

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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The Bastards Among Us

Can ad people act like true professionals when we're encouraged to push boundaries?

Have you ever taken a picture of your client's sweaty ass crack?

I haven't, but I know someone who did. I've seen the photo. And yes, it was quite frightening, but not for the reason you might imagine.

As the story was related to me, the agency once had a client who was a large dude. Like 6-foot-1, 350 pounds. A lumbering, stumbling man. That frame, coupled with his perceived lack of marketing knowledge, earned him the nickname "Fat Bastard" around the agency.

Well, "Fat Bastard" had to attend a TV shoot in Orlando. Outdoors. In July. This recipe for perspiration caught up with the man, so much that the dripping sweat was visibly apparent through the rear of his khaki shorts. Thus, an embarrassing moment turned into a Kodak moment for an agency lackey with a camera.

This client's reputation for heft, and sweat, was the subject of frequent agency coffee klatches. What's more, the agency staff was egged on by the agency CEO and Creative Director, who not only tolerated but also encouraged the mocking. And "Fat Bastard" never had a clue what was being said about him. What's more, with his trusting nature, he thought so highly of this agency and its people that he continued to give the agency marketing projects even when he switched jobs.

This agency is still in business, trying to woo more clients and develop a reputation for great ideas and superior client service—despite a corporate culture that openly disparages the personal appearances of others, including the very clients who pay their bills.

I'll bet a lot of agencies function with this kind of culture. Yet we wonder why the advertising industry doesn't get more respect.

So what kind of behavior is out of bounds? How can some of our dealings with co-workers and clients be deemed "professional" when at other times we act so unprofessional?

I've worked in agencies where routinely, I've heard comments that would make for ready-made harassment and discrimination lawsuits in any other corporate environment. I've always accepted that an almost anything-goes environment is a part of the Faustian bargain one makes in order to work in a comparatively freewheeling industry.

We work in a business of ideas and thoughts, where bad taste is often celebrated, even financially rewarded. We cross the line (whatever that is) with glee. But crossing the line, as the ad industry sees it, doesn't just apply to ads and concepts. It's part of daily agency office life, isn't it?

We're always going to have co-workers and clients who get on our nerves. Since advertising depends on a high degree of interpersonal collaboration, friction is inevitable. Add time crunches and less-than-ideal clients to the mix, and you've got a recipe for an environment of petty squabbling, subtle backstabbing, and frequent bitching. It seems like a primal rule of agency politics that you have to tear someone else down in order to build yourself up.

Everybody is susceptible to these base instincts. And if the future of advertising is so-called branded entertainment---i.e., "The intersection of Madison and Vine," we'll be pretending like the ad business is more Hollywood than it really is. We'll be taking more of our behavioral cues from "Swimming With Sharks." That's not a future I'm looking forward to. Are you?

What's it gonna take for us to curb this behavior? We're all guilty of it at one time or another. Me, all I can say is I'm working on it. Trying to stay positive whenever I can.

What about you, and the people you work with? So your ass isn't sweaty today. Doesn't matter. Perhaps someone right now is calling you Skinny Bastard. Or Bald Bastard. Or Gay Bastard. Or Jew Bastard. Or Irish Bastard.

And unless we all change, the public perception will always be that the ad business is nothing but a bunch of bastards.