

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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Living In the Echo Chamber

Meet the new clutter—same as the old clutter

Over the past few weeks, quite a number of ad people and press people have turned their attention to the new Volkswagen campaigns being put out by Crispin, Porter & Bogusky. Since expectations are so high, it's quite a hot spotlight for any agency or campaign to be in.

The funny thing is, I didn't see any part of the campaign on TV or in print first, or anything that be considered my normal daily media diet. Just on blogs. Ad blogs. PR blogs, business and automotive-related blogs, etc. I consider reading them just keeping up with my job and my industry. Being a contributor to an ad industry blog myself, I have to admit I've lost some perspective with exactly what many consumers actually do see or hear. I mean, I see the Ditech.com guy more often on my TV than anyone else, but no ad industry blog would give that dude 5 seconds of attention.

It's now becoming quite common to "seed" ad campaigns or websites through word of mouth—say, on marketing industry blogs & related websites. And the latest TV spots and print ads get leaked. This often happens before consumers see the work. If this is the new face of viral advertising, I suppose I'm developing immunity to it.

But a bigger problem looms. The ad industry echo chamber is growing louder and louder. New campaigns get judged—and given praise or scorn—in just a few days, and before any media dollars have been spent. No campaign gets a chance to build momentum. It either comes fully launched or it gets soundly trashed by online pundits. Which gives campaigns bad early word-of-mouth that's hard to overcome.

In addition, today's campaigns are more integrated—and convoluted. Is that what consumers want? I'm inundated with ads designed to lead me to seek out more information, or play an advergaming, or direct me to a site that entices me to give out my email address or other information in exchange for the privilege of being entertained. But are the messages we're trying to send—the advertising messages—really that complicated, or worth that much trouble?

How many people truly want to seek out more advertising? How many people yearn to visit ad campaign-related websites? All of them attempt to provide a modicum of entertainment value, but it seems like there are a few sites that are hits (with a lot of hits), but a whole bunch of misses. After a while, keeping up with all the microsites and viral efforts is mentally exhausting, even though it's an occupational hazard. What, then, is it for people who don't care much about these sites in the first place?

Since the Volkswagen work has been hyped quite a bit, far less attention is paid to the hundreds of other, similar efforts that are cropping up every month. All marketers are exploring them now, whether they're German car makers or Texas salsa makers. We're seeing efforts that are truly integrated—but often, very convoluted, costing a lot of time and money to create. Are marketers getting their money's worth from all these sites?

I may indeed make friends with my "Fast," but I'm taking it slow. I generally don't like to express an opinion about an entire ad campaign based on what I read on a blog, or a small QuickTime video. For the benefit of Volkswagen and any other marketer's campaign, I prefer to give it some time to build momentum, or fade away if there truly is no momentum. That's what consumers will do, after all. They simply don't care as much about advertising as we wish they would.

Don't get me wrong. I'm all for finding new solutions to marketing challenges. But maybe it's time I spent more time out of the echo chamber. Because now more than ever, the noise is deafening.