

# DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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Sunday, February 3, 2008

## PRODUCTIVE COACHING

For a long time now, we have been advising clients to coach their creative resource teams by “providing positive direction.” By “positive direction” we have always meant identifying the changes or additions needed to take the work presented to an even higher level; we have consistently seen “positive direction” as the opposite of fault-finding, or of saying what we think is wrong with the work presented. Yet despite examples we give and role plays we do to exemplify this kind of direction, we find so many of our clients confusing “positive” with “complimentary.” They assume that in acting friendly, courteous, and collegial in their initial comments (such as, “Great. Thanks, Agency, for all this hard work.”) they are setting things up for a “positive” discussion...which will help ease the tension when they subsequently begin to find fault with the work. And then they wonder why so much contention and wasted time follows!

It occurred to us this past week, as we were once again helping some clients to improve their coaching skills, that this notion of “positive” is ultimately misguided because it is simply too easily confused with “being positive.” So, from here on out, we are changing our longstanding advice from “providing positive direction” to “*providing productive direction.*” The more we have thought about it, “productive” is what we have intended all along: to keep people engaged and motivated to reach even higher goals; to sustain momentum; at a minimum, to keep making forward progress.

When you get down to it, we all want to be productive communicators, regardless of how willing our “receivers” are as listeners. The doctor who informs his patient that he is over-weight and at risk of coronary heart disease knows that not all patients want to hear such things; but he nevertheless wants the patient to listen and change behaviors accordingly. The teacher who ineffectually keeps threatening the class with detention should they not stop cutting up knows she is probably wasting her breath; yet she very much wishes they would listen and behave. At its most basic level, providing anyone with “productive direction” means getting listened to!

In our minds, there are two dimensions (a content dimension and a style dimension) to providing productive direction, and they go hand-in-hand: making comments that add value (the content), and making those comments in a way that gets listened to, gets heard (the style). As simple as these two dimensions sound, if we were honest most of us would say that we rarely think about our need to achieve them both when we are commenting; some of us might even admit that we are not naturally gifted at making comments in a way that ensures they get heard...and that we could use a lot more practice to become better direction-givers. The starting point for any of us wishing to become better direction-givers is in the mind—it takes a “right attitude” more than anything else.

For this week's Boats & Helicopters, let's get inside the mind of, say, an experienced brand manager somewhere who very much wants to provide his agency creative team with productive direction and who is approaching the task with the right attitude.

### **BOATS & HELICOPTERS:**

- “OK, I know this work I’ve just seen is a good start—maybe even more than that. But I can also see that we have some more work to do...in at least these three areas: (1) generating additional ideas that truly have a “twist” to them, so we have a better chance of engaging the target; (2) making our two-benefit communication truly balanced 50/50 in both the core dramatization and key copy words; and (3) exploring some other “camps” such as a competitive comparison, target-as-hero, and doctor-influencer. What do I have to do in my commenting approach to make this work happen? (After all, I have 6 years experience, but combined, the creative team has about 100 years experience; and I know they have sat through many brand manager commentings as part of those years.)”
- “In the interest of time (and maybe to show my boss sitting next to me that I’m demanding as a client) I could jump right in and tell the creative team that this work is missing three things...but, chances are, these ‘missing things’ will be heard as ‘mistakes’ or ‘screw-ups’ and we’ll likely get into heavy defense of the work. A lot of time will end up being wasted instead.” NOT PRODUCTIVE!
- “If I really want them to listen, I ought to let them know that I’ve understood and assessed the entire body of work they’ve presented—and that I think we should move ahead with some of it. This way, they will get the clear signal right from the start that their work has some merit (which it does) and they’ll also see that I’m in a build-upon mode, not a tear-down mode. Most people who are exposing their work (and their egos) need to hear that they’re ‘on the right track’ or ‘off to a good start’ in order to really hear what else is needed to reach the goal.” PRODUCTIVE!
- “I probably won’t even mention those ideas that are well off the mark or that need a ton of work. If I do, someone on the team will obviously need to defend them (as a manhood issue, if nothing else), and this will not only take time but will also take the focus away from the work I actually have heart for and want them to zero in on.” PRODUCTIVE!
- “Part of me is screaming inside that several of these ideas just won’t work—they have absolutely no appeal to me at all! But I have to ask myself, is this kind of reaction adding value? If I am squarely in the target group, well, maybe it could add some value; but if I am not, the best way for me to add value is by commenting upon the strength of the benefit communication (something that can be cited within the work) or by suggesting new camps to work against.” PRODUCTIVE!

Becoming a better, productive direction-provider...it's all about the right attitude to get more effective communication.

Richard Czerniawski & Mike Maloney

**Richard Czerniawski**

.....  
430 Abbotsford Road  
Kenilworth, Illinois 60043  
tel 847.256.8820  
fax 847.256.8847  
.....

reply to Richard:  
[richardcz@bdn-intl.com](mailto:richardcz@bdn-intl.com)

**Mike Maloney**

.....  
1506 West 13th Street, #17  
Austin, Texas 78703  
tel 512.236.0971  
fax 512.236.0972  
.....

reply to Mike:  
[mikemaloney@bdn-intl.com](mailto:mikemaloney@bdn-intl.com)



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