

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



4.1.2003

Getting Embedded With the Client

What advertising can learn from a televised war

I always take public opinion polls with a grain of salt. But it startled me when, in the first week of the current war, the percentage of people who agreed with the statement "the war is going well" fluctuated DAILY.

According to the Pew Research Center, here are the percentages of Americans who agreed that "the war is going very well" during the first week of fighting:

Friday 3/21	71%
Saturday 3/22	69%
Sunday 3/23	52%
Monday 3/24	38%

Two days of a less-than-rosy outlook sent public opinion spiraling down. The constant stream of war news (and the endless spin of cable news taking heads) and our short attention span led to false expectations of instant victory. I shudder to think how 24/7 news coverage would have affected World War II, when bad news lingered for months at a time.

I believe the ad industry can learn a lot from the war coverage and its effects on the public.

As advertisers, we are the ones who can shape public opinion for our clients. We have to be the ones to ensure that a brand, at every turn, puts on its best face every day. That means being proactive, especially in the face of forces beyond our control. Public perception is fickle, and advertisers have to prepare for that reality.

Every piece of information about a brand contributes to the cumulative effect of perception. A sale can be jeopardized by bad customer service or rude salespeople. A person talking about a bad experience at a store will influence his/her acquaintances. A bad, misguided, insulting ad can turn consumers off for good.

What ad agencies also need to accept is that we are ultimately responsible for the consequences of our campaigns once we've executed them, and we must define for our clients what constitutes a "successful" campaign.

For every client and every campaign, success is perceived differently. Does your agency effectively manage your clients' expectations or does your agency promise them the moon and stars? Do your clients get nervous if one ad or one month's ads don't work as well as hoped? Are your clients ready to bail on you at the first sight of trouble?

Reaching for the panic button is quite common when an ad campaign does not roll out as well as hoped. But look at the war situation--our military didn't give up after one week, nor were they ever planning on giving up despite the polls I quoted. Adjustments were made because of the enemy's shifting tactics, not the shifting mood of public back home.

If our military leaders take intelligence data and then ultimately make decisions by trusting their instincts, shouldn't advertising agencies be allowed to do the same thing?

I actually heard a retired general on TV this weekend say that war is an art (I guess Sun Tzu was right.) Well, if war can be considered an art, advertising certainly is. No test, simulation, or focus group can adequately predict the effectiveness of a campaign. We should not pretend otherwise.

By the time you read this, the war might be close to ending. Or the war could be a long way from over. No doubt, public opinion will continue to shift wildly. However, our leaders are confident that the mission will be a success and right now, that's what counts.

As advertisers, we can learn from our military's example. As brand stewards, we're in it for the long haul, and must think long-term. We have to believe we're doing the right thing for our clients. We need to start with good raw data. We need to formulate a good plan.

Most of all, we need to trust our instincts and stick with them. Otherwise, (bad cliché alert) we may win the battle, but we'll lose the war.