



::view from the cheap seats::

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Harry Potter and the Obtuse Client

So who really are the ones with the short attention spans?

Almost 2 months from now, on July 21, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* will hit bookshelves. Already, stores are taking pre-orders and planning midnight release parties. Fans are craving every nugget of plot detail they can find on the Internet.

According to Amazon.com, it'll be a 784-page book. Who has time to read all of it? Who has that kind of attention span? Who reads anything these days?

Apparently, lots of people do. Combined, the books in the Harry Potter series have sold over 250 million copies worldwide. Somebody's reading all those words. Words that are typeset on pages. Pages that are bound in book form.

So why the hell do my clients think a paragraph with 3 sentences of copy is "too long" for their audience?

It's not consumers who have the short attention spans. It's the clients. Because today's clients aren't concerned with brand equity, customer relationships, or long-term initiatives. It's a project-to-project, deliverable-to-deliverable existence. They're worried about their jobs—and surviving in those jobs for one more month.

For a CMO, the figure that's popularly kicked around is 18 months—as average tenure on the job. Add to that all the underlings who report to that CMO. They all need to kiss ass and meet their numbers, whatever those numbers may be. Marketing's middle managers subsist from PowerPoint deck to PowerPoint deck. So it's no wonder that they're smitten with bullet points, three-word sentences and immediate gratification. Context? Forget it. Storytelling? No time. Patience? "Fuck that, we have to get this piece out ASAP."

These days, you can't even explain to a client the importance of a well-written or well-designed ad. Why? Because they're not paying attention. They're checking their BlackBerry or stare into space, preoccupied with that afternoon's meeting with the boss.

That's why they don't believe consumers read. Most of us, and our clients, can no longer remember what it's like to be on the receiving end of an ad message.

The problem isn't that consumers don't read. It's that they don't give a fraction of a shit about the products or services our clients make. Our client's product is not the solution to some perceived problem. It's just another widget on the shelf. No one cares, and bullet points aren't the answer.

The problem isn't that consumers don't read. It's that creatives rarely give them anything worth reading these days. No clever turns of phrases. Nothing to make a reader or viewer think, pause, or reflect. Nothing to make them even go, "What the fuck are they talking about?" No, the message is dumbed down to the same dull copy points every time.

The problem isn't that consumers don't read. It's that we've given up on them. The idea that people won't listen to us has become a self-fulfilling prophecy in the ad industry. They won't read or listen, so we won't try to say anything interesting. In turn, the work increasingly stinks, consumers increasingly turn away, and our work becomes increasingly ineffective. Quite a death spiral, if you ask me.

Actually, not everyone believes today's conventional wisdom. Here's one example.

StrawberryFrog recently placed an ad for itself in *Fortune* magazine. An ad with no whacked-out visuals or Web 2.0 components. Just a simple headline that asked a question and 3 paragraphs of body copy that answered the question and explained the agency's core beliefs. It feels so retro it actually seems daring, even more so given that they bothered to advertise themselves. This from an agency often cited as one of the "new breed" of agencies that've cropped up lately. Obviously, they're out to find that rare CMO or CEO who does read.

Of course, technology has truncated everyone's timelines and attention spans. That won't change. The massive stream of information has given us all a bit of A.D.D. But it's especially brutal in the ad industry, because technology plays such an integral role in how we create the work we create—and how our work is seen or heard by the public. But beyond our profession lies a world full of people who are living, breathing, eating, shopping and yes, reading without the innate desire to be plugged in to the latest gadget or the latest craze at every waking moment. I wonder if we still know how to reach them.

Harry Potter and the PowerPoint Deck? Sure you could sum up a book with bullet points, but it will be shortly forgotten. Nor will it seep down to readers' imaginations. And of course, you won't sell 250 million copies.

Because to do that, you'd truly need to be living in a fantasy world.