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'Only In Houston' strives to rally creative forces

"I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore," exhorts an infamous anchorman from the movie "Network." That sentiment sort of echoes the feelings of some in Houston's advertising and marketing industry these days.

It's been a long time since Houston had its place on the creative map (some would argue the city never did). The creativity and innovation here 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.

Enough already.

A movement was set afoot last February that arose from a monthly meeting of the Houston Advertising Federation in September 2004. 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 accounts and budgets lost.

February 2006 serves as the first anniversary OiH. We've come a long way but we've got a ways to go yet.

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



GUEST
COMMENTARY

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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 and passionate.

The February luncheon of the Houston Advertising Federation showcased the newly revised OiH Web site and a new branding campaign. The highlight is a full-page ad reading "The One Stop Source for Finding Houston Creative." A new purple logo has onlyinhouston.com beneath it with "Choose Wisely" completing the ad. A full array of media exposure both locally and nationally is planned for March and April.

This is all fine and well you say, but so what? Well, if you're in business and involved in advertising and marketing communications, you need to realize how Houston got into this mess and — more importantly — how to rise above it.

Our own stupidity and greed can be blamed in part, and outside forces beyond our control can take credit as well. 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.
- 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.

• Economic conditions have pressured local creative companies to lower prices or lose work.

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.

In significant contrast, GSD&M in Austin reported \$1.2 billion in billings for 2004. That's miles ahead of the Top 25 Houston agencies combined.

Yes, Houston, we still have a problem. We also have a solution: Only in Houston.

OiH is trying to change the collective mind-set, but that doesn't happen overnight. The OiH movement must be convincing to those of us in the creative community before even attempting to convince the clients. This is slowly happening.

OiH needs the community to join and provide support, become vocal advocates for changing the industry's situation, be innovators never satisfied with the status quo, and focus on promoting local work and showcasing the results.

The key to our creative and economic survival rests with all of us. We'd better be up to the task. ■

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