

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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Clear Problem, Clear Solution

When the 800-lb. gorilla says there are too many ads, we should pay attention

Yesterday was a cold day in Hell.

I read that Clear Channel, monolithic owner of radio stations and other media goodies, announced it would soon place a ceiling on the number of commercial minutes per hour and put a limit on the length of a typical commercial pod.

The news release didn't get into specifics, but it's an attempt to curry favor and "increase value" among advertisers who fear their messages are lost amidst a sea of clutter.

I love listening to the radio, and as a copywriter, I love writing radio spots. Yet so much of what I hear on my radio dial, the commercials, talk, and music, is utterly banal and depressing. So I appreciate that Clear Channel, in a small way, recognizes that they can do better.

And they've got serious influence. But for both radio fans and media professionals, Clear Channel ranks somewhere between Charles Manson and chlamydia on the likeability meter. Which means until we actually hear a difference, nobody should jump for joy.

Making an entire medium more palatable for listeners and advertisers is a start. But increasing value by cutting commercials only goes so far. To me, they'd do a lot better tossing out their cookie-cutter playlists and the seamless use of a couple of faceless DJ's pretending to localize their patter for hundreds of cities. More than anything, it's the sorry state of radio programming that's driving radio listeners to embrace iPods and satellite radio.

But if an outfit like Clear Channel takes a "less is more" philosophy towards commercials, will other media outlets embrace the idea?

This isn't simply an issue for the media department. It doesn't matter what your title is, clutter directly affects what all advertising professionals do on a daily basis. Because for many clients, "breaking through the clutter" doesn't mean, "be more creative." It means, "be louder, be more intrusive, be more annoying, and be everywhere." And use lots of exclamation points to create excitement!!!!!!!!!!

Collectively as an industry, clutter is something we ourselves created. It's not the fault of some sinister cabal of anonymous agencies and clients. We'll be more effective at our jobs if every agency and client each does some small part to reduce it. Yes, we need to reach our consumers, and yes, it's harder than ever, but spreading ads like weeds doesn't advance the cause.

Howard Gossage, the San Francisco ad legend, once said, "I like to imagine a better world where there will be less, and more stimulating, advertising." Amazingly, he said it 35 years ago. Did anybody listen?

Perhaps there will be a gradual awakening to the consequences of our industry's addiction to message overload. When a media giant like Clear Channel takes action, others are bound to follow.

After I read about Clear Channel, I wanted to celebrate this newfound embrace of common sense. Then I saw another news article.

This article mentioned that to "break through the clutter," a new marketing company is placing ads on hubcaps. And yet another is hiring models to walk around cities wearing a specially designed T-shirt featuring a built-in 11-inch video screen and speakers, in essence creating a walking commercial.

Suddenly, Clear Channel looks like a paragon of restraint. Yup, it may be a sweltering summer day outside your office, but it's a cold day in Hell.