

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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Majority to Minority

Are middle-aged white ad guys facing extinction?

The year was 1999. The place: Texas. You couldn't turn on the TV or walk by a newsstand without seeing a certain male Hispanic singer's face. Everyone was Livin' La Vida Loca, or knew someone who wanted to be.

Everyone, that is, except my hayseed 40 year-old agency Creative Director.

"Who's Ricky Martin?" he asked.

I realized that there's a bigger issue facing our business than just staying in touch with trends. We're in the middle of a seismic cultural shift.

You've heard it all before—the face of America is changing, blah blah blah. A report just came out saying that Hispanics now represent America's largest minority group. And advertisers know they spend lots of money.

But our industry still faces a major problem adjusting to demographic shifts. Advertising, and Corporate America in general, remains largely in the control of middle-aged white guys or other conservative people who act like middle-aged white guys.

Will the faces in the ad biz ever really reflect America? Will the faces of our clients?

For all the talk of the need for diversity, and one-to-one marketing, advertising lumps people into groups. Demographics, psychographics, target audiences, whatever you'd like to call it, we don't have a grasp on the wide-ranging makeup of our audiences.

Once again, it comes down to cash.

If your client only has the money for one TV spot, or one photograph in a print ad, what are the odds they'll want to choose a really fat Tanzanian lesbian couple to portray their typical consumers? (You can tell I'm really not trying to offend anyone...my readership is really low among fat Tanzanian lesbians.)

Most likely, clients who need to use people in their ads gravitate toward using a pseudo-diverse looking crowd shot—with at least one African-American, one white, one Hispanic, and one Asian. Or even better, a few who look ethnically vague.

When I see these types of ads, I automatically imagine the conversations held during the casting sessions-where everyone expresses the need to cover all the possible ethnic bases. I bet you can, too.

Inevitably though, the efforts look hollow. The reality is we will never truly treat consumers as individuals in our efforts to reach them. It simply costs too much to create a dialogue that's uniquely relevant to each consumer.

So we target just enough different groups to make it cost effective. But even when large clients parcel out portions of their accounts to so-called minority agencies, the creative that gets produced may differ widely from the "general market" creative. Segmenting the messages conflicts with the widely held notion that all communications related to a brand's need to reflect a singular tone and vision. Ultimately, it may hurt the brand.

But advertising will have to find, in both the people entering the industry and the work we produce, an effective way to stay culturally relevant, manage accounts with ever-changing audiences, and still remain profitable.

I'm not sure white guys like me will be up to the task. I'm not middle-aged, but I feel the creep of cultural ignorance starting to wash over my brain, which may affect my future in the business.

I'll leave you with one example.

As a writer, the gradual incorporation of hip-hop language into everyday media is not something I can ignore for long. 20 years ago, such language was not considered appropriate English.

Now, I might have to start writing killuh adz 2 B successful in da biz.

And doesn't that make me sound really white?