

Lake Charles Ad Club Presentation

“It’s Still the Idea, Stupid”

February 6, 2006

The Pioneer Club

Lake Charles, Louisiana

The weekend before Rita hit, I met several folks from here at a district ad conference in Beaumont. We talked about the possibility of me coming over to share some thoughts with you.

I came over for a quick trip during the holidays and was awestruck at some of what I witnessed and captured on film. I didn't realize I'd be back so soon. Seeing friends and colleagues I haven't seen for years, being here at the Pioneer Club -- I spent a lot of time in this club in the 80's, had a lot of fun. Well, as Yogi says, "It's like déjà vu all over again."

About my presentation today – advertising/communications is still about the idea and how best that idea is conveyed.

Let me offer two honest observations and one pledge:

The state of the advertising industry sucks!

The state of the advertising industry in Houston sucks!

My pledge: to try and make it suck less.

A Few Talking Points We'll Cover:

Idea is king and the solution is queen

Advertising – a dying industry?

Traditional agency is dead; make way for agency of the future.

Re-invent ourselves while staying true to what we do best

What can we bring to clients (that they can't get elsewhere)?

Out-of-town syndrome (why Only in Houston was born)

How do we combat commoditization?

The Super Bowl and everyone's favorite water cooler topic – *the commercials!*

1) Idea is king and the solution is queen (both are scarce, like water in a desert)

World is media-neutral; good idea will work anywhere. Yet it seems more attention is going to the iPods and cell phone devices. However, there are challenges such as the limited screen space these devices have and the number of people actually wanting to watch an entire episode of, say, ABC's Lost.

Good idea but how viable is the execution and what kind of advertising would be appropriate for this audience? Only time and consumer feedback will tell.

Clients want fresh ideas and they don't really care where they come from. Big, national agencies are losing out to smaller, less bureaucratic agencies. When I first moved to Houston in '87 from Lake Charles, I went to work for then Bozell-Jacobs-Kenyon & Eckhardt. We eventually shortened the moniker to Bozell Worldwide, but that didn't lessen the negative impact of the bureaucracy.

Providing creative solutions for Texas Chrysler dealers via Bozell's Detroit office and the infrastructure in place was not conducive to innovative thinking or anything done creatively, much less in an efficient and timely manner.

Face it: Thinking still matters. Strategy matters. It's all a part of the value proposition which is constantly being under-appreciated by the client.

One marketer sounding like they understand the value proposition is Pontiac. Take note of this introductory little piece for the new G6 convertible (due in showrooms in March or April).

It'll be interesting to see how the G6 is received by the consumer, seeing that Cadillac now sells a retractable hard top convertible for about \$70,000 and Ford decided not to make its revitalized T-Bird like that because of cost.

Recent Adweek article: The increased pressure to perform has created the client need to be more open to alternative ideas. Thus has sprung up a new breed of "agency" – claim to be leaner and conducive to more intimate relationships between client and senior talent and bottom line that encourages the creativity of an idea rather than where it came from or how it will be executed.

2) Advertising – a dying industry?

I wouldn't say dying, but I would say malnourished. The industry needs more intelligence added to its creativity. We need fresh talent who think strategically as opposed to with hormones, and innovative thought that will complement the creativity.

Currently, I have to wonder sometimes who the advertiser is trying to reach and/or what their IQ level is. We as professionals have an obligation to uphold this quality and our credibility.

Some of this is the client's fault as well. "Put me in front of the camera," says Mr. Client, "so I can make an ass out of myself while I show off my cute little daughter who is playing with my dumb dog while I try to convince you I give a damn about what I'm trying to sell you." Cuteness in the kid and dog can only take you so far, especially when the kid has yet to take command of the English language. Quality advertising this is not.

3) Traditional agency is dead; the business model is broken (judging by the state of our industry, some might say it took too long to die, while others don't want to acknowledge the death) . . . So make way for the agency of the future.

We've all worked for the traditional agency and we may still be working for one. 10, 15, 20 years ago it was the norm because we didn't know any better. Advertising was the answer to everything.

We were all compartmentalized, especially in larger agencies. Media and planning (when there was finally a planning department) didn't talk to creative and account management. Account people didn't talk to creative. Then, again, no one really talked to creative.

The true team concept where all significant parties are involved from the get go didn't exist for the most part. The structure of that business model limits creativity.

We may have preached multidisciplinary options, but we never really practiced them. We felt there was no alternative to the 15% commission. There was no Web (as we know it today) and no virtual office. When Jay Chiat of Chiat /Day spoke of it, everyone thought he was not in step with reality. He was; it was just a different reality.

Now it's more the norm, especially in places as spread out as Houston. Clients usually don't care where you are as long as you stay in touch and they see you. Frankly, I prefer to go to them.

And the agency of the future . . . may just be at our doorstep and already happening. What really needs to happen is to be better compensated for our ideas.

Some agency-like firms become not only marketing partners but business partners by creating new brands and sharing in the profits. Consider assessing the client a % of gross sales or revenue generated during the campaign timeline or other time span.

Some agencies have done this in lieu of collecting a media commission. Instead, they charge a fee for their planning and buying time. It's risky, nontraditional and one way to prove ROI, Return on Investment.

Needless to say, work for hire is not being done all the time.

This new wave of "communications agency," if you will, offers craftsmanship and innovation in more than just advertising. The services are very multidisciplinary and these firms are more adept at providing nontraditional media solutions.

According to Chuck Porter, of Crispin-Porter-Bogusky, "The pendulum is swinging away from size and experience to innovation and new ideas."

In recently selecting Crispin – Porter – Bogusky the primary agency for Miller Lite, Tom Long, Miller Beer's new marketing chief, said Crispin "demonstrated an impressive ability to think in innovative ways across all marketing platforms and to apply their creativity smartly across emerging and traditional media."

Think Burger King and the Subservient Chicken and the BMW Mini campaign.

The agency of the future from a client perspective – Motorola: "We need ideas and talent, but, like most companies, we need different things at different times for different jobs. The next great agencies will be less dormitories for copywriters and art directors than catalysts for broader networks of all kinds of different talents.

Motorola goes on to say: "The new generation of clients is often as radical and creative as the best agencies. The days of "show us how it's done, 'cause we don't know how" are over. It's now about genuine co-creation. Amazing things can happen when this occurs. There will always be tension but it's a good tension."

4) Some of us seem to re-invent ourselves all the time, and in so doing lose sight of our strengths.

With the ad industry in a state of flux, this is easy to do; we want to do whatever it takes. However, we must stay true to ourselves and what we do best.

My company, Ideas & More, is part of an agency-of-the-future-like environment in which an umbrella company has been formed which covers five individual companies who complement one another more than compete against one another.

Some consider us “partnering with the competition” and in some instances we are. However, we feel we are a stronger and more cohesive company – and more attractive to prospective clients – than any one of us acting alone.

5) What can we bring to clients (that they can’t get elsewhere)?

Give clients viable reasons to employ us & utilize our services. Some of what has already been mentioned could apply here. This is also a bit subjective because in a lot of instances, decisions come down to chemistry and fit, just like in a job interview. But when you’ve got a sound strategy and sound ideas that are cross functional in ability, odds may be in your favor. The more resources one has, the better.

6) Out-of-town syndrome (why Only in Houston was born)

What do you do when clients start leaving town or don’t even consider the local talent because, well, just because? Giving Houston, Texas, a wake up call to consider local talent and to keep local communications business local is why the Only in Houston movement was born.

We found that businesses and clients leave town when there’s a lack of trust and a perceived lack of talent to do great work. The fault lies on both sides of the client/agency fence.

Agencies have taken advantage of clients before through excessive fees and, frankly, poor creative execution, possibly even shoddy strategy, while clients have given agencies unrealistic expectations to meet, insufficient information on which to base strategy or simply an unwillingness to go along and trust the creative minds trying to execute the idea.

In the course of trying to convey to Houston businesses what our local creative community offers, we’ve established a Web site, www.onlyinhouston.com, which is serving as sort of a one-stop-creative-shop for all kinds of resources available.

We know we can’t force businesses to “give” us their accounts; we have to earn that right. We can, however, bring to their attention the fact that we should at least be considered.

7) How do we combat commoditization?

Start by never being “just” an order taker. Anybody can do that. Dare to be nontraditional, act on what you suggest and walk away from conservatism.

Also realize that if a client insists he can get the work done for less, he can, and he also may not be worth having as a client. If he knows you'll meet his cheaper rates, just think of what he'll continue to do following this project. It may be a losing scenario for you.

Don't be afraid to say "no." This type of client truly doesn't value what your greatest asset is to his business – your creative mind power.

Being treated as if you were a commodity is a bit like equating you to some loaf of bread – they all pretty much look and taste the same. Obviously, little thought goes into the purchase of bread for some people if they truly believe this.

The advent of the computer, the Web and a variety of graphic applications, for instance, have turned many an employee into a graphic arts specialist. The boss interprets this as being able to be creative in-house. The tools may be widely available but one still has to have the knowledge-and vision- to know what to do.

What can an outside "expert" possibly bring to me-Mr. Client- that we're not already receiving and for less? Well, Mr. Client, try experience, value, depth of knowledge, a unique and different perspective, time to think and execute professionally. It's still about the idea, stupid!

8) Lastly, a few comments about the Super Bowl and everyone's favorite water cooler topic – the commercials!

Bob Garfield of Advertising Age on Super Bowl advertising: Best spot of all time – anybody want to guess? – Apple Computer's 1984. Apple's brand identity was established with this spot and they've never wavered. The Apple community is a special one unto itself. It's defined as being different from, then IBM, now Windows.

According to Garfield, the biggest mistake marketers make in Super Bowl ads is pretty much the same as with regular ads: entertainment value is the godhead and it just isn't. Again, where's the idea, what's the product or service to do for me (benefits/attributes) and why should I care?

Now, in my view, some of the more memorable ones from last night's game.

Burger King's Whopperettes – memorable, different with humorous take on "real" ingredients landing on the burger as it is being made your way.

Bud Lite's "Magic Fridge" – kind of cute

FedEx "Caveman" – really cute and funny, but you sort of expect that from FedEx

Diet Pepsi w/P. Diddy – more like a mini music video; as Garfield would say, this one was strictly entertainment value

Alleve featuring Leonard Nimoy in Spock-like hand gestures – cute, pretty good

AmericaQuest – "Hospital Bed" docs killing fly with electronic shock paddles. Good, unexpected.

Budweiser – Football "Streaker" – kinda cute, worth a chuckle

Dove Self-Esteem Foundation – nicely done; too bad the contact info wasn't on screen longer

Michelob Ultra – "Women get even" Talk about a target market spot. It's unexpected that the gal, after being pulverized on the field, takes it to the guy while he's sitting on the bar stool.

Gillette Fusion Razor – good product description and portrayal with visuals/graphics; nicely done

Budweiser – "Little Clydesdale" – cute spot and latest in that series; makes you wonder what's next

Nationwide Insurance w/Fabio turning old at the last while steering the gondola; gotta wonder if viewers will remember it was Nationwide

Hummer – "Little Monster" – I just scratched my head after watching this one. Frankly, the sight of a pregnant monster is not that appealing to me. Would this really make you want to buy a Hummer? Even a toy one?

Toyota's Tacoma-by-the-Sea spot "Invincible" – This was pretty good for its use of all visual, no voice over and rather surprising and disturbing footage of the truck being tossed around by rising water.

Budweiser's "Stadium" spot showing thousands of cards being held up by fans to illustrate/animate a glass of Bud being consumed. This was pretty effective and I found myself being drawn to to see what would happen.

Remember, it's our responsibility to prove ourselves, that we know what we're talking about when we give advice, that we're not just trying to spend the client's money.

In a recent Advertising Age article, it was stated, "No matter what your structure and however much talent you have, how important you are to your clients will always hinge on how well you meet their requirements, rather than how well you live up to an image of your own creation."

But whatever you do and however you face the industry's challenges, consider doing these three things:

- 1.) Become vocal advocates for changing the industry's situation,*
- 2.) Be innovators never satisfied with the status quo, and*
- 3.) Focus on promoting your work and showcasing the results.*

So when you're faced with that client who just doesn't get it no matter what you say or do, go back to basics and simply tell him, "It really is about the idea, ya know."

And to help you come up with those ideas, I've brought some reprints of my Houston Business Journal article "Getting Creative Juices Flowing Again."

I've really enjoyed this, guys. Thanks for listening!!