

HOW A CLIENT CAN GET THE BEST POSSIBLE WORK OUT OF AN ADVERTISING AGENCY

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From time immemorial, advertisers and their agencies have squabbled over creative proposals. For the most part, the arguments remain unresolved simply because they're based on intangibles. The definitions of "good" and "bad" are always subjective and never fully agreed-upon among all the decision makers.

This is no small problem. I've never once heard, nor can I ever conceive of, a client telling the agency, "Give me a bad ad." On the other hand, I've never heard anybody in an agency say, "This time, I'm going to do a real stinker." Yet bad ads abound, and not just by subjective standards. Give me any five magazines and ten minutes, and I can tear out a dozen ads that, under a little calm scrutiny, turn out to be ludicrous.

Who's to blame? The agencies, obviously, because they did the ads. The clients, obviously, because they chose to run them.

I've been making ads since most of the people on the planet were small children, and over the years I've learned a few things about the process of making them. There are some very helpful objective ways to evaluate the quality of a creative solution, and there are simple procedures and techniques that put each creative decision into the hands of those most qualified to make them.

WHY BAD ADS HAPPEN

When you stop to think about it, it's amazing that bad ads happen at all. They're done by experienced professional communicators working for experienced professional marketers.

The only explanation is that advertising is an inexact science, the most mind-messing occupation I can conceive of. It's a field no one can possibly learn, because total knowledge requires total understanding of the human mind. Since no one knows enough to be infallible, proficiency is determined by batting averages. I tell it this way to my advertising classes:

"You beginners are listening to me because my batting average is higher than yours. On the other hand, David Ogilvy sat in his castle in the South of France because his batting average was higher than mine. However, on any given decision, any beginner, yourselves included, could have found the right answer while David Ogilvy blew it."

In itself, this isn't the problem. The real problem is that everybody involved in the process of creating an ad knows this, so therefore they all feel they have a perfect right to think their own solutions are better than anyone else's. They try to help, the help often gets heavy-handed, and these well-intentioned efforts often move things backwards rather than forwards.

The answer to "why bad ads happen" is seldom that the people who made them didn't know any better. It's far more often because, after everything that went on, that dreadful ad was the best thing those poor, confused people could think of at the time.

It's a process that needs referees, and the best answer is to have every call in the process made by the right referee.

ASSIGNING REFEREES: WHAT THE CLIENT DOES BEST

The client lives with and attempts to sell the product day in and day out, and should make all final calls in these areas, with no dispute from the agency.

Product attributes
Questions of fact related to the product
Relative strength of sales points
Marketing priorities
Budget allocations to task

WHAT THE AGENCY DOES BEST

The agency devotes its hours to solving the specific problems of business communication. Even though the client is paying for the end product, the agency should be permitted to make the final calls in these areas.

Budget allocations to specific media within a task

Presentation of message

Any questions of “how something will be perceived” by target prospects

WHEN AND HOW THE CLIENT SHOULD OVERRULE THE AGENCY

If clients are uncomfortable with the way agencies have presented a message, they should hear out the agencies fully, bearing in mind that the agencies’ presentation skills are well ahead of their own—after all, that’s what they were hired for in the first place. If, after a careful hearing, the client remains truly uncomfortable with the agency’s proposal, the client will be much better off bouncing the whole thing back rather than trying to “fix” it with changes that turn the piece into something else.

The agency will be more gracious about it, too. It’s far easier to drop something and try something else than it is to watch your creation being nibbled to death slowly and agonizingly.

WHEN AND HOW THE AGENCY SHOULD OVERRULE THE CLIENT

Sometimes, a client will be convinced that a message that seems of paramount importance within the company’s walls will be perceived as equally important by a target prospect. The one thing the agency brings to the party that the client cannot is third-party objectivity. For better or worse, an agency is better qualified to view a client’s product dispassionately than the client is.

When a client becomes overly enamored of a sales point, the agency should make every effort to swing the client back to a better line of communication. Of course, this will always be the client’s ultimate call, but clients will be far better off if they listen carefully in these areas.

WHERE AGENCIES GET THEMSELVES INTO TROUBLE

Because all communications problems are terribly complex, all solutions must be oversimplified, or they’ll be so complicated they’ll be incomprehensible. An agency has to crunch data in order to define the problem in a simple enough way to accommodate a solution. This crunching process provides a direction, but a slip somewhere along the line can put the agency on the wrong track. The agency becomes enamored of its solutions, blissfully unaware that it solved the wrong problems, and it defends them to the death.

The best way to avert a collision is to agree early in the game about the true objectives of the program—exactly what everyone expects the target prospects to do when they receive the message—and analyze any given ad directly against that objective. If client and agency have previously discussed and agreed on the specific preconceptions and wants of the target prospect, they should be able to give any piece of communication a “pass/fail” against the objective without getting into “like/dislike,” which has little to do with whether or not any given ad will

succeed in its assigned task. Everybody's best weapon in this struggle, client and agency alike, is simple, objective common sense.

WHERE CLIENTS GET THEMSELVES INTO TROUBLE

Clients spend all day worrying about their products and how to sell them. In the process, they spend far more time talking about their problems within their own hallways than they do anywhere else, and develop cherished ideas of the right and wrong things to say about their product and of the right and wrong ways to say them. Often, the outside world doesn't hear these things in the exact same way.

Compounding the problem, it's really true that everyone is a born creative director. Anyone, given the opportunity, can see ways to improve any ad, and the more people at the client level who become involved in the ad-making process, the more improvements an ad will receive.

This, of course, builds camels (defined as "horses designed by a committee"), ads that no one really likes, for which the client blames the agency and the agency blames the client.

This is where the agency's third-party objectivity can really help, and where the client should listen hard to the agency's recommendations. It goes back to areas of expertise. The client may be more qualified to pass on what to say in an ad, but the agency ought to be better at how to say it, or it shouldn't be in the business at all.

A (RELATIVELY) CLEAR PATH THROUGH THE JUNGLE

In a perfect world, the most efficient, generally satisfactory procedure for making the best possible ads runs like this:

1. *Client defines the task*
2. *Agency applies its communication disciplines to the client's definition, returning with a preliminary recommendation, which should include*
 - *media selection and estimated budget allocations*
 - *recommendation for creative units needed*
 - *definition of target audience, their preconceptions of the product category, the client's product in particular, their preconceived wants from the product category and a specific action objective for each piece of communication*
3. *Client discusses agency's recommendation with all concerned parties, then instructs agency on modifications to the recommendation.*

4. *Once client collectively approves all parts of the recommendation, agency submits creative materials and estimates to single designated client decision-maker.*
5. *Decision-maker determines whether or not materials meet pre-agreed objectives and discusses any features of the materials which might not be acceptable. If fixes are more than minor, decision-maker rejects outright. (Note: if client and agency have good mutual respect, both acknowledge that outright rejection is the cleanest, most efficient way to reach a good end product.)*
6. *Agency produces materials the way it thinks they look and sound best.*

So much for perfect worlds. This model works beautifully when small agencies deal with entrepreneurial clients in a one-to-one collaboration, and becomes increasingly more difficult to adhere to as the number of players increases.

What seems salient here, however, is that all parties should recognize that this is the model, and that procedures which deviate from the model are almost certain to erode the quality of the advertising produced.

Can a client and an agency actually live happily ever after? It's been done. It just takes a lot of attention to the process, on both sides.

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