

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



10/25/2005

The French Evolution

Unfettered hero worshipping in the ad biz? Now that's crap

This week, the advertising industry had a public relations problem.

Neil French's resignation from WPP became a news story that was picked up by newspapers worldwide. Hell, I even saw it covered on Fox News. The singular face of the ad industry was a middle-aged white guy puffing on a stogie.

Reading the press' descriptions of Neil French was quite entertaining.

"Guru." "Legend." "Celebrated Figure." "Expert." (The UK *Sun* used the phrase "Motormouth Brummie." I'm not sure if that's good or bad. I have no clue what it means.)

Frankly, Neil French isn't the problem. The problem lies with the starstruck suckers who treat his every utterance like it was the word of Moses or the Dalai Lama. And then insist his comments are above reproach simply because, well, he's Neil French and we're not.

The cult of personality that surrounds certain people in advertising is silly at the very least, and in the case of Neil French, dangerous. It was bad for business at WPP where he worked, and it's bad for the ad business as a whole.

I'm always amazed at the aura that surrounds the people who have the ability to match some decent words with a picture or two and a product shot and then convince a client to say "yes." In an award show book, they're perfect. Genius. Untouchable.

Then, inevitably, they open their mouths. They get quoted in *Adweek* or give an interview in *Creativity*. Rarely is there any real brilliance in anything they utter. Which makes me think, "that person's full of shit." Or more appropriately, "that person's just as full of shit as I am and why did he end up in *Creativity*?"

I have a friend who's met many of these people, whereas I haven't. Usually when I inquire as to what these "superstars" are like, the report goes something like this: "He's unimpressive." "She's really not that bright." "You'd be disappointed."

And yeah, I am disappointed quite a bit when I hear that. Because, starting in ad school, we looked to certain people and certain agencies whose work we admired like: *They have the secrets. They know something we don't. We have to be just like them.* But it was beyond admiration. It was hero worship.

I've now been in advertising long enough to see many of the agencies we admired go out of business. To see the particular people we admired end up doing incredibly average work or leaving the business altogether.

With very few exceptions, the people in advertising that impress me are not the ones with the most trophies. They're the quieter ones. The ones who use their talents boosting their clients' businesses, not boosting their egos.

So let's keep things in perspective. Neil French will keep pontificating on "crap" females and sucking on his big brown cigars. Just maybe not on WPP's dime.

The rest of us have jobs to do, bills to pay, and clients to serve. And we face a consumer public where women—at least in America, according to American Demographics magazine—control 85% of the household spending. That's \$3.5 trillion. Oh yeah, and a lot of them try to balance career and family just like female creative directors do.

Here's hoping advertising's next expert legendary guru understands the audience our industry needs to be communicating with. I'll save my hero worship for him.

Or better yet, her.