

Why agencies don't advertise themselves

 By [Grahame Hall](#)

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In a recent article on Bizcommunity, PR pundit Peter Mann asks the pertinent question "Why Don't Agencies Advertise?"

In view of my 35+ years experience as a copywriter in the wonderful, wild, whacky world of advertising, I think I am eminently qualified to answer this question.

Agencies don't advertise because they don't know what they're doing, or what the purpose of advertising really is, or even the most basic rudiments of our craft.

In the first decade of the 20th century a Canadian Mounty-turned-copywriter by name of John E. Kennedy coined the expression "advertising is salesmanship in print." 100 years down the road and a better definition has yet to be proffered.

Does advertising sell

In front of me is the 2007 edition of *Tony Koenderman's Ad Review*. In an article headed "Does Advertising Sell? And should it?" the MD of "one of South Africa's most creative agencies" has this to say:

"I genuinely don't believe that advertising sells...when I sit with current and prospective clients I tell them that outright...advertising doesn't - and won't - sell their product."

With attitudes like this it's hardly surprising clients don't take agencies too seriously.

Vast amounts of money are wasted every year on advertising that accomplishes nothing. If many clients treated their capital equipment investments the cavalier way they treat their advertising expenditure they'd probably be out of business in short order.

He's not alone

But I don't think the MD mentioned above is alone in his misguided views. I think it's the *prevailing* attitude. The result is that agencies, instead of focusing on selling the client's product, they are now focused on winning creative awards because that's all that separates one agency from another these days.

And to say that advertising doesn't sell ignores the vast body of work produced by companies that wouldn't be in business if their advertising didn't produce profitable results.

The debate between award winning vs effectiveness is not new. It's been raging for almost a century and is unlikely to be resolved any time soon.

But creativity in advertising is, in my opinion, becoming a commodity if it isn't already. This year Acme Advertising picks up a slew of gongs, next year Slamdunk Creative Concepts takes the honours. Who really cares?

Who?

Blame can also be apportioned to the advertising schools. When I speak to graduates of these schools and ask them what they know of the history of advertising I'm met with blank stares. They've never heard of people like Albert Lasker, John E. Kennedy, Claude Hopkins, Victor Schwab, Maxwell Sackheim, James Webb Young, John Caples or Rosser Reeves, among others. Yet these are the people who laid the very foundations of what we call advertising today. Not one of them would have dared opine "advertising doesn't sell". On the contrary, another advertising great, David Ogilvy, said "we sell - or else."

Clients are not entirely blameless in this scenario, either. "If more agencies were held accountable for the work they produce, advertising would look very different to the way it does."

We need to know how to sell

But if one doesn't know how to sell, how can one go about the business of actually selling? Teach the kids in school, particularly the copywriting students, how to sell stuff, and we may see a renaissance of the ad agency.

Until agencies can put proven, real results in front of clients they've really got no point of difference to talk about. They've all tried advertising their own services but with little success, I imagine.

In paging through the issue of Tony Koenderman's Ad Review I mentioned earlier, I do see ads for agencies. They are full of platitudes, generalities, and meaningless puffery. And if they don't know how to sell themselves, how can they be expected to sell their clients' products or services?

ABOUT GRAHAME HALL

Grahame Hall is a copywriter with 35 years experience. In that time he has worked in dozens of agencies, large and small. He abhors the wasteful way most agencies spend their clients' money. It's money which could be put to far better use feeding the poor than winning meaningless awards.
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