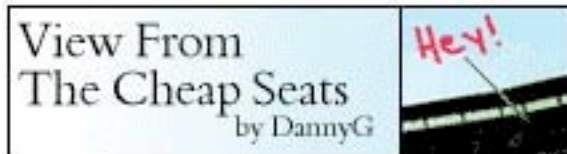


VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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Living Under the Bus

When people disagree over creative concepts, does anyone really win?

Somewhere in between receiving awards in Cannes, France and writing on-hold messages in Dubuque, Iowa, there's The Never Never Land of Subjectivity Hell. Many creatives spend a good deal of time there.

The collaborative, creative process is a messy affair. We're in the business of solving marketing problems, yet there is never "THE" answer, never a definitive right and wrong way to approach a problem. A receptionist can have an earth-shattering idea and an Executive Creative Director can have an awful one. But all ideas are not treated with equal attentiveness. So how do you maneuver your way through an agency where your work must get through a layered maze of approvals and egos?

I found myself in a particularly hairy circle of Subjectivity Hell a while back. My partner and I had a brief freelance assignment at an agency in the throes of regime change: They had a new Executive Creative Director who in turn brought a Creative Group Head along with him. Stick a piranha in a tank full of goldfish and guppies and you'll get a sense of the unease and unspoken tension I felt at the shop.

So my partner and I do a few rounds of concepts. The Group Head likes our work and gives it his blessing. Naturally our work involved getting approvals up the totem pole, but my partner and I were feeling good about things. The next day, we present to the ECD. He was too busy to see the work until the last possible minute (at which point our freelance time is almost through.) Sure enough, the ECD hates what the Group Head liked, and decided that my partner and I were given bad strategic direction. So in front of everyone, the two creative directors start arguing over the validity of the creative brief. In the midst of this, my partner and I get blamed for not "solving the problem" and boy, are we screwed.

As my partner and I sat there afterward, my partner said, "We were set up to fail." While it smacks of the Nuremberg Defense--'Ve vere only following orderz'--what other options are available? A couple of freelance outsiders calling 2 CD's on the carpet are about as welcome as cockroaches.

Are incidents like the one I encountered a big deal? Of course. Because they're the kind of situations that occur at agencies every day. Especially the second-rate ones, where doing great work gets lip service, but the butt cheeks of the creative directors get the lip prints. Do the math: take one dysfunctional assignment that you've personally encountered, multiply it by many times a year in hundreds of ad agencies, and it's easy to see why most advertising sucks the big one.

(I found out later, after my partner and I were done with our assignment, that the agency ended up presenting some of our initial, panned concepts. So yes, I got a paycheck and a tiny sense of redemptive satisfaction.)

You have to be careful when you're in Subjectivity Hell. There may be an instinct to pursue creative concepts that aim to please everybody. The problem is, those types of ideas always end up satisfying nobody. That's coupled with everyone having their own personal agenda. Plus, there's no way to read anyone's mind. Bringing fresh ideas to the table is challenging enough without having to tap dance through a minefield of office politics.

And, because every assignment is different, there's very little emphasis on wanting to improve the process, or fix communication snafus. If work goes out the door, well, it's almost never talked about again, unless you have a RCD--a Retroactive Creative Director ("Oh yeah, that ad you did and I approved 3 months ago? I never liked it.")

Sometimes, when I read about the genesis of successful campaigns, I'll see a quote like, "Well, so-and-so really hated it but we kept it in the mix." I wonder how the creative team managed to get their ideas past the hairball of differing CD's, or differing AE's and clients for that matter. Frankly, I don't want to read useless profiles of the people who come up with successful campaigns. I'd love to hear how the little battles to produce those great campaigns get fought and won.

Bill Backer once said that ideas need "care and feeding." But in Subjectivity Hell, ideas can starve, and people become roadkill when they're thrown under the bus. It's getting to be a rough neighborhood— especially in a business where there's increasingly less time to think things through. So let's be careful out there.