

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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The Interactive Ghetto

Agencies are scrambling for talent to produce web work—and are determined to segregate them

I recently ran across a classified ad from an ad agency that's so highly regarded they rarely have to advertise to find people.

The ad was odd. Here's a snippet: *"We are not looking for someone who thinks ads are the end all be all. Or who are really just trying to get their foot in the door of the (DELETED) advertising creative department. What we are looking for is a writer's writer...They must be wildly creative. In other words, a bright, articulate visionary."*

When I mentioned this on AdPulp.com, we got an anonymous comment (well, not so anonymous, the commenter's IP address gave away the fact that they were at the aforementioned agency.) In the course of defending the agency and the ad, the commenter said this: *"They want a good writer, but not one who is more interested in working in the creative department than the interactive department."*

Based on these insider comments, I infer that at this world-class agency, the interactive department is separate from the creative department. I can imagine the interview: "OK, bright articulate visionary web writer boy, clamp your iPod earbuds in your lobes and don't bother the people writing the TV spots. You won't do what they do, after all."

I dug a bit deeper, and found a press release about 2 of this agency's recent hires, which touted the team as "a unique combination of enormous creative talent who think Web-centrally."

Oh really? I wonder which department they'll end up in: the interactive department or the creative department.

All of this may sound like a matter of semantics, but I think it's very telling that even the most lauded ad agencies have no intention of truly integrating their departments, and make that fact plain to jobseekers. Or perhaps they simply don't want to integrate, for fear of alienating the prima donnas who wouldn't dream of writing a banner ad or a page of web copy. I liken it to copywriters who love to write TV but would avoid radio like the plague.

Once again, agencies are asking their creative departments to hire one-trick ponies, or once they hire them, agencies are determined to keep them that way.

I'm not suggesting that writing ads and writing for interactive don't involve different writing techniques. Clearly, writing for the web, and working in rich media, are skills that must be learned and refined.

But slowly, the dividing lines are being drawn. In other words, like their direct marketing cousins before them, interactive people are now occupying their own ghettos in traditional ad agencies.

Conversely, in primarily interactive shops, creatives with more traditional experience are shunned. It's now gotten to the point where you can't move from traditional to interactive work (or vice versa) without prior experience, or without an employer questioning your motives. So I guess it shouldn't be a surprise the two rarely work together.

Trust me, all this territorialism will backfire. Agencies who specialize in "above the line" work are very protective of it and hate to give any of those assignments away to "below the line" shops. More significantly, though, a similar distrust exists between the people who work in these different disciplines at the same agency.

Yes, there still is a line—and interactive is somewhere in the middle, but climbing with a bullet. And the more traditional shops know this, so they're desperate and scrambling to compete. They're forced to advertise for interactive creative people, only to stick them in the ghetto.

Marketers are scrambling for anything—anything—that will command the attention of the ever-more-elusive consumers. They want ads, they want microsites, they want buzz, and they want it all at once. But they need coherent brand strategies to do this. Which means they need coherent work from their agency or agencies, who right now are not staffed or structured properly to deliver.

Great ideas need to be expressed in all types of media—which can only happen when no one is designated as strictly working in the "creative" department or the "interactive" department. Perhaps if we liberate the ghettos, we'll all work together in a truly collaborative environment.