

My Turn

The Safe Hire

By David Bernstein

It's a basic rule of business: Only hire someone who's done the job before.

It sounds like a no-brainer. But I wonder if that's just because we aren't using our brains. I wonder if we're simply following this rule like a parade of lemmings, unaware of where it's taking us.

In our industry, the parade starts with pitch consultants. They won't put you in their agency review unless you have the right (read: achingly specific) experience.

Next in line are the clients. They almost always hire an agency with said category experience. So is it any surprise they end up producing work that looks like the rest of the category?

Pop quiz: When was the last time you saw an airline ad that didn't look like an airline ad? Answer: 1967.

Bringing up the rear of this twisted conga line are the ad agencies – the self-proclaimed courageous, who rail against conventional wisdom. And then follow it in lock-step precision.

If you think I'm exaggerating, consider this: Agencies only hire people who have worked on the right (read: achingly specific) accounts. If you're an account executive or media planner, we look for it on your resume. If you're a creative person, we look for it in your portfolio.

It's a fact that not only pervades internal hires, but external ones.

Admit it. You'd never choose a photographer or director who hasn't shot something just like the ad you're about to shoot. That would be irresponsible. Right?

Regardless of where you sit on the consultant/client/agency triangle, we think the same thoughts: Why take the risk? Why wait for a learning curve when the potential hire already knows the category, can speak the lingo and quote the industry mantras?

Hiring someone who has done the job before isn't only easier. It's safer. They've seen it all before, so they're less likely to screw up.

But is making the safe hire making the best hire? Is experience more valuable than ingenuity?

That's where Ben Sliney comes in.

Who's Ben Sliney? He was an air traffic controller who once sued the Federal Aviation Administration on behalf of the air traffic controllers. So it was more than a little surprising when the FAA hired him to be its National Operations Manager. Beyond their obvious history, he had never held any position like this one. His first day at his new job turned out to be Sept. 11, 2001.

Within minutes of arriving at the center that he now commanded, reports of the hijackings hit his desk. As the events of the day quickly spiraled out of control, Sliney was under tremendous pressure to do something, anything, to minimize the potential for disaster.

What he did was unprecedented in the history of American aviation. He ordered every single plane in the air to land immediately. He literally closed the skies to all air traffic.

No one had ever taken this step before. It's doubtful any experienced operations manager would have made the same decision. They almost certainly wouldn't have done it as quickly.

As Sliney said in the press, "It was good that I was there and not someone more in tune with the bureaucracy." Sliney was new to the job and the corporate culture of the FAA. He didn't know the rules, so he went with his instincts. Grounding those planes may have saved thousands of lives. All because the FAA hired someone who hadn't done the job before.

Which brings us back to the less dramatic world of advertising.

What lessons can we learn from Ben's story? I can think of three.

1. Ad agencies should hire the best person for the company instead of the best person for the account.
2. Clients should hire the pitch consultant with the most imagination instead of the most criteria.
3. And pitch consultants shouldn't be afraid to throw a wild card agency into the mix.

At worst, the agency will present an idea that misses the mark.

At best, it'll present an idea that's different than the more "experienced" agencies. An idea that's divorced from the sacred cows of the category. An idea that actually surprises, motivates and inspires those who see and hear it.

I can't tell you this approach will save lives. But given the average CMO only lasts 18 months, it just might save some jobs.

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