

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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Can't We Just Be Friends?

Dealing with friendly, and unfriendly, co-workers in the ad business

I have a good friend who works at an accounting firm. He's been there for 8 years, and he's doing pretty well for himself. However, his work life is pretty uneventful. So when I told him about a "liquid" job interview I once went on, he couldn't believe it.

I'm referring to an interview I had with a Creative Director where we spent several hours talking in the office, and several more barhopping later that night.

I truly felt that if I wanted to get this job, which I did, I had to match this guy drink for drink to prove we were compatible co-workers.

In advertising, the line between personal life and business life gets extremely blurry. So how do you determine the boundaries that are acceptable in your agency, and in your life?

Late nights, TV shoots, concepting sessions, client schmoozefests--ad people spend lots of time with each other both in and out of the office. Combine that with a fairly open, casual idea-exchanging business, and you have some tricky situations to negotiate.

Can you really be friends with your boss, who can rule over you with an iron hand if he/she chooses? Can you confide in someone who works for you? Can male and female co-workers share time, personal stories and innuendo without the specter of a lawsuit?

Some agencies like to promote the fact that they have a "family atmosphere." Others don't. I once worked for an agency where a prospective employee came to interview for a media job. She told the president that she valued an agency where the employees were friends. The president said, "Well, I'm not going to be your friend." Needless to say, the media candidate didn't want the job after he said that.

Agencies are never truly like family, no matter how much you want to think they are. In a business where people move around quite often, your co-workers can be your first, and most vital, social network in an unfamiliar city.

But don't get too attached. Maintaining contacts and personal friendships are important but the impact of a firing, resignation, or layoff can cut off a friendly relationship abruptly and permanently. Were you ever once good friends with a co-worker only to stop talking with that person when one of you left the agency?

Working in the ad business means you have to maneuver around the Bermuda Triangle of office politics, emotional intelligence and the Golden Rule. Oh, and you probably have a life, family, and friends outside the business, too. Some people have the ability to make this juggling act look effortless, while others can't put their socks on straight with all that pressure.

If you have tips on maintaining successful friendships through the choppy waters of the ad business, I'd love to hear them. Sometimes I have been good at it, sometimes I haven't.

By the way, I didn't get the job after the "liquid interview." But I did make a friend out of that creative director, and an enemy out of my liver.