

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



05/31/2005

Madison Avenue, Main Street, and the Arab Street

To win hearts and minds, or merely wallets, perception is everything

We've all had tough clients and tough brands that gave us a good marketing challenge. But could you successfully market a brand people hate?

Recently, on behalf of the Council on Foreign Relations, Charney Research conducted 14 focus groups among college graduates in Egypt, Morocco and Indonesia to determine sentiments about America in the Arab world. Of course, Anti-Americanism sentiments were rampant, but what surprised me were the whacked-out misconceptions that served as the basis of their hatred.

The focus group participants fervently believed, among other things, that up to 85% of America's citizens are Jews (it's more like 2%) who also control nearly all of Congress. In addition, the focus group participants were unaware that America has given billions in foreign aid to their countries and other nations. They thought the figure was only in the millions.

Remember, these were university-educated people. How could their view of the US be so incorrect?

Their perceptions have been shaped in a society that only presents to them a skewed vision of reality. They know only what their government and religious leaders tell them, or what they read and hear in government-run media.

As a result, America is not a brand they can experience or comparatively shop—they can't kick the tires, so to speak. Our country's actions are far from perfect, but as long as the positive attributes remain ignored in Arab countries we don't stand a chance to win their "hearts and minds."

Now what does all of that have to do with our job as advertising people? Plenty.

In America, even deodorant makers have an easier time selling themselves. That's because we live in a world where access to information, positive and negative, is infinite. Consumers don't rely on advertising messages to make purchasing decisions. They're free to buy the products or reject the products. So advertising people have to be incredibly skillful—and truthful--persuaders.

But we're paid to present one side. Our client's side. Through, empathy, or comedy or fear, clients pay us to move product. Sometimes, all we consider is our client's vantage point, and not consumer perception. That's when advertising sounds like bullshit.

Maybe you've written an ad saying your client's product is the ultimate "solution." Or your client asks you to emphasize their "superior customer service." Even if everyone quietly knows what you're shoveling doesn't smell too good, you have no choice. At least, not if you want to keep your job or your agency wants to keep the account.

The problem is, people believe what they choose to, whether based in truth or not. As advertising professionals, we must be aware of these perceptions in order to change minds.

This is not merely a political or marketing phenomenon. The perception battle is even fought within our industry. I'll give you another example.

Adweek recently took an editorial cue from a high school yearbook and published a reader poll of "Best & Worst" ad agencies in a number of categories. Grey took the dubious honor of "Worst Agency Reel." Now, I'm sure most of the voters (ad people) don't know what Grey actually had on its reel, but since the industry perception of Grey is that they're a perennial poster child for creative mediocrity, they took the title.

To combat this, Grey put up a website called worstagencyreel.com, where you can actually see the reel and decide for yourself its degree of wretchedness. Maybe Grey can win some "hearts and minds" by actually getting people to watch the reel. Or maybe Adweek readers are as prone to preconceptions as a focus group of college-educated Indonesians.

The lesson of all of these example is simple: We can only do our best work, influence consumer perceptions, change minds, and increase sales if we and our clients know what consumers really think—good and bad. The truth isn't always pretty, but it's the starting point for any good strategy or creative brief.

Some minds will never be changed—not in the Arab world, the business world, or the advertising world. But any advertising or marketing person who doesn't understand the power of consumer perception, especially preconceived notions, lives in a world of their own.