



It's the veritable moment of truth. Those silent pregnant seconds immediately following a creative presentation. The creative lies open on the table in front of the client. Fresh, full of potential, optimistic. And then the client says...?

What do you say? How *do* you effectively evaluate print, DM, online or broadcast creative? With your *gut*? When there's hundreds of thousands of dollars (and your own reputation) on the line there's got to be more to it than instinct. Right?

Actually, there *is* a process. Fine-tuned over hundreds of presentations, this tried-and-true method will help you separate the creative that's right for your business, from the creative that's only right for the Creative Director's portfolio.

Be the customer.

First things first - leave your client hat at your desk and enter the presentation as your target customer. Think like they think, desire what they desire, slouch like they slouch. You'll be much better equipped to recognize a potential winning idea if you can see past the

usual corporate filters of consistency and conservatism.

When you see the concepts, listen to *how* they are being presented, rather than rush to ogle the art direction or dissect the copy. If your creative team is worth their salt, they have synthesized your objectives, the strategy, the benefits and a few tasty target insights into a fully dimensional selling argument – and can articulate its subtleties accordingly.

There will be plenty of time later to talk kerning, paper stock, HTML and asterisk size. If you grok the “why” behind the creative, you'll be empowered to evaluate it's potency.

The objective is subjective.

Now for the easy part: evaluate the ideas *objectively* with this short checklist:

- Is it on strategy?
- Does it clearly convey a *single* USP?
- Does it succinctly convey all benefits?
- Are the call to action and offer clear?
- Does it follow my brand guidelines?
- Can it be produced on time and

within budget?
Does it make good use of the medium (online, e-mail, print etc.)

Is it legally safe?
These checkpoints aren't exhaustive and you can probably enrich the list with your own criteria. This evaluation is your preliminary filter to weed out the creative-for-creative's sake.

Now comes the hard part. It's time to get emotional. Get comfortable in that customer hat you're wearing, slouch a little lower...and evaluate the ideas *subjectively*.

That's right – take those 75+ years of starched collar marketing advice that decrees never to let your personal opinions affect your business judgment... and shred it like an Enron e-mail.

Here's why: when was the last time you gave your customers the creative brief inside their DM package? *Your customers have no reference upon which to evaluate your message except their own subjective opinions.* So make like a customer and ask yourself these questions:
How does it make me feel?

(Excited, warm, curious, indifferent etc.)

Does it grab and hold my attention?

What is good about it? (Identify the elements you like)

What won't work? (Identify the deal-breaker elements you don't understand)

What's missing? (Identify the deal-maker elements that need more emphasis)

It's critical that you answer these questions from a customer perspective. Your razor-sharp business instincts will naturally try to intervene (*"Hey – that shade of red isn't in our corporate graphic standards manual"*)...but if you can anticipate how an actual customer may react, you'll have a much more balanced understanding of how effectively each concept could work for you.

Next step: babies & bathwater

We've all seen it happen: an inspired creative idea gets diluted to the point of irrelevancy as it progresses from presentation to publication. Sometimes, it can't be avoided, but here are three tips to help your lovechild survive the washout.

Take time. Give yourself time to collect comments from all stakeholders (legal, production,

IT, the CEO's graphic designer intern niece) and build a consensus direction. Often this process can be accelerated by convening a roundtable discussion where all parties can articulate their opinions and you can ringmaster accord.

Define the effect, not the method. Nature or nurture? Most creative is born half-formed and can benefit from some fine-tuning. The best way to ensure you get what you intend is to define the effect you'd like to create, rather than how to create it. Example: "We would like the banner ad to be more attention-getting" rather than "Animate the elephant to lip-synch our company name and make him turquoise".

Be tough. It's your money (and ultimately your career) - so push, prod and challenge your creative team to deliver exceptional work. Give them tangible benefits to work with, a reasonable timeframe and modest budget. And when evaluating their work be clear, be direct and be fair. And please, drop the poker face. Oh, and if you happen to encounter the occasional creative jughead who can't recognize good direction and continues to spout self-serving justifications... just shut him down. Hard. You're the one putting the money on the

table. Feel free to exercise that power – you're fighting the good fight.

Keep your perspective. Let's be real. Between scraping baby's dinner off the floor, scrolling through spam, and coping with more Chrétien gaffes, today's multitasking consumer will only languish a few moments with your communication. So by all means take the time to make it simple and compelling and intoxicatingly benefit-driven. But get it out there. Let the market tell you what it likes, then take your learning into the next quarter.

So the next time your moment of truth comes around and you have to evaluate creative, relish the moment. It's a terrific opportunity to play a key role in crafting a memorable campaign. Or, at the very least, play with crayons again.

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