
Chapter Twenty Two

Some recurring themes

I doubt if it's just coincidence that I find these recurring themes in advertising agencies. I guess some version of these situations might exist in other businesses, too.

The Great Man Syndrome

I've spent most of my working life, so far, in advertising agencies. I've encountered several recurring themes. One is the great man syndrome. I'm sure similar phenomenon exist in other kinds of companies and businesses but The great man syndrome is particularly pervasive in advertising. The basic premise is this: in every agency there is at least one person, whose word becomes a kind of gospel. The great man's point-of-view is weighed heavily on every action. The great man can ruin you if you cross him. At least that's what people think. He might be the creative chief. He might be agency chairman or president. The great man doesn't get his power by virtue of title, though. In fact, it's likely he had the power before his current title was bestowed on him.

Here's an example of how it works:

Account Executive (on the phone with client): We all agree that the best way to reach your target is Television. And we also know that people are bombarded with advertising every day. Some estimates are as high as 2,000 ads a day. That's why we wanted to use humor in our TV spot for your product.

Client: The TV spots you guys are working on better have strong product demonstration in them or I won't be able to get buy-in from my sales and marketing team, not to mention my management. I don't want to fund some funny ad so your creative guys can win awards. I need to sell product.

AE: Well sure, I guess that's important but our CD (the great man) says that people only pay attention to things that interest them. Your product, frankly, is a parity product. There is no real

difference between your brand and the competition.

Client: We have new packaging and a lemon fresh scent, though.

AE: That's great but it still isn't enough of a positioning. We'll be sitting down internally this afternoon and working out a creative platform that positions your product against the competition. No creative work begins at our agency until you've signed off on this creative platform. (The AE is lying. The great man is on vacation in Florida.)

Client: Fine. Shoot it over to me via fax this afternoon and I'll look at it.

AE: Errr, it might take some time because we like to prepare it in our creative strategy format.

Now this AE has put herself in a pickle. She fibbed about the great man's involvement. The great man exists for two reasons: 1) the agency wants to protect itself from the client and 2) the client wants high-level involvement on its account. The client in this case doesn't care about the great man but the AE is petrified of him.

Now the great man comes back from a vacation in Florida and needs to make a command performance to get this AE out of a major jam. The great man has to be brilliant and philosophical and smart.

If the great man is well briefed by the AE and the clients are "buying his act" the agency gets an opportunity to solve this creative challenge. If the great man is off his game, the client launches a review and begins shopping for a new agency. The great man is typically spread so thin that people inside the agency are covering for him all the time. The good ones learn to be expert handlers of the great man and his limited schedule.

The Chill Effect

The Chill Effect is a separate but sometimes related condition of the great man syndrome. Sometimes people are burned by the great man. Maybe the great man humiliated the AE and made her look stupid in an important meeting. All it takes is a

couple of public floggings and pretty soon the chill effect sets in. The AE suffers the impact of the chill effect. She's afraid to tell the client the great man is not in (he's in Florida) and she's afraid to tell the great man about the client's dictate regarding the new packaging and lemon scent. She intimidated to a point where she barely can function. This can be a debilitating condition.

You know the chill effect has set in - at the next meeting hardly anyone says anything except the great man. There is fear motivating every action. Maybe the great man has the support of someone at a high level at the client organization (maybe their great man). Decisions get made without anyone truly knowing from where the directions came. If you walk into a meeting like this, it's almost like mental telepathy. It's downright spooky. The AE takes careful notes and tries to decode them later in a carefully written conference report. (Hopefully, for her sake, with the tacit approval of the great man). This would be funny if people didn't suffer in silence throughout their careers, due to the fear of the great man and the chill effect.

For the sake of the above example I'm not projecting whether or not the great man is right or wrong. To be a great man in this situation it really doesn't matter. The best agencies are dictatorships not democracies.

Flawless Execution vs. New Thinking

The client-agency relationship is a kind of marriage. Just like a marriage, sometimes the same old routine, while not altogether uncomfortable becomes too predictable. There needs to be some spice added. On the agency side, it's a balancing act. Keeping a client happy and profitable is a lot less costly than courting a new client. The client comes to expect things. They take for granted that routine tasks will be managed in the normal course of business. The agency has provided adequate staffing and the advertising gets produced, trafficked and billed. In another line of work it would be like getting the factory running at near capacity. Everyone should be happy because the agency

is making zero mistakes (total quality management), right?
Wrong.

If the best thing you can say at the end of the year is that “As your agency we flawlessly executed your advertising communications plan.” you could be in some serious trouble. Where is the razzle-dazzle? How are you going to keep competitive agencies from tempting your client with a sexy new approach?

As a predictable incumbent agency, you could actually be at a disadvantage if your client thinks they need a change. I don’t have to tell you that this is just the beginning of a thought process that might lead to a new round of musical chairs for the agency and its staffers.

My advice to any agency is to take some risks. Challenge your client. My advice to clients is to challenge your agency. Expect innovation. Budget for some tests. Try new things. There’s always more than one right answer. And last year’s right answer might not be right this year.

The notion of the “great man” is something that continues to evolve for me. The Next Section of this book provides some observations and commentary on just what it might actually take to be a great man in a corporate environment. In the section of this book entitled Celebrate Everything! The great man is redefined again – as one who faces life circumstances and (more often than not) wins!