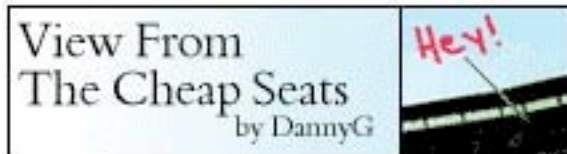


VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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When A.D.D. Adds Up to Crapola

Can short-lived campaigns and small projects lead to long-term success and big ideas?

I once worked on an account where our agency wasn't considered the "agency of record" for the particular client. Instead, we did quite a lot of non-glamorous advertising while another, more high-profile shop took the big-budget work.

Our AE's were always hoping the lead agency would screw up an assignment so we could get a crack at the sloppy seconds, hoping that doing a great job at the last minute would convince the client we could be trusted with all the work.

I bring this up because of the growing phenomenon of clients and marketers who are "adding to their agency roster" by parceling out projects to various agencies. On one level, it's truly wonderful that great smaller agencies are getting a shot at some impressive pieces of business.

But it is healthy for a brand to spread the work around in small morsels, or does it hurt the brand and waste money?

Inevitably, project work creates consistency problems. Every agency wants to create a unique look and feel for a brand without regard to what was previously done. Or better yet, agencies want to use their oh-so-special "proprietary branding process" to impress the client. Agencies who share an account rarely share creative briefs or research. So a multitude of messages spill into the marketplace. Different strategies, different tones, even different taglines. Half of a brand's advertising can easily be great, and half of it can be hackwork—at the same time.

For better or for worse, we all think short-term now. To do project work for a client means the advertising needs to cause a quick, sudden splash, even if it's completely forgotten in a month or so in favor of some other campaign. Results? Effectiveness? No one in the ad world gives a crap, because we move on to some other project so quickly. Agencies who work on a project basis are essentially freelancers. And hired-gun freelancers care about the end result for only as long as they're paid to care.

Just as A.D.D. has permeated all parts of our society, it's an inherent part of the way the advertising agency world does business. We don't spend time developing coherent strategies. Any body copy longer than a paragraph ends up being changed to PowerPoint-esque bullet point pabulum. The production artists have to get the work out tonight—or else. Technology has forced us to produce work far faster than we can process the information that enables us to do it properly.

Clients know we'll jump when they ask us to. Because often, they face the same pressures. Never mind end-of-fiscal quarter results; clients now focus on monthly sales figures or even the daily ones. And in their desperation to move product, they'll try their own ill-conceived short-term solutions--like bringing Lee Iacocca and Snoop Dogg together to push backlogged Chryslers at steep discounts. (I'll bet that once the price-break promotion is over, Chrysler sales will, uh, fizzle, fo' shizzle.)

I don't see any way that the cycle will get slower. Ad Agencies will have to get faster and cheaper, or else clients and marketers will yank an account from an agency take their business elsewhere. The trouble is, if the clients don't plan for long-term success, and agencies aren't conditioned to care about long-term account lifespans, the quality of the advertising drops and the consumers tune out.

And if the consumers stop responding to advertising altogether, well, that's when we might start paying attention once again.