

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



03/20/2006

Oh, the Humanity

Has the advertising business losing the human touch?

Recently a friend of mine, a marketing manager, was forced to acquiesce to her panicked boss, who asked her to send out an e-mail ad blast to a group of customers at the end of the business day, in a hurry. So it got done, fast.

Only the wrong database received the e-mail. The group of customers who got the message was a large group, and they received a special promotional offer that could potentially cost the company millions because it went to the wrong audience in haste.

But this is what the experts call Loyalty Marketing. Or Customer Relationship Management. Or the age of Integrated Communications, circa 2006. Any marketer who isn't onboard will fall behind, so it seems.

We have the ability to create ad campaigns and communication pieces, online or offline, in a matter of hours, and send them out to millions of people without ever seeing a human face or a human reaction. Is that a good thing?

One of the knocks on big budget, traditional advertising is that you can buy \$10 million worth of TV, radio, and print, and it's too general, too non-specific, and it misses the new audience and their fractured media habits.

But I think advertising, in a rush to embrace everything that is new in new media, is slowly losing the human touch. We produce work, in ever-larger quantities and at an ever-faster pace, that contain the tone and type of messages we'd never use if, say, we had to sell our products face-to-face or door-to-door.

Going virtual can lead to impersonal, which can in turn lead to antisocial. I have some personal evidence of this: I'm a contributing blogger on AdPulp.com. Sometimes we offer praise for ads and the ad industry, and sometimes we dispense criticism. We also have an open comments section. Invariably, the nastiest, most mean-spirited comments come from people who hide behind anonymous names and e-mail addresses.

Can we say the same thing about ads that are produced in haste, and behind a mask of anonymity?

But both online and offline advertising can lack a humanistic quality. You can hear the genesis of this in agency and client meetings. Advertising and marketing professionals get in conference rooms and rarely talk the way normal people would, discussing ad strategies without considering the desires of the audience on the receiving end. The groupthink kicks in:

"I think we need to focus on a service-oriented message..."

"We'll just get consumers to visit the website..."

"We failed to mention carpet fiber quality..."

All the market research, focus group testing, and other planning methods don't help. We still have trouble communicating in a human way. No wonder so many ads seem so irrelevant.

But it'll only get worse. Advertising is an industry that operates at warp speed. We need the Web to conduct business. And every ad agency is rushing headlong to make sure campaigns are integrated on the Net, and hiring accordingly.

I understand. I can't imagine a life without Internet. In the process of moving cities recently, any time I spent without a fast connection nearby gave me panic attacks. Seriously. Without Internet access I felt out of touch, left behind, and at a disadvantage, career-wise. Do accountants and doctors have this problem?

I know I'm not alone in feeling discombobulated despite being so plugged in. This week's Time Magazine had a cover story on today's teenagers and college students who multitask with their computers and cell phones, and how this phenomenon is changing life at both school and home.

Oh, I didn't actually see the magazine. I read the story on-line. Which you can do, if you watch an ad first. Don't ask me what the ad was for, because I can't recall. I was multitasking at the time. I don't think the inability to process makes me a bad person. It just makes me human.

I just hope the copywriter in me remembers that feeling the next time I'm writing an ad to someone.