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The Mindless Production Of Stunningly Creative Advertising

How many times have you said this:

“I saw this really great commercial last night. I can’t remember what it was for, but . . .”

Like that funny commercial you saw but can’t remember what it was for, creativity by its own self isn’t going to do anything for you.

Then again, advertising that isn’t creative won’t get anybody’s attention. And won’t do anything for you either. It’s a waste of money. So the idea is to make sure your advertising is creative, but creative for a reason. And be creative about it.

What to do?

To begin with, it’s helpful to understand the difference between Creativity for Its Own Sake and Creativity with a Business Purpose. Farting horses for beer, launching gerbils out of a cannon for a dot-com, and (forgive me) the entire “Wassup” campaign are good examples of the former. Very creative. Wildly amusing. Won awards for the creative team. Not particularly effective. No longer running.

Ok, for the flip side. “1984” for Apple, “Tastes Great/Less Filling” and virtually everything Crispin Porter did for Mini Cooper. Very creative. Compelling. Won awards for the creative team. Very effective.

So what’s the difference? For one thing, in the case of the last three, the humor or creativity was based on the product benefit – smashing the status quo, tastes great/less filling and the compact nature of the Mini. Not some sophomoric idea that farting is funny and shooting gerbils out of a cannon conveys any product benefits, and not based on a short film that had nothing whatever to do with beer.

“Creativity for its own sake is easier for a business purpose and shouldn’t be rewarded”

Who’s responsible for all that mindless creative out there? I have to confess, as much as I like to win awards for my work, it’s the awards shows that have to shoulder a lot of the blame. Everybody likes to be a winner. And look what wins. Farting horses, gerbils in cannons and Wassup. Of course, it’s not just the “creative first / product benefit second” work that wins awards. Plenty of smart, stunningly creative, hard-working advertising does too. And it damn well should.

But creativity for its own sake is easier than creativity for a business purpose, and shouldn’t be rewarded as much as it is. At least I don’t think it should be rewarded in the same breath as real advertising. Everybody in the business knows about the work



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agencies do for a friend or quasi-client “for free if you’ll let us do whatever we want so we can enter it in an awards show.” Not every agency takes this approach. We don’t. But enough do that the shows are full of the stuff.

I think as an industry, we have to come to grips with the difference between art and commerce. I’m sorry, but those of us in this business ought to face the reality of the situation.

We’re in this to sell stuff for other people. Period. Whether that stuff is a product, a service, an image or an idea, it’s still our job to sell it.

I hate to think how many times copywriters and art directors I know and respect refer to a campaign or an ad they’ve done in terms of what they were able to “get away with.” And as a man who has used an air sickness bag in a print ad for an airline, I’m going to have to shame myself on that count too.

The creative approach is best

The thing is, our job is to make our target think of our client’s product or service first, always, or in a positive light. And there is no question about whether a creative approach is going to be the best way to do it. It is.

Far and away. But it comes to be a problem when the goal is to get away with something or win an award.

So if you’re reading this and you’re on the client side, don’t settle for anything that’s not creative – even wildly so. Encourage your agency to do work that wins awards and reward them when they do so

on your behalf. Just make sure that winning the awards or impressing our peers isn’t the most important thing in our minds when we come up with the work.

And if you’re a creative reading this, you probably figure I’m just some disgruntled old fart who never won an award in his life. Believe what you want, but that’s not it. If you just want to be outrageous for the sake of impressing judges, buddies or your girlfriend, get out of advertising, and go get a job at the Comedy Network. Or do stand-up. Or something.

That reminds me. I saw this great commercial last night. Two ducks and a rabbi. I can’t remember who it was for, but one of the ducks says to the rabbi . . .

- Woody Hinkle

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