

Puget Sound BUSINESS JOURNAL

APRIL 24-30, 2009

Even a janitor can come up with a great marketing idea

Life would be simpler if I came up with all the good ideas I need all by myself. As it happens, I need help.

It's a cliché in the advertising world to say, "I don't care who has the best idea. It can be the janitor's." This is supposed to show how ego-free and open-minded you are. Apparently janitors have great ideas, because I've heard this for years.

My ego must be a little more fragile, because it bugs me sometimes when other people have good ideas — especially when they're not terribly polite expressing them. However, I'm determined to learn from everyone, even rude people.

I'm thinking about who I learn from because of a recent discussion I started in the advertising trade publication *Adweek*. My opinion is that awarding a "Digital Agency of the Year" is an anachronism. We're now at the point where every marketer needs digital tools and the digital world needs all marketing tools available.

This stimulated a number of comments. I was gratified that some people agreed with me. But some definitely don't. Several miss the point and must not have read the part about how, as a direct marketer, I love digital. One of the gentler critics said:

"As one of my old clients once said, 'The internet is a fad. I predict it will go the way of Lionel trains.' Is that your point? Cause that guy's not around anymore and most of his cohorts, like you, won't be soon either."

Actually that was the opposite of my point. My point was that digital is so mainstream that it shouldn't have its own agency of the year award.

A couple of them had some rude things to say about how old I am. I'm 42 — and obviously too ancient to know anything anymore.

Some of the naysayers misread me be-

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cause I come from a direct marketing agency and they assumed I had an ax to grind. They didn't take that janitor adage seriously.

One commenter says that online is an ecosystem unto itself and therefore deserves its own specialty agency. I couldn't disagree more. People are online and offline. What happens in one "ecosystem" influences the other. And I have the numbers to prove it.

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Another one made some very good points:

"The old models help, but don't have all the answers anymore. The problem with traditional marketers is that they keep coming up with command and control campaigns. Even the idea of media is different today."

Although I may not have articulated it the same way, and although this author assumed I was "traditional," I think we actually agree. I believe all agencies may, in fact, start looking more like digital agencies than traditional agencies in the next few months or years — and that's exactly why a "Digital Agency of the Year" award could look like a put-down, rather than a compliment.

He also pointed out three people I should follow on Twitter. So I was happy to learn that, too.

Here's a comment from someone else I think I could learn from:

"A digital agency is staffed and structured as differently as a brand versus direct response agency are to each other. Breakthrough creative is born from a requirement to create a conversation, which is different than developing brand attitudes or generating a DR action. Strategy is created and evaluated according to overt consumer input, not just research and response rates. Ignoring the distinctiveness and expertise of a specialist 'because they only have one tool' is flawed. What a digital agency has is the ability to use every form of communications (video, audio, print) to express ideas to global consumers and evoke many types of interactions from awareness to clicks to going to Denny's for free breakfast."

My understanding is that digital agencies tend to be staffed and structured differently from each other, as well as differently from brand and direct agencies.

But this commenter has something in mind about the agency organization that I'd like to know more about. I'd also like to know what he knows about creating a conversation — because I know more about creating conversions (which is often a digital directive as well) than I do about starting conversations.

I still disagree that only a digital agency would have the ability to use video, audio and print to express ideas to evoke all types of interactions. That's what brand agencies and direct marketers claim to do, as well.

So, with all the input I received, I still think my original idea is the correct one. But I learned some things from the conversation that I value. Good ideas come from janitors — and from people I disagree with.

SPYRO KOURTIS is president/CEO of Hacker Group, located in Seattle. Contact him at 206.805.1500 or skourtis@hackergroup.com.