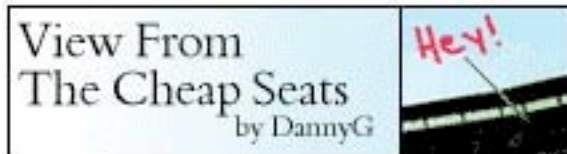


VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



12/05/2005

The Bald Midget and the Furniture Store Owner's Daughter

As media splinters, what will become of local advertising?

I once worked on an retail chain account that had a very simple marketing plan: They spent about \$1000 total to write and produce 2 radio spots, then run the shit out of them in a handful of markets, spending about \$2 million in the media buy.

That was it. And boy, were they known for those spots.

In spite of all the discussion about branded content, web movies, and other assorted "media-neutral" stuff agencies-of-the-moment brag about pursuing, the local and regional advertisers are steadfastly sticking to the old game plan.

You know who I'm talking about: The local bank that claims to treat you special. The furniture chain that has a 'going out of business' sale every month. The spa/billiards/dartboard outlet. The local hospitals. The car dealers. The funeral home shameless enough to flaunt itself in a cheesy, bouncy jingle.

Will they ever change? Can they embrace new media? After all, these are folks who aim for quantity in advertising, not quality. But if traditional media gets less effective, what will the local clients do?

Most every agency that is now doing award-winning national work starting out pushing local advertisers into new creative territory. Some agencies got famous doing local work for free and entering it into awards shows. But local advertising is rarely sexy. Creative directors never want to see it in a portfolio. Yet there's real money at stake; it's the bread and butter of our business and incredibly, incredibly tough to do well.

Taking on local clients means you either deal with marketing people who aren't very sophisticated, or you deal the owners who want to star in their own ads (and put their annoying kids & dogs in `em) no matter what. These clients don't have large budgets, and consequently their ad agency can't devote the resources needed to produce a campaign that's as nuanced as national advertisers do. So it's mass marketing, plain and simple.

Ultimately, much of it is wasted money. Because the President's Day Sale is competing with Nike. The local shoe outlet is competing with Lexus. No matter who you are, your ads still battle for the same limited attention, the eyes and ears of the consumer. And it doesn't help that on most cable stations, the local commercials always look like they're on 4th generation videotapes, and they're never seamless with whatever the national channel is showing. So a commercial will often get cut off too soon and you'll see the last frame or two of some other spot. Messages can get completely lost when that happens.

Someone once proposed that if TV stations wanted to retain viewers, they should reduce their rates when they air more creative TV commercials. Don't hold your breath. First off, the commission system is alive and well in local media, so the incentive exists for stations to sell quantity advertising time, not quality. Plus, how can you tell the carpet outlet owner that his lispy, pie-faced granddaughter just won't cut it in today's media world? Or that there's really no brand equity in a jingle that screams, "great people, great prices?"

I assume there will always be a need for local advertising, and by extension, the local TV, radio stations, and newspapers.

So weep not for the chick lying seductively on the bed as the camcorder pans across the furniture showroom. Or the bald midget willing to get hit the face with a cream pie for a pizza joint.

Their jobs, like those of all the other local yokels, are secure.

Ironic, isn't it? Because in the higher-stakes world of national and global advertising, everyone else is so insecure.