

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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The Soul of Soles

One brand breaks all the rules—and the results are wonderful

It's the first thing they teach you in ad school:

No puns.

Puns bad. Puns very bad. In advertising, puns went out with the manual typewriters. I do my best to avoid them like lepers.

Nevertheless, I'm fascinated with Kenneth Cole and his new book, "Footnotes" (get it?). It's a biography/ corporate history/ad campaign retrospective/ego-boost book. With a shoelace as a bookmark bound in the spine.

To look back on his advertising as a whole, Kenneth Cole has broken nearly every rule and thrown out most of the conventional wisdom that creatives tend to follow.

Kenneth Cole's advertising is chock full of bad puns, bad wordplays, bad art direction, controversial thoughts and very little detail about the merchandise.

And you know what? The work is unbelievably effective and cool.

I won't make this a fawning book review—I just want to highlight some lessons I wish we could apply to our often-fearful clients.

1) Be consistent. The fashion world changes constantly. But generally, Kenneth Cole ads have changed very little in 20 years. Most have one line of copy, which is made to look as if it's a quote from Kenneth Cole himself. A singular voice, literally. But from fashion to politics to new store openings and holiday sales, any point can be made with that singular voice. And usually, one ad=one thought.

2) Be relevant and topical. Yes, Kenneth Cole errs on the side of political correctness, but he makes you think. His ads have addressed AIDS, homelessness, the aftermath of September 11th, political campaigns, abortion, gun rights, crime, etc. All with a dash of wit and intelligence. Much of the ads can be open to interpretation—and in some cases, misinterpretation. But when was the last time an ad moved you to think about anything? What do your clients' brands stand for?

3) Be great. In the book, he says something brilliant:

"A bad ad is at best embarrassing and, at worst, damaging to the business; for all practical purposes, a mediocre ad is no better than a bad one: you define yourself as a mediocre company, compromising the relationship with your customer and worse, you spend money to do it."

Don't you wish you had a client who would say that?

I don't believe shoes, in general, are any different from vacuum cleaners, soap, lawn mowers, or health insurance. However, the Kenneth Cole brand reflects Kenneth Cole's personal beliefs. The advertising expresses those beliefs. He displays the kind of courage we keep wishing other clients would have.

At most agencies, if you proposed a campaign that was as simple, direct, and potentially controversial as Kenneth Cole's, you'd be laughed out of the room. And if you weren't laughed out of the agency, you'd be laughed out of the client's boardroom.

It's very sad that when it comes to being courageous most marketers have, well, cold feet.

Kenneth Cole wouldn't stand for that.