

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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Queer Eye for the Ad Guy

What do we do when our clients, or consumers, don't want to be cool?

Essentially, there are two types of people in America: Wal-Mart People and Target People.

Odds are, you're a Target person. Most ad people are. Target has stylish, affordable merchandise in a clean, upscale environment—it's the perfect place to stock up on knick-knacks, bric-a-brac, and other little necessities of life.

In my town, the nearby Wal-Mart is crowded, noisy, cluttered, and full of seemingly shoddy products. Given a choice between the two, I'm inclined to think everyone would prefer shopping at Target.

I'd be wrong.

According to Fortune Magazine, "Wal-Mart is the nation's biggest seller of groceries, toys, guns, diamonds, CDs, apparel, dog food, detergent, jewelry, sporting goods, videogames, socks, bedding, and toothpaste — not to mention its biggest film developer, optician, private truck-fleet operator, energy consumer, and real estate developer."

If you've never been to Wal-Mart, you need to go. Most people I know hold their noses at the idea of a trip there. If you live in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, or LA, you might not live within 50 miles of one. But I'll bet your clients go pretty regularly.

Why do I mention this? Advertising, and pop culture in general, doesn't always mirror the reality of mainstream America. Our business is a very insular business. We tend to surround ourselves with other like-minded agency types. We think everyone is young, hip, edgy, trendy—or wants to be.

Yes, tastes of the masses have become more sophisticated over the last few decades. It's true that you can walk into the baseball stadium in Pittsburgh or Cleveland and order sushi. And you can get a cappuccino almost anywhere. But most people still prefer their hot dogs and brats at the ballpark, and McDonald's still serves more coffee than anywhere else.

Yet, our business continues to latch onto trends and assume everyone else does, too.

No doubt you've seen Bravo's "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy." Or you've heard the buzz about it. Basically, 5 swishy guys prance around Manhattan looking for the perfect products to spruce up the appearance and apartment of some poor style-challenged schlub.

There's a big dose of product placement on the show. As a result, cable audiences across America learn about hip, Manhattan boutiques. We're exposed to exotic cheeses, obscure hair pomades, and the best tips to make a 300 square foot apartment look like a Eurotrash showplace.

In one hour, the radical change of the "straight guy" has been accomplished. Of course, the "after" always looks better than the "before." You'd think everyone in the country would be motivated to toss out their pink flamingoes and ratty furniture.

But in America, not every straight guy has a queer eye. Not every family seeks to upgrade their image. We are a nation of people with diverse tastes, and yes, some of that taste is downright horrible. No amount of queer eyes will ever change that.

And no amount of great advertising is likely to change that, either. Which might explain why The One Show or the Clios represent a tiny fraction of all the advertising that gets produced. Plenty of clients don't want subtle wit in their advertising. Or big words. Or sophisticated thoughts. They just don't want to be edgy and cool, at least the way our industry, or our awards shows, would define it.

In other words, they want Wal-Mart advertising for a Wal-Mart world. I know, I've been there.

I've worked on ads for many products and services that were "family-friendly" (read: conservative and lowbrow.) We did good work, and we pushed the envelope as far as it would go, even though the envelope was always addressed to Main Street, U.S.A. For its intended audience, the work was quite fresh and intelligent—we knew that lack of sophistication did not equal lack of intelligence. Yet I'd show the work to creative directors in bigger cities, and these CD's often didn't get it. They're not part of the audience I wrote for, and they don't understand how Middle America thinks. But these CD's could certainly tell me where to stay in Santa Monica the next time I'm on a shoot.

We have to confront our own sense of snobbery while maintaining a sense of creative integrity. Otherwise, advertising will become increasingly irrelevant if we continue to talk to ourselves. And it will become increasingly irrelevant if we don't find ways to talk intelligently to consumers—gently planting new ideas into the heads of people who still desire a comfortable, non-threatening existence.

For most of us in the ad business, learning about consumers in Middle America means trotting out to unfamiliar territory. So if you're looking to get out of your comfort zone, I suggest that you head down to a Wal-Mart in some faceless suburb or small Mellencamp-esque town. Get a look at who American consumers really are. Get a look at what your clients already face.

Do it this Sunday--after church, of course.