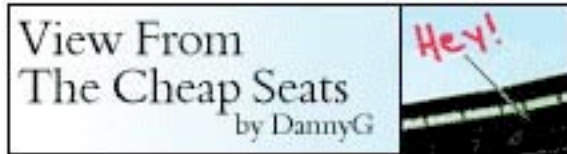


VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



5.1.2004

Subservient Agency

How do some agencies get away with stuff that others can't?

OK, I promise this column shall not worship at the altar of Crispin Porter & Bogusky. They get reams of PR as it is. But I would like to use them as an example.

Unless you live on Pluto, or in a McDonald's stockroom, you've no doubt seen the "Subservient Chicken" web site. And you've told the chicken to do the Riverdance or hump the couch or whatever.

Yes, it's completely weird and a great "viral" marketing idea, but that's not what impressed me initially. I wonder if anyone else shared my first reaction upon hearing about the site:

How on earth did they convince the client to use the word 'subservient'?

I immediately flashed back to all the clients I've ever dealt with, and thought how they'd react had my agency presented a similar title.

"I think the word 'subservient' is a little too sophisticated for our audience."

"Uhh...how about 'Funky Chicken'? That'd be fun."

"Let's call it The Beak—you know, BK? We could give away dolls."

"We should do a focus group and test the word 'subservient' against some others."

The point is that CP&B could've easily acquiesced to a client request to dumb down the website name. In other words, they could've been subservient. And the site would have still garnered attention. However, some of the goofy bizarre charm would've been lost.

In cases like this one, the small details mean everything, don't they?

Even as you read this now, some client or nervous agency person is asking for a concept, an ad, or even a word to be changed. Right now, something is getting toned down to be more expected and conventional. It's those gradual, habitual patterns that make most advertising so boring. Not one big decision—the hundreds of little ones.

As a copywriter, I've been known to trot out the SAT words on occasion, and even in agency meetings I've gotten quite a few blank stares using language that at first sounds unconventional. And I've dealt with more than my share of clients who steadfastly believe consumers are simply stupid. But I find it nearly impossible to defend work in the face of such ignorance.

Yes, we sometimes snicker about the perceived simplemindedness of the "average" consumer. Everyone in advertising is guilty of that; however, it's not a license to produce bad advertising. So with due respect to the late David Ogilvy, I'd like to adjust one of his maxims: "The consumer is not a moron. And even if the consumer is a moron, she doesn't think of herself as a moron." If more agencies and clients could keep that in mind, we might be able to turn out smarter, more provocative work that gets results.

Burger King customers are as broad an audience as you can find. So you'd think all the work has to be pedestrian--and until CP&B took over, it was. But 47 million hits in 2 weeks to subservientchicken.com can't be wrong (hell, you've gotta know how to spell it right to get there!)

So I want to congratulate CP&B and Burger King for not being subservient to the least common denominator. And I'd love to figure out how more of us can have it our way.