

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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Jumping The Shark

Why are some shops hot, cold, or dead?

Wells Rich Greene. N.W. Ayer. D'Arcy. And now maybe Bates.

All these agencies, at some point in the last 10 years, went from being billion dollar companies to out of business.

How does this free-fall happen? Why are some ad agencies able to stay in business for a long time, while others have the half-life of Uranium?

I'm certain the people who ran the agencies I just named did not sit down one day and say, "We're gonna do shitty work, treat our employees like crap and run this place into the ground."

So what happened??

Can we pinpoint any specific times when ad agencies "Jump The Shark?" (If you don't know what I'm referring to, go to www.jumptheshark.com and then continue reading this column)

This phenomenon doesn't only occur to big behemoth agencies.

In my days as an ad school student, I distinctly remember there were some shops, mostly boutiques, everyone talked about. If you were one of the lucky few to land a gig there, you would be handed the keys to the kingdom.

These days, some of those shops are long gone, and some are still around and doing good work. But they're not hot anymore. They've been replaced by a new crop of "It" shops, who possess whatever the "It" factor might be that gets students to drool over them.

Did the once-hot shops stop entering awards shows? Did they give up on press releases so you never read about them anymore? Did they take on accounts that lowered their creative standards? Did management changes affect the momentum of the agency?

It is true that a shuffle in management personnel can result in a new philosophy, better (or worse) work, and affect the company profile or morale. After all, the fish rots from the head down.

I'm sure you have, as I have, encountered agencies that want to become "the next hot shop." They want to become gold pencil winners. They want to take the work to the next level. They want to pursue more high-profile, national accounts. All of which is very easy to say, and incredibly hard to do. Invariably, those things rarely happen when a shop's cultural DNA prevents it. You can't polish a turd.

But there's always hope, or another open ad assignment, or another great account up for review. That's why no two days in this business are ever alike.

I firmly believe any ad agency, given the right conditions, can improve itself, make more money, grow, do great work, win awards, and be the kind of agency people would kill to work at. Your agency can be one of those agencies.

Just make sure your agency never hires Ted McGinley to be the new Creative Director.