



::view from the cheap seats::

4/09/07

The Sanjaya Principle

Why does bad advertising, like bad singing, work so well?

As I'm writing this, we're in the middle of the 6th season of the marketing juggernaut that is "American Idol." But the search and the voting for America's best undiscovered singer has been turned on its ass by one of the top 12 finalists, Sanjaya Malakar. He's the centerpiece of the show. His success is the lead story all over the media that cover "Idol."

Why? Because he sucks.

Sanjaya's just not a very good singer. Everyone agrees. The judges stopped criticizing him because it doesn't make a difference. Somebody, indeed millions of somebodies, keeps him in the competition week after week. And no one knows exactly why. He may be getting votes because of an attempt to subvert the show by Howard Stern or "VoteForTheWorst.com." But maybe there are hordes of little girls who have a crush on him and gladly take style over substance.

I think the advertising industry, too, has a Sanjaya problem. As I look out into the ad landscape, I wonder: Why does so much shitty advertising succeed so well?

Let's begin with the premise that if a certain type or style of advertising didn't work, it'd be abandoned.

If screaming car dealer radio ads didn't work, they'd be history.

If magazine subscription direct mail pieces with multiple inserts and form letters containing lots of underlining, bolding and a "P.S." at the end didn't work, you wouldn't have them in your mailbox.

Pop-up ads and banners that invade your computer screen are universally loathed, but they're still prevalent. If they didn't work, they'd be rare.

Anyone who insists that advertising is rapidly dying isn't paying attention. It's still alive, bad as it can be sometimes—because many clients still want it out there and gladly pay for it.

Even some politicians recognize how much bad advertising pisses off their constituents. In some states, there's been a recent movement to establish a "Do Not Mail" list for junk mail, similar to the "Do Not Call" list for telemarketing. Why the drastic measure? Because flooding mailboxes with direct mail works—even if it's 2 or 3% of the time, that's good enough for many marketers.

This isn't a battle over the aesthetics of art vs. commerce. Bad advertising works because we, as a society, are used to it. We're comfortable with it, even if we don't particularly like it. And in a world where fears seemingly lurk everywhere, we gravitate to that which is familiar to us. Our clients like the familiarity of bad work too, because it usually means they get to keep their jobs for another month.

“If you present 20 concepts, 19 of which are awesome and one that’s safe,” a teacher told me in ad school, “the client will always pick the safe one. Every time.” And for creative people, safe equals bad.

But in the ad industry, who decides what’s bad? Who decides what’s good?

As we head into the self-indulgent advertising awards season, we’ll see the coronation of a few ideas or concepts that are not Sanjaya-like. In other words, we’ll see award-winning ideas that don’t necessarily reflect the taste of the masses, just ideas that reflect the sensibilities of a handful of people. These ideas may be concepts that didn’t run, or hardly ran, or didn’t lead to any significant awareness or sales increase for its intended client. We have to convince ourselves that better or unconventional work is always possible, even if it rarely sees success on a mass scale.

Now, I’m not saying we shouldn’t try to produce better work. Quite the opposite; I believe in the power of differentiation. Never mind trying to sell a One Show-worthy idea: It takes courage to simply try to convince a client that tried-and-true formulas aren’t the best solution, because much of the evidence suggests they work. It takes guts to tell a millionaire car dealer that he can actually be selling without yelling.

The truth is America still embraces bad advertising—much like America votes for Sanjaya. Mediocrity triumphs, even if many of us wish it wouldn’t. However, Sanjaya could sell a million records, and make a lot of money for himself and Simon Cowell. Is that bad? If the critics, the pundits, and the self-proclaimed experts were in charge, American Idol wouldn’t have Tony Bennett week. It’d have Tom Waits or Leonard Cohen week, and do you think anyone would watch?

If Sanjaya becomes the next American Idol, there may be a lot of happy little girls. The rest of us will roll our eyes and pray for the day the rest of America develops better musical taste.

Ah, but that’s the trouble of it. The rest of America are also consumers. They’re our target audience. As long as they put up with bad advertising, and respond to it to any degree, we’re compelled to keep making it.

That is, if we want to get paid to come back next week and do it again.

UPDATE FROM DANNY G. 4/22/07: Okay, so Sanjaya got voted off a few days ago. It's about time. Now, I watch American Idol pretty much every week, but I can only name you one of the final six contestants. For Sanjaya, there's just something about being amazingly sucktastic that people seemed to gravitate to. It's too bad so much of advertising works the same way.