



::view from the cheap seats::

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Shuffling the Deckhands

Can agencies and clients move forward by moving people around?

I once worked on a big, global client who used to rotate its marketing executives on a regular basis. Like every year or two. They'd take someone in the corporate PR department and then put her in charge of direct marketing. They'd take a brand advertising guy and put him in charge of sales training.

From the client's standpoint, it wasn't a game of musical chairs--it was what they did to invest in their people, to give them a more well-rounded business career. Not coincidentally, many people stayed in that company much longer than people do at ad agencies.

But from our agency standpoint, it was chaos. We constantly dealt with people with little to no background in their current positions, and we were at the mercy of their personal learning curves. So what's the best policy? Should ad agencies make concerted efforts to help their employees learn all facets of the business?

I say this because the ad agency business seems as siloed as ever. Among account, media, creative people, and everything else, there's still a major lack of integration or knowledge sharing. It's even worse now that interactive is so much in demand. Interactive people are often stored away in their own corner—or at one agency I worked at, on the basement floor.

So what would happen if your co-workers switched places? Could media planners suddenly become Art Directors? Could Copywriters become Account Executives? Could your interactive team understand brand-building or point-of-sale if they had to? Even for a day or two, just to do a little role-playing exercise?

I'm not suggesting agencies should hire people unqualified for their positions. Some folks simply are better suited for a particular discipline. I know a fair amount about media, but I'm not the guy you want negotiating spot broadcast deals. However, I've always tried to learn as much as I could about advertising, business, media, etc., in addition to learning about my clients' businesses. I want to be able to hold my own in any client or industry-related conversation. But to most people, it makes me a freak, not a valuable resource.

Why are there so few really well-rounded people in this business?

For one thing, the skills successful ad people need aren't taught early on. Colleges and universities don't prepare undergraduates for an advertising career other than offering lessons in binge drinking. Portfolio schools focus on creativity, but primarily for creativity's sake, not to build businesses.

Then there's the actual hiring process. Agency HR people have little ability to discern who might be a great addition based upon a resume or a 10 second glance at a book. They look to see the blanks are filled in for whatever job specific checklist they have. The agency business has changed radically over the last 10 years—but the hiring process remains fossilized.

But let's say you do get started in an agency. Do you think you're set from then on? Ask yourself: Does your agency care about your professional development? Or do they just want your butt in a cubicle for as long as possible every day? How honest could you be with the people you work with that you'd like to spend some time developing your skills—even ones that might be outside your job description?

If ad agencies are going to have any relevance in the future, we have to make sure everyone understands how the big wheel of capitalism turns. "Great ideas can come from anywhere—or anyone." I've heard that countless times but I've rarely seen an agency turn that notion into some daily reality.

We work in a business that, let's face it, anyone can attempt. Consumers are offering up their own ads and spreading brand buzz. Management consultants are writing brand strategies. Printers are writing copy. Everyone's getting in on the act. So we have to do it better. One secret is knowledge, and the collective knowledge that exists in any agency. That's why I have little patience for art directors who don't care about words, or media people who care little for the account plan. Or anyone who doesn't care about a client's business or industry trends. Ignorance is not bliss--not anymore.

Maybe we could take a page from clients who like to shuffle people around, at least to give people a taste of every job in an agency. We may be able to do better work. It'll take some understanding, patience, and dedication to training—three things sorely lacking in the agency world.

But don't wait for your agency to start moving people around or helping you out in becoming a better advertising professional. Because if you're just sitting on your ass, it'll get kicked to the curb sooner or later.