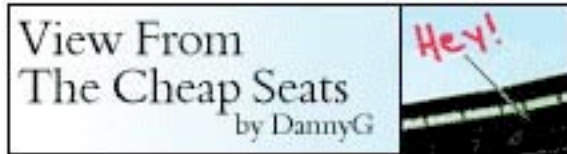


# VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS

---



2.16.2005

## **H-P and the Bigger Picture**

*What happens when a great campaign can't help a troubled client?*

Miss the business news for the past 10 days? Let me summarize:

February 7: Adweek gives Hewlett-Packard its "Campaign of the Year" award.

February 9: Carly Fiorina, Hewlett-Packard CEO, gets fired.

February 14: Alison Johnson, Hewlett-Packard SVP of Corporate Marketing, resigns.

Lest you think an honor from Adweek is a jinx, this is just a case of coincidental timing. Other business magazines have been hinting at a CEO change for months. And it seems the ad campaign played no role in reflecting Fiorina's overall performance.

However, any change in top management usually foreshadows a change in the direction of advertising and marketing. Which would be a shame, because the ad agency (Goodby, in this case) did what it was charged to do and did it well. So do recent events mean, in the end, that the campaign didn't work, or that the campaign wasn't the right idea for the company?

Once again, we'll see soon whether an ad agency is treated like a partner or merely a vendor—by whether the H-P retains the agency and solicits their advice as management forges ahead with a new corporate strategy. Positioning H-P as a leader in digital imaging and printing wasn't a panacea—the company has deeper problems that ads can't fix.

This paradox is one advertising agencies have wrestled with for decades. A successful, highly praised ad campaign doesn't mean automatic success for an agency—or the client. The converse is true as well—a highly loathed, bland ad campaign can prove perfectly okay for a company whose balance sheet is healthy and whose investors get a nice return on their stock. These are some of the reasons why many CEO's don't place a high value on their advertising.

So if agencies are so disposable, even after producing successful work, does this mean advertising people should still care about how their clients' business is doing? I say of course. But I've met and worked for numerous people who couldn't give a rat's ass about their client's business, so long as they got a nice TV spot out of the deal. Many creative folks wear their ignorance like a badge of honor. And in the ad world, a nice TV spot can take your career a lot further than finding other, unglamorous ways to improve a client's business. The clients go away, the ad people move on to something else, and wheels of commerce keep turning.

But our industry needs to change—or perish. We love to bitch that our clients don't understand advertising—say, when clients are presented with a humorous concept and take it literally, or they simply don't get it. Well, the ignorance works in reverse—we advertising people often don't understand their business or their industry. Although it's often our detachment that can point out the opportunities and problems a client has, and we can use that to their benefit to help them. If only we had the opportunity, or took the initiative to seize it.

It'll be very interesting to see where H-P goes from here. And they're not the only company facing this situation. Every high-profile account review seems to reflect something beyond a client's dissatisfaction with its advertising. Ad agencies must adjust to a restless business climate.

Maybe soon we'll see the day where "the board of directors" and "stockholders" are listed as the target audience on a creative brief. Boy, that's not a rosy picture, is it?