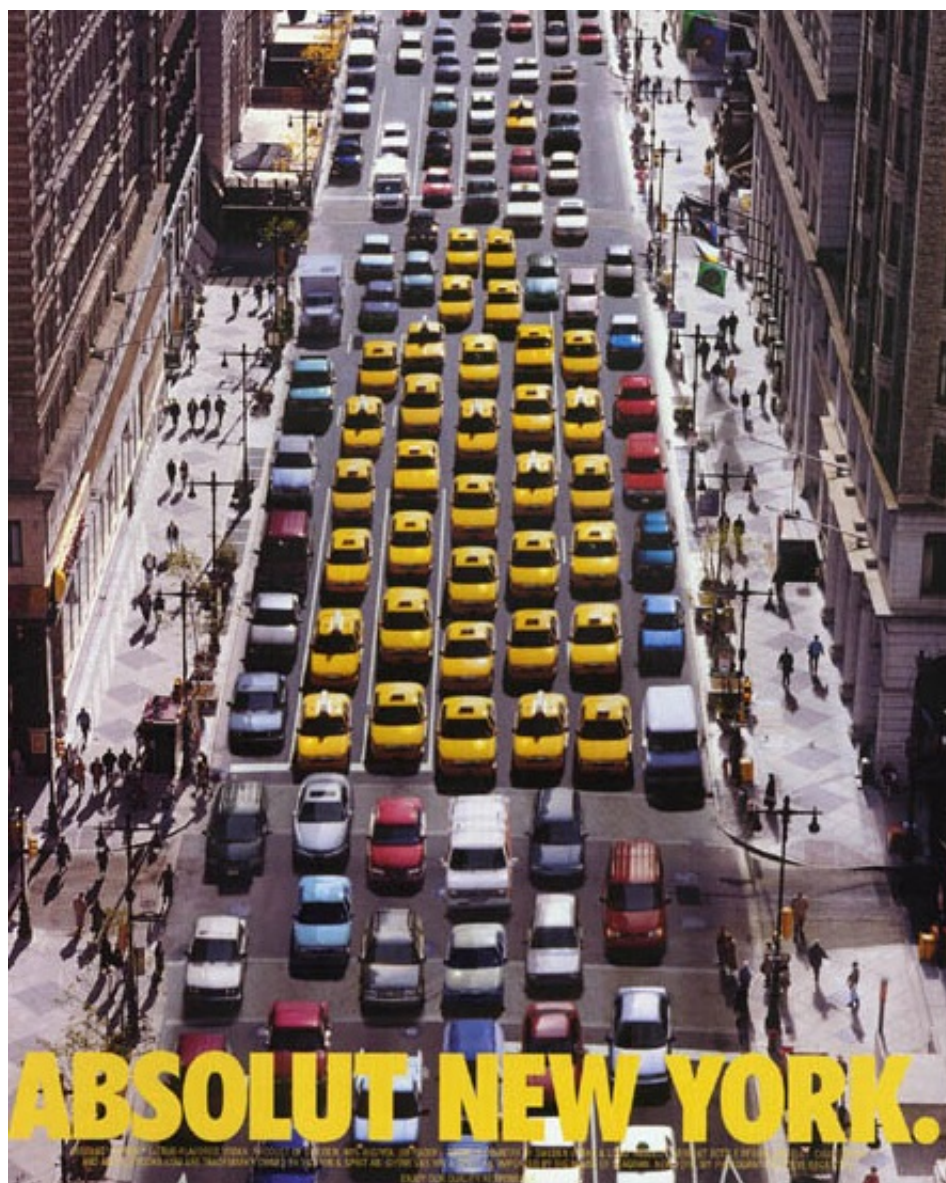


For Aziz, keeping pace with **digital** is about looking at the forest, rather than the trees. He helped launch **Absolut** Labs last year, an internal think tank around **marketing innovations** that focuses more on trying new things than ad campaigns. It's primarily directed toward people having fun because while **Absolut's** product is vodka, its place is in nightlife.

"Technology can simultaneously help and hinder nightlife. It helps when you use **social** media to find a cool event, buy tickets online or [Shazam a song](#) you hear in a club," says Aziz. "But it can ruin an experience because a lot of the time, everyone is on their phone. They're capturing and **Instagramming** the moment, but they're not *in* the moment. I spent all this time and effort creating something amazing and they're glued to these rectangles in their hands."

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em

Absolut has a long history of iconic ads, with Aziz's favorite being the one with an **Absolut** Citron bottle formed from New York City cab traffic. But that heritage isn't enough to push the **brand** forward as the world changes so rapidly.



Instead of trying to compete with technology, **Absolut** Labs creates experiences complemented by it. During **Absolut** House Party, all partygoers wore bracelets that measured their energy levels. If the party's collective energy reached a certain level, it would unlock the next part of the experience, such as a door popping open to reveal a band.

Absolute Reality involved making a concert into a [virtual reality \(VR\) experience](#). **Absolut** worked with a Vancouver band, and gave **Google** Cardboards to 5,000 of its fans a few weeks before the show.

"What was really interesting was, on Friday night, fans organized themselves into 600 parties across the U.S. They got together at home and at 8:30, they were able to log onto the app and watch a 90-minute concert like they were standing in the front row," says **Aziz**. "That was the first time, as far as I know, that anyone's ever done that."

“On average, people spent 19 minutes on that show,” he adds. “In **advertising**, we spend all this time on how to get people to watch a 10-second pre-roll and these people, of their own volition, are spending all this time watching **branded** content.”

https://youtu.be/EN4z7_xYTR8

Staying ahead by looking ahead

Keeping up with technology has been what **Aziz's** whole career has been about. Sri Lanka-born and London-educated, he was a journalist before switching over to **brand** management with Procter & Gamble. That was in 1999, just as Internet was starting to become a staple of American households.

Aziz eventually made his way to senior **marketing** manager at Nokia, where he worked for nearly four years. In terms of product, Nokia is the antithesis of **Absolut**.

“It changed completely every six months. It had a phone and then it had a camera, and then it had an MP3 player and a camera. **Marketing** innovating had to keep changing to keep pace with the product,” says **Aziz**. “Whether you’re a mobile phone **brand** or a vodka **brand**, you have to figure out how technology changes everything about you. It can always be the most relevant thing for your **brand** if you use it properly.”

Aziz's continued success in this area comes down to being forward-thinking. He compares [ad blockers](#) to Napster, which completely transformed the way we listen to music. VR hasn't completely taken off yet, but Aziz sees it eventually transforming the way we consume video, the way **digital** already has.

At the end of 2014, YouTube said 300 hours of content were uploaded to the platform every hour. That means one day is worth nearly 10 months of video.

“If you’re a **brand** and you’re putting out any content, it's kind of like a needle in a haystack. How do you stand out against the next *Star Wars* trailer or music video from Drake?” asks **Aziz**. “**Brands** are now looking at VR content as another way to differentiate themselves from this deluge of content out there.

“All the old models of traditional media are slowly starting to disintegrate,” he continues. “Unless you think about the future, it's going to show up on your doorstep before you know it.”

Afdhel Aziz's philosophy in 10 words

Even though he's a new dad, Aziz somehow found time to write a book. “Good Is the New Cool” will be out later this year and it's all about how crucial it is for **brands** and marketers to create great customer experiences.

The book project aligns perfectly with his 10-word mantra: “Focus on delighting your fans. They'll become your biggest champions.”

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