



::view from the cheap seats::

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A Diverse Set of Problems

We're still in an age of mass marketing—and mass mediocrity

Let's try an experiment. I want you to form a mental image of "Joe Sixpack."

Advertising people talk about "Joe Sixpack" all the time. But what does he look like?

Picture him in your mind. Look away from the screen until you've got him pictured...then come back and read the rest.

Got a picture?

OK. Now...let me ask you a question:

Is he black?

I'd be willing to bet the "Joe Sixpack" you pictured in your mind was a white dude. With a beer belly, sitting on the couch, holding a beer, watching NASCAR or something like that. Right?

It's not a particularly flattering image, but I've heard numerous clients and ad professionals refer to the imaginary "Joe Sixpack" as some sort of average typical consumer—and proceed to commit millions of dollars to messages targeting that very type of person.

But in reality, we have no idea who "Joe Sixpack" is. It's just another condescending stereotype. And stereotypes and prejudices have a special place in the advertising industry. We call them "demographics."

We're living in an age in which marketers are desperate to reach disparate audiences. Whether it's using CRM, segmentation, targeted marketing, or whatever you'd like to call it, the search is on to know as much as we can about every single customer.

But it can't be done.

The problem is, most marketing is mass marketing. Even if you break your audience into 200 different segments for some direct marketing initiative, you're still mass marketing. It will never, ever be truly one-on-one marketing, lest you unleash an army of door-to-door salespeople. We have to make assumptions. We have to make guesses. Because human behavior isn't as predictable as we wish it could be. And we don't have the budgets necessary to create ideas and programs that truly treat people as individuals with different backgrounds, tastes, ideas, or hot buttons.

Whatever attempts our industry makes at including different audiences is invariably a token effort, an afterthought to fill some perceived obligation. That's why any ads that promote a company's commitment to "diversity" always depict a carefully blended group of freshly scrubbed, differently hued people. For example, there are always some African-American people—just not ones that look "too black." Other things are lacking in those "diversity" group shots: No midgets, no wheelchair-bound co-workers, no really fat chicks. Just a happy rainbow coalition—oh wait, no gays or lesbian couples either.

Advertising, far from taking any risks, is determined to stay as old-fashioned as possible. Of all the ads I've seen on TV that show a typical nuclear family—a mother, a father, and children—I don't think I've ever seen one with a mixed race couple, adopted kids from a different ethnicity, or a father with a prosthetic leg.

It's amazing how so much advertising seems so disconnected from the real world. Just like software programs such as Excel, Photoshop, or PowerPoint, our industry has default settings, the images clients are most comfortable with. In this business, white is the default setting, not black. Young is default, not old. Same goes for thin, straight, married, Christian...all preferable to whatever the alternatives are. Anything that deviates is different. And different makes people, particularly clients and agency executives, nervous and uncomfortable.

While we fret over how best to communicate with new generations and new media, we need to also concern ourselves with what we communicate—and how we attempt to portray those we're communicating with. I don't think there's an easy answer. Real life simply is too imperfect, too messy, too disordered, and too unpredictable to accurately portray in advertising.

We can't account for the nuances found in everyone's lives. So we're going to get more generalizations. More middle-of-the-road. More work that tries to appeal to mass audiences with massive doses of mediocrity.

Sounds to me like Joe Sixpack isn't just the target audience. He's also the client.