

THE ECONOMIC TIMES DESCRIBES ADVERTISING as “messages paid for by those who send them to inform or influence people who receive them.” Under that description, corporate communications is a form of advertising. And advertising is once again under the spotlight, not because of digital changing the landscape, but rather quality, or lack thereof. Perhaps the biggest ad-budget holder in the world, Marc Pritchard, Chief Brand Officer at P&G, said recently, “The past few years in advertising have seen an exponential increase in crap.”

The obvious question is “Why?” I would suggest four reasons.

First is the mistake of thinking that business and brand are different. Any brand you can think of is a business, its reputation driven by brand behavior. Our perception of any brand is driven by every touch point it has with us. Reputation is everything, and everything is reputation. Too rarely do clients and agencies sweat every detail concerning their brand.

A brand is not a logo, or a set of guidelines. A brand is a person’s gut feeling about your product, your service or your organization. This gut feeling matters because people make decisions for emotional as well as rational reasons. Many brands are good at appealing either to heart or mind, but not many are good at both. Either they lean too heavily on the rational side by providing too much information, overwhelming if not boring their audience, or their emotional-side effort is melodramatic, creating cynicism or incredulity. Only when both sides work together do you start to get a brand with charisma, a rare and precious thing, one for which people think there is no substitute.

The second reason for the increase in crap is that clients and agencies have become lazy around the importance of the brief. Briefs have become “to do” lists that overlook important business and brand challenges. Too often we don’t stop to figure out what it is we are looking to achieve. Why are we assuming at the outset that we know what will work best? Instead of rushing headlong into execution, pause for intelligent consideration. It is worth the investment in time.

The third reason is the need for insight. A lack of sound insight produces generic content – and what’s generic is invisible. So why bother?

Insight comes from knowing your brand, from asking what you want your audience to think, feel and do as a result of your communications. When Pope Julius II asked Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the artist asked “Why?” The Pope replied, “Because the ceiling is cracked



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and needs a coat of paint.” Now there’s a brief lacking insight. So Michelangelo asked what the Pope wanted his subjects to think and feel upon entering the chapel. Pope Julius said he wanted people to experience a sense of divine inspiration when looking towards heaven. “There is your insight,” said Michelangelo. “And so I will not just paint the ceiling, I will create a masterpiece for the greater glory of God, as an inspiration to His people.” Or words to that effect. For 500 years, I would suggest, that particular insight has proven to be a worthwhile pause for consideration.

The fourth reason is the medium. Technology makes it easy to reach your audience, but hard to get their attention. Creating standout content is difficult, especially for display on a hand-held screen. Ask yourself if you’re seeking to inform or communicate. Information is giving out, communication getting through. The latter – getting through – must be the goal, because it registers your message and increases the likelihood of meeting your objective. Doing so in small digital formats is an art that’s often overlooked. ♦

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