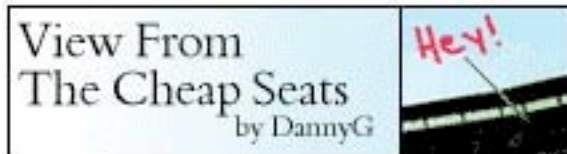


VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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Black, White, and Spot Color

Will advertising agencies ever reflect a diverse America?

Amidst the little brouhaha of last month, I received an email from a Cheap Seats reader that I couldn't get out of my head:

"I'm an African-American with a Masters in Marketing. I have been in the advertising industry now for about 6 years. I've been interviewing at many of the larger agencies in New York City for an Account Services position for sometime now with no success.

At every interview Human Resource personnel and Account Service people constantly tell me of their commitment to diversity in the industry and within their own agencies. But when I look around these agencies everyone, aside from the janitors, is white.

My question is why is it so difficult for so many people of color to get ahead at a general market advertising agency? With Latinos counted as the largest minority in America and the combined spending power of African Americans and Latinos, is this pigment less trend bound to change? And why is it like this in the first place?"

I felt rather honored that he chose to tell me his story. But how could I respond?

Because I, Whitey O'Cracker, am only a few years and a few cheeseburgers away from a being a fat old white man myself. As much as I can sympathize with the guy's job-seeking frustrations, I just can't put myself in his shoes.

I didn't have any easy answers for him, but I did pose a few guesses.

First, consider the history of the ad biz. Advertising agencies in the early days were founded on relationships. In Randall Rothenberg's "Where the Suckers Moon," he illustrates how the old shops like J. Walter Thompson resembled country clubs--sort of WASPs only, so that their clients would feel comfortable that their account was in good hands. All of which began to change in the 60's with agencies like DDB, started by Irish guys and Jewish guys. So as corporate America evolved, advertising did, too.

But it's still a relationship business--read ADWEEK and you'll see lots of higher-ups change jobs to work with people they worked with in the past. Which tends to keep outsiders, uh, outside. It's a cycle that keeps perpetuating itself over the years.

I was also under the impression that the largest agencies, especially the big NYC ones, would have the most resources to find, recruit and train more minorities. But according to this reader, that may not be the case. And if NYC is the most diverse city in the world, what hope is there for ad agencies in, say, Denver or St. Louis?

I've never been in the position of having to hire anyone. I have participated in interviewing people, and I'll never forget after an Asian art director came to interview and my Creative Director said later, "Well, there's your diversity." As if one Asian could balance out 30 honkies. But you have to start somewhere, right?

Plus, a more diverse workforce in an ad agency will result in a major change to its internal culture. Advertising people tend to be very loose-lipped and politically incorrect in meetings and conversations. Which is easier to do when you're not afraid of offending anyone in the room. In other words, more diversity means more sensitivities to watch out for. Kinda takes the fun out of stereotyping people all day long, doesn't it?

The bottom line is, well, the bottom line. Ad agencies are too tightly staffed to go out of their way to recruit minorities the way FORTUNE 500 companies and others might. Plus, there is no job security for anyone--and agencies who layoff people on a somewhat regular basis might be opening themselves up to discrimination lawsuits if those layoffs include minorities. There may be some good old-fashioned CYA happening there.

Agencies these days are not proactive--they're reactive. If clients demand that the agency staff reflect the makeup of their audience, then you might see things change. But it won't happen just because some agency CEO makes a speech at an industry conference or some equal opportunity line gets thrown into a classified ad. It'll happen one person at a time, one interview at a time, one position at a time.

Like I said, I don't think the answers are easy ones. Our society, and our industry, may simply never be able to truly look past someone's looks. But it's important to keep the conversation going. Because when it comes to matters of black, white and any other skin color—it's all one big grey area, isn't it?