

# Bridge over troubled waters

After weathering a rough five months as trans-Tasman boss of Lowe Hunt, Stephen Pearson hopes to be sailing into calmer straits soon, writes **Heather Jacobs**.

**I**t's been the toughest five months of the past decade for Stephen Pearson. But it has also been extremely rewarding, claims the chief executive of Lowe Hunt Australia and New Zealand, of the expanded role he took on last December.

When Pearson grasped the reins, he inherited an agency (Lowe Hunt) about to be dumped off the crest of a wave. Lowe had been voted *B&T's* Creative Agency of the Year for 2006 and the phenomenally successful "LynxJet" work saw it scoop Campaign of the Year, as well as all-important Cannes recognition.

However, most of the senior management team and key talent behind that hot patch have since left. In March, the agency's Vodafone NZ client walked, moving to the Clemenger Group. The implication for Lowe was a round of redundancies followed swiftly by another body blow when NZ Lotteries handed its account, valued at \$NZ30m (\$A27.1m) in media billings, to DDB.

Tough times for the one-time chief executive of Lowe NZ, who relocated to Australia after taking on the newly created role of CEO for both countries following the resignation of Ben Colman from Lowe Hunt Australia.

But has it been the shit fight it sounds like?

"It's not a term I'd have used, but yes, it's been the toughest five months of the past 10 years. But because of it, almost, and the scope of the challenge, it's also been the most rewarding.

"In a few months' time, I will be able to show you significant evidence of the progress that has been made on a people front, a work front, a client front and on a new business front."

Pearson had already resigned from Lowe NZ and was working out a long notice period when approached to take the trans-Tasman job. Other options included starting a boutique agency or working in an Interpublic Group (Lowe's parent company) office overseas.

His agency career began at Ogilvy & Mather Wellington, but it was a few years before the turning point came – in 1987 he embarked on a start-up, Pearson Davis, which went on to become New Zealand's largest independent direct marketing agency. It then merged with IPG's

Ammirati Puris Lintas and in time became Lowe, which Pearson has managed for the past five years.

And being part of a holding company, in this case at least, means Pearson can now tackle an aspect of working in adland that he loves: growing and reshaping a business.

"They (IPG head office) consider Lowe Sydney to be very important, it's important that it's successful so they are backing us to hire very senior people to take on senior roles and that in turn will allow the growth that I am keen to get," he says.

## NEW LEADERSHIP STYLE

Judi Lewis, managing director of Rivet, the direct arm of Lowe Hunt in Sydney, who has worked with Pearson for the past decade, says his great strength is he doesn't claim to have all the answers.

"He's very entrepreneurial and tends to have other people around him that are like that," she says.

"Some people really thrive on that and some people don't, but that's philosophically what he's about – building great businesses and allowing other people who have got an

**"He's very entrepreneurial and tends to have other people around him that are like that. Some people really thrive on that and some people don't."**

– JUDI LEWIS, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF RIVET

entrepreneurial spirit to help build that."

And on the people front, Pearson is making progress reconstructing a strong senior team. Chris Hunter, based out of the NZ office, has been made executive creative director for Rivet in both markets, while a creative director and some senior suits for the Sydney office will soon be announced.

Pearson is also looking for a new Lowe Hunt creative director, a role temporarily filled by Dave Johnson, one of the founders of The Glue Society.

But why did so many people leave in the first place? Pearson says it's partly because new leadership always prompts others to consider their options.

"Also, I've got a very different style to Ben (Colman), I believe that I want to create a different agency to how it's been – it's not just an organic shift, it's a material change in how the business will be run and



Stephen Pearson: Rebuilding at Lowe Hunt.

I think that has people going, 'do I like the look of this, or do I not?' And, so that's where you get the change."

One person who apparently isn't going anywhere is chairman Lionel Hunt, despite

brilliantly with him," Pearson says. "I admire his thinking and in some ways he has been a mentor for me over the five years, he's always been extraordinarily honest and forthright and I've always respected him for that."

The admiration is mutual. Hunt says Pearson's management style is to build a great team around him.

"He's inherited some terrific people and now plans to add a world class creative director and boost our strategic planning firepower. His strengths are all of the above plus very strong strategic planning and a real appreciation of great work and a unique understanding of above and below the line, having experienced both at a very high level," says Hunt.

"There has been a lot of flux with senior staff recently, but I actually think it has strengthened us in many ways," he adds.

If the right things come together as Pearson hopes, the rest of 2007 shouldn't be as demanding as the past five months. ■

Lowe Worldwide chief executive Steve Gatfield recently being quoted in the press as saying Hunt was about to retire, sell his shareholding and the agency renamed Lowe. Hunt, who says he will retire in 2009, as planned, vehemently denied this.

Pearson says Hunt will continue to play an important part in the business.

"Obviously I wouldn't be here if Lionel hadn't offered me the job and I've gotten on

## STEPHEN PEARSON CV

1977 - 1981

Ogilvy and Mather, Wellington (account exec through to head of account service)

1982

DDB Sydney (account director)

1983

Campaign Advertising Auckland (account director)

1984 -1986

Results Advertising, Auckland (managing director)

1987 -1995

Pearson Davis (founder)

1995

Merged Pearson Davis with Ammirati Puris Lintas (chief exec)

2001

APL which became Lowe (chief exec)

2007

CEO Lowe Hunt Australia and New Zealand