

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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The Home for the Strategically Challenged

Can you ever make a great ad from a bad strategy?

When my client, the CEO of a well-known widget company, started banging his fist on the table, I knew we were in trouble.

"Power," he said. "That's what we need to hammer home. We're the leader in power. Power, power, power."

Only we knew it wasn't true. His competitors had equally powerful widgets. And a new widget manufacturer had just entered the market with impressive technology and a design that one-upped everyone else.

But no one from the agency who was in that meeting that day, not the AE, not the Creative Director, not the agency president, not me or my art director, challenged him on this assertion, which would become the new strategic direction for our ads.

Oh, yeah, and he wanted one more mandatory element: Babies.

"Our target audience is women," the CEO said. "When we've used babies in our ads before, the focus groups remember those ads. We have brand equity in babies."

So off went my art director and I, to concept ads with babies that would reinforce a position of power.

There wasn't any recourse. At that point, what the CEO asked for became sacrosanct to the AE. When reviewing the concepts, it was her mantra. "We don't hit the power message hard enough. We're not hitting the babies hard enough." (Okay, she didn't say that last sentence, but she implied it.)

Like all other aspects of advertising, strategic thinking has evolved. From the idea of a USP, to Ries and Trout's idea of "Positioning," to now, when we capture attention by any means necessary, be it entertainment, interruption, or sheer weirdness. More, and more, consumers reject what simply doesn't ring true or relevant to them.

So why do so many clients keep resorting to cliched thinking? Why do agencies continue to accept those mandates? Is there a place in agency life anymore for well-thought-out strategic thinking?

See if these platitudes ring a bell: "We don't give the clients what they want. We give them what they need." "We always show the clients something that'll scare them." Somehow, when the CEO is in the room, it rarely happens.

Ad agencies can only survive if they offer a service no one else can, and be the impartial thinker that aims to make the client's business succeed. It's a reason why I believe creative people, the ones doing the work, ought to have a say in strategy as early as possible in the process. (If they want a say, that is. Many creatives simply don't care, and they're only screwing themselves if they can't think strategically.) Because when you're the one making the product, you want the raw ingredients and blueprints to be the best possible. And you need the option to revisit the strategy if the process doesn't yield great concepts. Otherwise, you might end up with something like, say, "Fried chicken is part of a healthy diet."

Unfortunately, many agencies still operate on an assembly line approach, where you do only one thing, and don't dare suggest how to do anything else. When Henry Ford did it, he made cars a commodity. Now, many ad agencies have let their strategic thinking, and the work that follows, become a commodity.

In other words, for you all who love buzzwords, an agency with a multidisciplinary approach needs multidisciplinary people. With the freedom to weigh in on something even if it's not reflective of the title on their business card. If an agency's employees only know how to do one thing, an agency won't succeed at anything. And, when your client starts banging his fist on the conference room table, no amount of photogenic babies can save you.