



::view from the cheap seats::

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The Agency Internal Combustion Engine

Is your shop chugging along smoothly or choking on the fumes?

For well over 100 years, one invention has propelled our world forward, literally and figuratively. And now many people want to eliminate it.

It's the internal combustion engine. Cars have 'em. Planes have 'em. And ad agencies have 'em, too.

It's an ingenious idea. Take a high amount of energy, put it in a small enclosed space, and ignite it. You might get a lot of forward motion. You might also get nothing but noxious fumes. The same mechanics apply in the agency world: Depending on where your career fits into the corporate machine, you may be in for a wild, fun ride, or you might get run over.

In the engine that makes up an advertising agency, the parts don't always work the way they're designed to. Because we're in the business of generating ideas—and generating money. And most ad executives can't agree on the best ways to do one, the other, or both.

Nor do all the parts work together seamlessly with one main thrust. Most advertising agencies aren't meritocracies. The best idea doesn't always win. Rather, ideas and concepts are prejudged, judged and filtered in all sorts of ways, from the rank and demeanor of the person presenting the idea to the monetary and or emotional cost of doing (or not doing) an idea.

Sometimes, you can pinpoint those moments where you know the engine isn't built to run smoothly. I once worked in an agency that simply never presented work internally. No "let's put it all up on the wall and take a look." I mean, if two creative teams were given the same assignment, never did they put campaigns side-by-side to compare. Until one day, when it finally happened. Everyone from the account director to the new business guru championed the idea me & my art director (the less experienced team) presented. The other team, consisting of 2 creative directors, got upstaged and knew it. But later on they insisted, "well, ours is a slam dunk." Which left me & my partner thinking, "What meeting were you just in?"

The engine sputters because everyone in advertising is in the business of self-preservation—and career preservation. Particularly when you're a creative it's easy to feel threatened by the success of others around you. Because ultimately, you're judged by your output—what you produce that the marketplace and the industry can see and value. So when it comes time to prove your talent and worth, you're judged not as a part of a team or agency, just as an individual. Unless you have a stake, like a financial one, in the success of your agency, you'll always have to look out for yourself.

As much as the parts of our agencies are interdependent, it only takes one malfunctioning part to bring it to a halt. A Creative Director that green lights everything without much comment looks weak, and a Creative Director that decides to rewrite and redesign everything is a megalomaniac. Account Executives try to please everyone, which often pleases no one. And the CEO often has no idea how well the engine's running on a day-to-day basis.

It'd be nice all the parts of an agency work smoothly. Some parts need a little extra greasing. The fuel has to be the right mix. And the conditions outside have to be as optimal as possible. It's hard to get an agency going if everything's frozen over.

But, as we crank up the advertising engine every day, we need to keep some things in mind.

The agency will stall if it's dominated by naysayers and devil's advocates whose mantra is, "the client will never go for it."

The agency will spin out of control if there's always a last-minute scramble to change campaigns because someone important didn't see them early enough.

The agency will grind to a halt if one part lacks the ability to effectively work with the other parts.

With every week comes a new conference or survey in which it's said that the advertising industry and its professionals aren't keeping up with the times. It may be time to face that an agency's attempt to push new thinking or new marketing ideas are subject to old processes, posturing, and personal prejudices. Maybe that's why, if you think you're an integral part of your agency's internal combustion engine, you never want to see it dismantled.

Can we eliminate the internal combustion engine? Maybe, but we'll have to replace it with something else. Something more efficient. Cleaner, maybe. New fuel. Less moving parts. Something that isn't designed by the engineers who came up with the last version of the agency internal combustion engine.

It may take our work to new places we never thought we'd go.