

Fostering creativity and other ideas from Ad Week DC

Yesterday, I attended the first day of Advertising Week DC, a yearly event that is hosted by the Ad Club of Metropolitan Washington. The theme of this year's week is "awe," as in awesome. It quickly became an annoying trope used throughout the day. I think what the organizers were trying to tap into was creativity—because that is what drives awesome campaigns, ads and/or concepts.

Of the nine presentations I attended yesterday, three stood out in regards to creativity.

Mad Women

The first was a presentation by Jane Maas, who has written a book about women in advertising during the 1960s called *Mad Women*. Ms. Maas started her advertising career as a copywriter in the days when most women in advertising were secretaries. We've seen those days portrayed in *Mad Men*, and apparently, according to Maas, the portrayal is not far from the truth. People in the advertising world back then were busy smoking, drinking and having sex. Of course, people today are busy doing that, just not at the office. Drinking heavily at lunch was de rigeur. She gave the sense that advertising work was freer from constraints back then. There was more loyalty from clients, and ad agencies were willing to experiment. Perhaps the experimentation was fueled by alcohol, regardless, there seemed to be an attempt to push the envelope and see things differently.

A cool office...and CEO

Andrew Graff is the CEO of Boston agency Allen & Gerritsen. Graff spoke about how he has created a pretty cool environment at his agency, which is designed to foster creative thinking.

First, he has given his staffers tons of perks, like free breakfast every day and pet health insurance. Second, he has built an office environment where people can work in different locations—cafe, sofa or cubicle. Third, he has implemented a mentorship program where he is being mentored by a 23-year-old. This has allowed Graff to understand how another generation thinks. The main points here are that people should enjoy coming to work and that work should not be structured in a traditional way. Graff says that if you are someone who needs a lot of structure to work, you won't be happy at Allen & Gerritsen (nor would you likely be hired). **To be creative—to think differently—you have to be able to see beyond structure.**

Cannes award-winning campaigns

The last program (before the kick-off reception) was a reel of the winners of the 2012 Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival. What's great about being able to see these diverse campaigns is that it showcases creative and impactful work from all over the world. A couple campaigns really stood out to me.

One was to save a library in Troy, OH. The people who were in favor of closing the library were saying that it was a tax issue. To counter that narrative the save-the-library folks came up with a social media campaign saying that they would be burning all the books once the library was closed. Folks were outraged at that suggestion. Then the save-the-library people said that closing the library was equivalent to burning books—effectively shutting down the taxes argument.

The other campaign that I thought was very creative was to encourage employers to hire workers with Down Syndrome. The campaign showed well known advertising (this was in Italy) but replaced the people in the ads with people who have Down's. It was designed to make people see Down Syndrome in a more positive light.

What are you doing to foster creativity?

Lately, I have noticed the lack of creativity in commercials. It seems as though the same ideas are cycled over and over. Chances are that ad agencies are not fostering creativity as much as they are kowtowing to clients who are unwilling to take risks. There is no creativity without some degree of risk.