Five Things I Learned
from Advertising.

Or, how I learned to stop whining and love aplomb.

By Matthew Clark / Applied Arts Magazine "By Design"

Contrary to some popular beliefs (and this writer's own diatribes in these pages), design and advertising are in many ways two sides of the same coin, each bringing its own best practices to help clients promote their brand and, in turn, their products and services. My nearly 10 years at DDB Canada, then Palmer Jarvis, put me within eye and earshot of some of Canada's best advertising talent. And I soaked it in.

Multimillion dollar ad campaigns can be sold with stick people

When I was a young designer, advertising seemed counter-intuitive to the craft I knew. But that is the point: The starting place for great ideas and solutions, advertising or design, must start outside of "craft." It must start with a great idea. So in went advertising's best, to some of the largest clients, with little more than stick figures and the energy and enthusiasm of an art director/writer team to walk the client through the concept. And if clients can get excited about (and approve) stick drawings, how much more enthusiastic will they be as the process moves along and "craft" comes into the picture? Designers, listen up: You can sell logos, packaging and print collateral with little more than stick drawings. Give yourself more time for thinking, and far less time for dressing up thin ideas in computer comps and oh-so-slick 3D simulations.

Don't let the creatives into the room right away

While, to some, the multilayered, hierarchical structure of the agency system can be seen as a deficit, the benefit is that creatives aren't the first to answer the door. Account executives and planners are first on the scene, and they bring with them a skill set that asks "why" first. So in comes audience research, planning workshops and marketing studies. True, the massive stakes of advertising campaigns and their accompanying media budgets simply make this a mandatory process. But designers need to remember that, while our total budgets may be smaller, the need for in-depth understanding and the self-control to resist jumping right to creative solutions is paramount to our clients' success.

"Our job is not to give clients what they want, but to give them what they never dreamt of, and when they see it, to realize it's what they wanted all along"

This quote (or something very close) was written on the wall in reception at the ad agency where I worked. And rather than being a call to rebellion, it is a call to insight. I have generally found that advertising agencies challenge their clients more than design studios. Ask "why" more. Debate more. Of course, the bad ones do it for their own egos, but the good (and great) ones do it to gain the all-important insight. A client may think he needs a mass-media campaign targeted at tweens, but what he really needs is a guerilla campaign for moms. Designers tend to have a client walk in the door looking for a brochure, and so we give them the best, darned brochure we can. But the good (and great) designers challenge and ask "why" enough to recommend solutions that are right for the challenge at hand.

Don't do it all yourself: Call in the talent

I am as guilty of this one as any designer. The agency art director is just that: a director of art. So once the concept is cracked, the AD works like a director on set: selecting illustrators, photographers, typographers, designers, models and prop makers to realize their vision.

But designers have become generalists: We are typographers, illustrators and photographers. Blame it on lower budgets, but it's a vicious cycle. The more we "DYI" design, the less we can charge and the more limited our solutions are. If we do it all ourselves, all our work can start to, well, look that way. And that, in turn, makes it hard to justify bringing in specialized talent on projects.
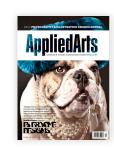
The money is there

True, you can't squeeze blood out of a stone, but designers need to stop bemoaning how clients seem willing to spend vast amounts of money on agencies and media, when they seem to have so little time and money for design initiatives. The simple message is not that they don't have the money, it is that they don't value spending it on design. It's not them; it's us.

What are we lacking? Proven and measurable ROI? Success stories and case studies? Good old-fashioned persuasion? Mad Men swagger? And is this the challenge and responsibility of individual design firms or an industry-wide challenge? Yes on all counts.

The lesson to designers? Think more, decorate less. Plan, don't react. Challenge, don't just say "yes" (or "no" for that matter). Collaborate with the best. Find your value, and the money will come.

Matthew Clark is principal and creative director of Subplot, an internationally recognized brand design firm based in Vancouver.

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