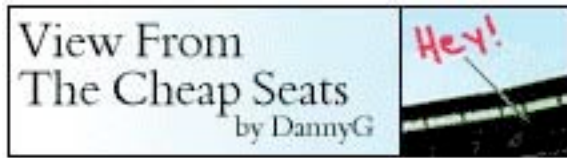


VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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My Client, The Bait-and-Switch Sleazebags

Why would honest agency people work for dishonest clients?

All advertising people eventually own up to a certain amount of self-loathing about the ad business. Hucksters, whores, sellouts--we question whether the world really needs this advertising shit. For the most part though, ad people perform a service that helps clients and greases the wheels of capitalism and hey, capitalism is a good thing. But what happens when we work on something that makes us truly loathe the ad business?

I started thinking about that question once when I worked on a particular project. Not to get into specifics, but my clients were truly bait-and-switch con artists. They (with my copywriting help) wanted to advertise a service for a certain price. Then they admitted to me that 90% of the time, customers pay 4 times as much for the work if it's done properly. In other words, I had to promote a \$100 deal that usually ended up costing \$400. All this to a blue-collar target audience who needed to keep their hard-earned money. The whole assignment made me want to puke.

Okay, fine, these people had a history of working with my agency, no big deal, I just did the work and kept my mouth shut. Then, poking around the Internet one day, I did a search on this company and discovered they had been profiled on a weekly newsmagazine show and investigated by the Better Business Bureau in several states for deceptive practices.

To make matters worse, my clients really were not nice people. The account represented only a tiny sliver of our agency's billings but consumed huge amounts of time because they were so high-maintenance and demanding. The account was unprofitable, and the creative was awful, too.

I wish I had the power to tell this client to take a flying leap, but I didn't. I was just a lowly CW and there'd be hell to pay if I actually spoke the truth. I couldn't understand why my boss ever gave this client the time of day. Why he never told them that running deceptive ads was a horrible idea that, while it might drive short-term traffic, would kill them in the long run. Why he never pointed out that brand loyalty erodes when they continually screw their customers. No, he just went along with all of it--even though our agency would do just fine without them. Did this mean our agency was as scummy as our clients?

Clients like these are all over the place. Agencies, too. As I found out, even legitimate, honest ad agencies run by honest people are all too happy to service the business. But as professionals, we need to draw a distinction between puffed-up language and dishonest claims. Too often, we know when our clients want to cross the line yet we're reluctant to call them on it or suggest a higher road. Is this why so much advertising stinks? Is this why consumers have such a low regard for advertising and the people who make it?

All the truly good work our industry does gets neutralized in the face of crap like bait-and-switch advertising. Regrettably, faced with my own bait-and-switch client, I didn't do shit. Maybe I won't do shit next time either, or maybe I'll take a stand. Maybe now is a good time to begin taking a stand against clients that promote their products and services with deceptive marketing. Who's with me?