

# VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS

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## **Brands Flying Blind**

*When advertising seems like a waste of cash*

I recently did a lot of flying, and found myself facing a delayed flight and the likelihood of a missed connection. I was pissed off. At that point, I'd have ridden in the cargo hold of a FedEx plane if I thought I'd get to my destination.

Fortunately, I got another on flight on a different airline, but it occurred to me that no amount of feel-good airline advertising can offset the unnerving and unpredictable experience of flying.

Flyers face all manner of hurdles: security screeners playing grab-ass at the checkpoints, the roulette of airfares that change daily, weather delays beyond anyone's control. Flying commercial just isn't pleasant, and that's not solely the fault of airlines.

So how does advertising help? Are there some industries and businesses that simply shouldn't bother to advertise?

I dealt with very nice employees at the airline that night, and the positive experience was worth all the advertising in the world. Plus, I find technological innovations, like the ability to skip check-in and print out boarding passes from the Internet, extremely useful.

I really wonder if any ad agency would tell a client noted for bad customer service, "You're better off taking your ad budget and training your employees better." Or suggesting a way to make a brand experience better that wouldn't involve advertising. Can any ad agency be an impartial advisor?

Of course, I understand the desire for airlines to differentiate their brands through advertising. But on my trip, it simply didn't matter. More powerful forces were at work.

I'll use another example.

Where I live, there's a TV spot running for a local—and I'm not making this up—"Funeral Home and Gift Shop." Who knows, maybe the competition in that industry is, uh, cutthroat. But it seems they've got a guaranteed customer base, even if there's not a lot of repeat business.

I can't imagine any "Funeral Home and Gift Shop" that advertises on TV would specialize in compassion and empathy, which is what I'd be looking for during that time. So what advertising professional would be interested, or even excited, at the prospect of servicing that account? I wonder if the people involved enjoyed winning the account, making money off the account, or putting that spot on their reel.

When advertising simply doesn't match the real world experience, or promotes a business in a crass manner, the entire industry gets a bad rap. Because the really awful work sticks out in consumers' minds. And we don't need to perpetuate the negative opinion consumers have of most advertising.

This is a creative business; perhaps we should focus our creative energy on other ideas to help a client when it seems ads won't be a big help.

If ad agencies want to position themselves as "marketing partners," then we must be willing to accept that advertising is not always the answer. More importantly, as individuals and agencies, we must be evaluated, paid and rewarded for the kinds of ideas that don't easily fit into a category at The One Show.

But that's wishful thinking. I don't think it's gonna fly.