

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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Stuck on Stupid

Advertising and PR don't work well if they don't jibe with reality

When the gloriously badass Lt. General Russel Honore rolled into New Orleans to oversee military operations a couple of weeks ago, he was asked why the response took so long. "This is a disaster," he said. "This isn't something somebody can control. We ain't stuck on stupid."

Well, there are few Russel Honores in the advertising industry. If we think we have absolute control over public perception anymore, we're stuck on stupid.

Watching TV the last few weeks reminded me that any PR or advertising initiative, when it simply doesn't match reality, can indeed look stupid.

Nowhere was the vacuum so clear than in the news coverage of the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina. The Bush administration choreographs the President's every piss for maximum image appeal. So the contrast between deteriorating conditions in New Orleans and the official attitude of government officials turned into a lesson we advertising people can heed.

As the situation got obviously worse, people got mad. And often, raw emotion took precedence over objective news reporting. Anchors like Anderson Cooper and Shepard Smith rediscovered their testicles amidst the Gulf Coast debris. Elected officials and TV pundits had a hard time putting on a happy face when they were confronted with reality live on the air. Even President Bush needed a DVD compilation of news reports 4 days after the storm hit so he could actually see what was happening.

It's once again a reminder that advertising and marketing people need to get out of our collective bubble. Our ability to size up a situation from a somewhat neutral position the only advantage we have if we want any influence over shaping the images of our clients.

More and more, we're living in a transparent age. Just because an ad says something, a marketing VP says something, or a PR campaign says something, doesn't make it true. Some recent examples bear this out:

Dell's advertised its "award-winning service and support" for years but when a prominent blogger got the runaround from Dell's customer service reps, he told the world of his troubles and found many folks who've had similar experiences. In the spring, while Wal-Mart opened its corporate headquarters to the press in a charm offensive, in Arizona they authorized an ad comparing a new store's opponents to Nazi book burners. And Kaiser Permanente has enlisted Bob Dylan in an image-burnishing ad campaign to insist "The Times They Are A-Changin'" while consumer-generated websites tell horror stories of their experience as Kaiser HMO patients.

A glossy ad or a shiny happy PR campaign can't completely wash away those contrasting realities. I've often heard creative directors say they like ads that reflect little "human truths." But here's the problem: There is very little truth anymore.

Everyone has their own version of the truth, and when it comes to brands, consumers will decide what the truth is. Maybe they'll experience something firsthand. Maybe they'll learn it in school. Maybe they'll find it on the Internet. Or maybe, just maybe, they'll get the truth from ad or a news report spun from a PR campaign.

And marketing and advertising can still make an impact. With thought-provoking work that bears some relevance to the real world or provides comic relief that lets people escape the harshness of the real world. And by losing the clichéd thinking and marketing buzzwords. Stopping clients from insisting they offer "great service" when they don't. Or pushing the notion that a client's product or service is a "solution" when there really is no real problem to solve, only something that needs selling.

We have a messy media landscape right now. With plenty of challenges and opportunities for smart marketing and advertising. There's plenty of cleanup work to be done and I think we'll be able to see the results. That is, as long as we can see for ourselves the reality that's on the ground—and we're not stuck on stupid.