

Rethinking Process & Protocol

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Advertising agencies have traditionally served as the liaison between companies and creative suppliers. Acting as intermediaries, they have long functioned as the hub of control around which these related services have revolved. As the industry has migrated from a traditional fixed-rate commission to a cost-plus or sliding-scale fee structure, agencies have countered the fiscal pressure with aggressive moves in mergers and acquisitions, following trends prevalent in other market sectors.

There are several ramifications specific to the communications industry that can accompany consolidation of such unprecedented scope. First, promotion and communications rely on inspired creative thought to differentiate a client's message from their competition. It has been well-established that massive consolidation leads to homogeneous standards of practice. In disciplines reliant upon creativity and aesthetics, this can unintentionally produce a

formulaic approach to problem solving which is rarely challenged. Another problematic issue is the tendency for internal bias to skew the data, information, and analysis on which conclusions are based.

Two factors that are key in addressing this dilemma are discernment in matters of visual literacy, and the malfunctioning concept of "agency-as-hub," which concentrates creative control into the hands of the few, the like-minded. This perception has been facilitated by the prevailing inclination of corporate executives to outsource the entire creative process. In practice, this model displays the opportunity for hijacking the loyalties of creative participants which rightly should be bound to the corporation's best interests, rather than the agency agendas.

The corporation or firm itself should become the hub around which all communications services revolve, with an informed executive level orchestrating all junctures of communication and promotional decisions. The communications industry lags behind the organiza-

tional curve in the implementation of breakthrough practices for team construction, designed for dynamic performance.

A good reference to examine is the Toyota production model; Set-Based Concurrent Engineering. The core principals speak of a radically different approach to structuring process and design. Opening lines of communication and access to information across lateral channels can clear the way to initiate and maintain feedback among participants, establish a baseline for mutual trust, reduce the damaging outgrowths of defensive reasoning, and foster an "ownership mindset" among participants.

Clarity in communication lies at the heart of establishing an authentic competitive edge. Although seemingly obvious, the standard tactics used to direct promotional efforts reveal the process to be swathed in complexity. In just a few short years, new technologies have thrust the state of the market through epic structural change. Moving faster than thought, the need for "now" has triggered the visual to preempt the verbal for the

first time since the invention of the alphabet revolutionized communications. Fast transfer solicits the most applicable mode; visual information is processed 60,000 times faster than textual information. Market volatility drives perceptions to become reality before facts can be established; when perception predisposes outcome, managing perceptions requires managing images.

In an economy contingent upon creativity, innovation, and design to sustain competitive advantage, every image used in every promotion matters. An image is the first thing seen and the last thing remembered. This awareness is confounded in a culture ever more dependent on images, yet ever less equipped to adjudge their value or quality. Business leaders would be prudent to lead the way as advocates for elevating the level of visual literacy in marketing and corporate communications if they hope to compete in an increasingly visual world. ■

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