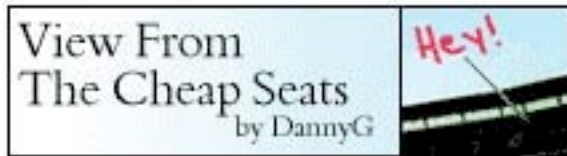


VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



6.13.2002

I Got Your Account Planning Right Here, Pal

Do we really wanna know what consumers think?

Admit it: whenever you tell someone you work in advertising, they turn into an instant critic. At a family gathering last year, my uncle came up to me and started complaining about commercials. In this case, he was bitching about a couple of Wieden and Kennedy's Miller High Life spots. We didn't have a long conversation.

Me: "Do you drink beer?"

My Uncle (who's about 60): "No."

Me: "Then what do you care?"

Sure, I could have talked his ear off about target audiences, the advantage of entertaining ads, the lack of USPs in beer advertising, but I would have been wasting my time. My uncle wouldn't care, he only knows he doesn't like/get/understand the ad, and "how can a commercial like that possibly sell beer?"

Wait a minute. Didn't the Miller High Life campaign win awards? That means it MUST be brilliant, right? How come my uncle doesn't recognize that brilliance?

If I have to try and defend award-winning spots to people, I will definitely have trouble defending the real crappy ones.

What bothers me is I know my uncle is not an anomaly. A lot of "breakthrough creative" goes over consumers' heads. Not because they're the wrong target for the ad, or because they're stupid. Consumers just don't analyze advertising the same way ad professionals incessantly do.

Ad people sweat the details most folks don't notice. But often times, it falls on deaf ears: I had someone tell me once, "I've never seen an ad that made me buy anything." And then she drove off, to Pottery Barn, in her Lexus, stopping at Starbucks along the way. You know people like this, right?

We ad pros have convinced ourselves that the kind of advertising consumers say they respond to in a survey or focus group does not always correlate to a purchase. It's an ever-so-subtle way of thinking we know what's best for consumers.

In order to bridge the gap between what people say and what people do, we've invented all sorts of methods to get "inside consumers' heads." My question is: Do we really want to know what's in there?

For all the talk about understanding our audience and identifying with their lifestyles, why don't we get some of them to judge award shows? Boy you'll get a wake up call then.

Let them get in a room with all the work spread out on long tables. Pump them with coffee and let their eyes glaze over. Let's see what they come up with.

Who would take home Best of Show at a People's Choice advertising award show—the AFLAC duck? The 1800-COLLECT commercial with Carrot Top? The Dell ads with that punk kid? (Actually it might be those truly funny Bud Light "Real Men of Genius" radio spots—I've heard many non-ad people rave about them. Is there anyone on the planet that dislikes those?)

We're living in a time where clients are trying to maximize the effectiveness of their advertising dollars, and clients don't correlate effectiveness with what ad people deem to be creativity.

Advertising, therefore, has become more pervasive and more ubiquitous. We've turned up the volume to 11, but it's the same old song. Is that what consumers, like my uncle, want?

I would've asked him, but by then I'd had a few too many Miller High Lifes. Hey, I'm trying my best to consume the products of One Show winners. It's the least I can do.