



Photography by Nick Cubbin

consuming PASSION



Strategic forecasting, civilian surveillance, in-house table football and a lot of Xploring. We go behind the scenes of a top advertising agency. By Claire Scobie.

It's 9.49 on a Monday morning when Aisea Laungaue strolls into work. Apologising, he explains he was up until 2am editing a video for Sony. He squints in the bleached-white reception area. "Fancy a coffee, anyone?"

Over breakfast at Laungaue's local cafe, he outlines his job as a strategic planner for Saatchi & Saatchi, an award-winning advertising agency and "global ideas network" with 150 offices in 86 countries. For a start, it doesn't fit with regular nine-to-five hours. The day *Sunday Life* follows him, his full schedule of meetings is already morphing into something more fluid.

"As a strategic planner, my focus is consumer behaviour – to understand the dreams and inhibitions of a consumer and what drives people to buy. I then turn those insights into a creative brief so the creatives in the agency can come up with the ad."

No longer is advertising about "one person who writes the ads and a man in a dapper suit who sells

them," says Laungaue. "The roles have become a lot more specialised." His "beat" is generation Y and empty nesters (baby boomers whose kids have left home); his area of expertise, cars and gadgets; his key clients, Toyota and Sony.

With short black hair flecked with grey, Laungaue looks older than his 24 years. Voluble and expressive, his stripy Ralph Lauren shirt may hang out over baggy faded jeans, but it's clear his focus is razor sharp.

His is a typical "migrant story". Laungaue's mother and father left Tonga in search of a better life, bringing up their only child first in Auckland and then in Sydney's inner west. Growing up, he translated for his parents, so it's apt his Saatchi colleagues nickname him Language and his job is to interpret what the consumer wants. He is the bridge between the creative directors, the client and the customers.

Traditionally, strategic planning used market research methodologies: questionnaires,

demographic data and focus groups. But since 1998, Saatchi & Saatchi has refined research into its own brand, known as "Xploring". Instead of trawling through data, Laungaue, one of 300 Saatchi Xplorers worldwide, speaks to individuals one-on-one – on the street, in shopping malls – "to get under the skin of what they're thinking". In the past 12 months he's done 500 hours of Xploring, from babysitting the children of generation Xers to hanging out with mums at childcare centres. Through this "anthropology", as Laungaue calls it, he narrows down which media should be used for which campaign.

In 2007 he worked with Sony to use YouTube in a campaign. With a budget of \$10,000, he gave a Sony video camera to Hughsnews, one of the most visited video blogs (or "vlogs") on YouTube. For a month, Hughsnews trialed the camera, giving updates and feedback and making mini-movies. The vlog recorded 900,000 hits in the first month.



A day in the life Strategic planner Aisea Laungaue starts with a quick coffee before meetings, a motor show and table soccer fill his day.

About half of Laungaue's week is spent interstate Xploring. When in Sydney, his daily routine starts with a round of the Saatchi offices located in a converted biscuit factory in the historic Rocks district. Divided into digital, broadcast and online, each workspace has its own chill-out area: bar stools around a sparkly table or leather lounges and beanbags. The kitchens are fully equipped and the fridges well stocked, but gone are the days when ad execs had a reputation for snorting white powder and having long lunches.

"Most people in my office are health conscious," Laungaue grins, swiping an almond croissant from a plate of pastries. "I'm not. I mark my day by my coffees, cake and KFC." He catches up with Dan Smith, a senior business director who's seen the video Laungaue was working on until the early hours. The video is in preparation for a big meeting with Sony to spell out Saatchi's strategy over the coming year. Any good? "Corpor-video-tastic," says Smith.

Part of Laungaue's remit is to meet regularly with the "scouts" – hired as part of Saatchi's graduate program – which is how Laungaue joined four years ago. Hundreds of applications a year are whittled down to three. "They must be the right cultural fit," says Laungaue. "They have to be Saatchi people. One of the things when picking scouts is to see how often they say 'I'. We don't pick people who say 'I'. Saatchi is all about working as a team. We need our scouts to love the brand and love the company." Laungaue pauses. "It sounds a bit cultist, doesn't it?"

He predicts the Emmy-winning TV drama series *Mad Men*, set in a fictional 1960s New York agency where ad men wear perfect suits and chase their secretaries, will increase the interest in advertising, an industry associated with glamour since that "golden time" of the '60s and '70s. "The stark difference is, generationally, we are more clean living," says Laungaue. "Today, the CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi

Australia is a woman. Back then, women weren't in copyright roles; they were caricatured as eye candy, beautiful skirts. The show is about that misogyny and how advertising was run by white males."

At the Sydney agency, home to 180 employees, the average age is 27. Dominated by generation Y, who favour teamwork over hierarchy, there's been a conscious decision to level out the playing field. Last year job titles were erased from everyone's business cards, from the CEO down to the newest scout.

Even so, the creative directors have the best offices, overlooking the Opera House and Sydney Harbour. Laungaue shares a cramped space with another planner, with no natural light. Outside is a wall plastered with photographs and phrases such as "Australia has gone a little insane" or "Being green is complicated" printed in large letters. This is the planning team's "insight area", designed to "future cast" what these trends could mean for the market. →

At the core of Saatchi's philosophy are "Lovemarks" – brands that create "loyalty beyond reason", such as Apple, Harley-Davidson and Mini Cooper. "The job of strategic planning is to make people love a product, to turn that into a Lovemark so people will buy it regardless of price," says Laungaue.

He takes me into a mock-up of an urban living room with bare brick walls, a flatscreen TV and black stretch sofas. Ordinary people are filmed here, talking about what makes them buy. Afterwards, Laungaue and his team analyse the psychology behind the focus group's decisions. "We might map out how couples shop. The husband wants to spend \$2000 on a new television. His wife refuses. So the challenge is 'help him, help her'. What will make his wife change her mind?"

But Laungaue adds, "We don't like focus groups as much as Xploring, as people aren't in their familiar environment. They're more relaxed at home." Saatchi pays people for their time: \$90 per person for a 90-minute focus group. Prices vary for Xploring – subjects receive around \$250 per day, depending on their demographic profile.

Laungaue has always been fascinated by what makes people tick. At 16 he got an early entrance into the University of Sydney to study political economy and sociology, spending six months at the University of California in Berkeley as part of the international program. From there, he worked as a journalist for Fox News in Washington DC. In 2004, aged 20, he graduated and started work at Saatchi, first as a Toyota account executive before becoming a planner. Now he heads up the industry division.

He spells out the process. "Say Toyota has a green and clean hybrid car to sell. We identify the product – who, what, where. Who should we be talking to? What should we be saying and where? The planning team do the research. We then give that information to the creative side. Two or three weeks later, we revisit them and they will have lots of ideas. This is "ideation" – the ideas process. While the creatives refine the concept, planners ask questions again from a consumer's perspective. From that we come up with three or four ideas to sell to the client."

Clients can choose to buy research or packages of Xploring costing from \$50,000 to \$100,000 depending how many people are interviewed and how long the project lasts – usually up to two months.

Aside from the consumer campaigns, Laungaue takes pride in the pro bono work Saatchi does for Reconciliation Australia and the United Nations. As a Tongan who's grown up where "big brown people" weren't the norm, he knows how it can feel to be different. "I never experienced racism myself, but my family did. I was smart enough to answer back."

These days his stumbling block is keeping to budget. "Finance isn't my strong point," he says, sheepishly returning from a meeting with the accounts department. "I'm not very good with margins." To take his mind off it, he has a game of table football in the reception area with one of the scouts, before we jump in a cab to the Australian International Motor Show in Darling Harbour for some serious Xploring.



On the move A walk through Chinatown with Sony executive Rob Hunwick, followed by a beer, rounds out Aisea Laungaue's day.

My focus is consumer behaviour – to understand what drives people to buy.



Due to privacy issues with his client Toyota, Laungaue doesn't specify exactly what he's looking for at the show, and from the outside he appears to wander aimlessly among the new motors, clicking away on his newest freebie from Sony, a Cyber-shot camera that downloads directly to the internet.

He watches an older couple try out a new Honda Civic, a key competitor for Toyota's Corolla and Prius vehicles. "They said exactly what I was expecting," he mutters when they are out of earshot. "They're looking for more room. In this job you master the art of eavesdropping."

By 3.06pm it's lunchtime. In the Motor Show cafe, he picks at fish and chips while scribbling notes. "This year the biggest car manufacturers like BMW and Mercedes didn't come to the show," he says. "I would encourage Toyota to keep coming. I would suggest they make it more of a playground, so there's more interaction to keep the dads and their kids here."

Back in the city, Laungaue hooks up with Rob Hunwick, the Sony account executive, to shoot some more footage for the video. Then it's off to Chinatown to observe "socialisation of Asian teenagers" – observing how being an Asian-Australian affects

shopping. One of Laungaue's pet projects is to try to understand "hyphenated identities" – another ad term that translates as second-generation Australians from different ethnic backgrounds.

Looking sideways at a group of four Chinese-Australians in their 20s, he explains, "We're trying to understand how a brand interacts in this space. It begs the question, 'What is it to be Australian?' Brands want to know, they need to work out their social networks. In this group they speak Mandarin and English. What I do is develop a hypothesis and then spend time with the friends and video them."

When the group leaves, he photographs their half-eaten meals. "Did you see they all had skinny black jeans, Puma shoes and Sony Ericsson phones?" Laungaue says knowingly. "That could be useful."

Pounding the streets of Chinatown, he checks the times for karaoke. Not yet 5pm: too early to sit in on a session to watch hyphenated identities sing their favourite numbers, so the next best option is the pub for a schooner of Tooheys New – another Saatchi client. Laungaue raises his glass. "Sometimes I will have an ultra meeting day. And then there are days like today when I pontificate, eat and drink." ●