



ONLY IN HOUSTON: KEY TO CREATIVE (AND ECONOMIC) SURVIVAL

BY JOE FOURNET

"I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore," exhorts an infamous anchorperson from the movie "Network." That 1970s sentiment now echoes the feelings amid some creative circles in Houston's advertising and marketing industry.

It's been a long time since Houston had its place on the creative map. The creativity and innovation in this Bayou City has stagnated in recent years. Several advertising and marketing communications companies have downsized or closed altogether, while a host of client companies have parked their marketing and production dollars at out-of-town firms. Meanwhile, local talent is starving or has already left town.

Well, enough is enough!

A movement was set afoot in February that arose from a monthly meeting of the Houston Advertising Federation last September. Only In Houston (OiH) was formed by concerned professionals who want to present the positive side of Houston's creative communications industry and reverse the trend of account and budget losses.

The mission of OiH is to "promote the undeniable creative forces found within the city of Houston through programs that increase awareness of this talent, and through a spirit of community that fosters cooperation among all entities involved in the creation of advertising, marketing and communications."

OiH fervently believes that Houston has an excellent cadre of innovative thinkers — with an eclectic range of solutions — and they are powered by a passion for providing creative that works for the success of a client's marketing program. Hence, the three cornerstones that best describe the city and the OiH movement: eclectic, innovative, passionate. Lou Congelio, principal of STANANDLOU Advertising, has been spearheading the initiative.

Realizing how Houston got into this mess will help with how to rise above it. Consider if you will:

- Most local ad agencies have not entered (or won) high-profile creative competitions.
- Local agencies rarely pursued prominent national accounts outside of the city (unlike the GSD&M's and Crispin Porter + Bogusky's of the land).
- Highly respected national ad agencies wooed away Houston businesses as local agencies grew weaker and lost talented personnel.
- Houston's reputation as an industrial, energy-only city with few large market and mass-retail corporations has not stimulated creative efforts.
- Economies have pressured local creative companies to lower prices or lose work.
- More Houston companies are taking work "inside" with the apparent objective being to save money, instead of improving marketing results.

Illustrating the dismal state of affairs for the past couple of years, the *Houston Business Journal* reports actual capitalized agency billings of the top 25 Houston ad agencies for years 2003 and 2004 as \$828 million and \$778 million, respectively. That's a \$50 million decrease in billings, a loss of 16.5 percent. This was during the same year in which the national economy grew 1.3 percent more than in 2003.

Educating ourselves and serving as change agents have been and will continue to be no small task. Only in Houston needs to change the collective mindset; that doesn't happen overnight. The OiH movement must first be convincing to those of us in the creative community (the "choir") before even attempting to convince the clients (the "congregation").

As a primary tool to aid the movement, the OiH Web site has been designed as a one-stop source for finding Houston creative professionals. Powered and launched by

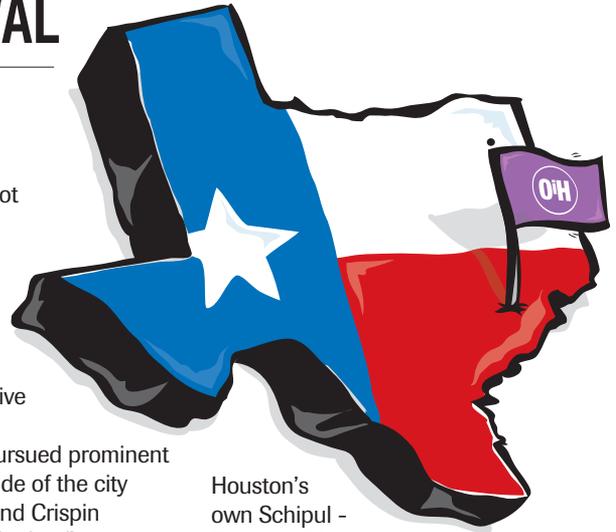


Illustration by Berry Villegas

Houston's own Schipul - The Web Marketing Company, the site features video, print and Web galleries that showcase local creative talent, as well as an online directory to help site users locate Houston's vast talent resources.

An ongoing challenge is to understand what sours Houston's business community towards using local, professional creative services, or why the amount of work dispensed has been drastically reduced (are you listening Continental Airlines, AIM and M.D. Anderson?) OiH needs to understand what it takes for local companies to consider tapping into the local creative well.

Only in Houston needs you to join and provide support and become vocal advocates for changing the industry's situation. Be innovators never satisfied with the status quo, and focus on promoting your work and showcasing the results (like positively impacting ROI).

Interested and concerned professionals can learn more and become involved by registering at the Only in Houston Web site (www.onlyinhouston.com). ■

A Louisiana native with extensive experience in advertising and marketing, Joe Fournet moved to Houston to become regional manager of the Bozell Worldwide office. He opened his own marketing consultancy, Ideas & More (www.ideasmore.net), where he served such clients as Halliburton, Bechtel, and various consumer businesses. A presenter at the 2005 American Creativity Association International Conference, Fournet specializes in concept development, strategy, copywriting, creative direction and presentation counseling. Past-president of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Houston, and member of HAF, Fournet serves on the Only in Houston's education and advertising committees.