

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



8.30.2004

Corvettoversy

When an ad or idea gets muzzled, is it act of responsibility or censorship?

Last week, GM pulled a Corvette ad off the air. The ad depicted a young boy staring at a parked Corvette and dreaming of cruising through New York City so fast he gets the car airborne.

Now, I'm sure most people who drive in Manhattan think that even reaching 30 MPH is an unattainable dream. So this spot was obviously not grounded in reality, just another car ad with some cool-looking footage.

There was even a prominent disclaimer on the bottom of the screen that said, "This is a dream. Do not drive without a license." Still, several auto safety and child advocacy groups complained to GM. And GM acquiesced.

Is it bad business to do creative work that garners complaints? Is it so irresponsible that it's construed as a form of malpractice? And if it costs the client extra time and money to deal with the trouble, should agencies be held liable?

I think it's too flip to just say "Oh, those spineless GM corporate weasels bent over because of a few paranoid soccer moms." Or "GM planned to get all this controversy and they love all the free publicity." The issue is a little more complicated than that.

I can speak from experience here. I've written 2 radio spots that actually generated complaints. We certainly didn't set out to get that kind of response, nevertheless I received copies of the letters and tacked them up in my cubicle as a sort-of badge of honor. Our client dismissed it as "well, at least the spots are getting remembered." However, our client was in the gambling business, and there's not a lot of moral high ground there.

No matter what business our clients are in, we have to live with the notion that advertising simply can't win a popularity contest. Like music, movies, books and other forms of pop culture, we always run the risk of pissing off somebody. And since most advertising is unsolicited, people are most disdainful of ads they don't like.

But here's the paradox: In advertising, there is always a constant stream of new ideas and concepts. That's where the reward—and the risk—lies.

New ideas are always controversial simply because they're new. We have no prior history to judge them against. And new ideas seek to alter the status quo, which means someone's current position of power, wealth and status gets challenged. Or, if an idea challenges conventional wisdom, someone will perceive it as a threat, and try to muzzle it. Just ask Salman Rushdie or Mel Gibson.

Every piece of advertising has some consequence and influence—be it positive or negative. The only alternative would be to produce ideas that are completely milquetoast. In other words, guaranteed non-offensive. Tried-and-true. Safe. Dull. Which will lead to messages that are roundly ignored. And creating advertising that's roundly ignored is a waste of our client's money.

You'll have to draw your own conclusions about whether showing an 8 year-old dreaming of speeding in a Corvette is a dangerous idea that may encourage reckless or copycat behavior. To paraphrase William Hurt in 'Broadcast News,' "It's hard not to cross the line. They keep moving the little sucker, don't they?"

Maybe GM knew the risks when they approved the spot. Perhaps they thought that the disclaimer was legally correct and nothing else needed to be done. (The spot, by the way, was directed by Guy Ritchie, who's married to Madonna--who Pepsi dropped after seeing her "Like a Prayer" video. Guess it runs in the family.)

There will always be controversy over ads. There will always be resistance to new, unfamiliar or risky ideas. We simply have to keep doing them, and ad agencies have to provide a framework to encourage them. Because the moment we stop, that's when the ad industry will truly be dead.