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Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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THE SKILLFUL MEANS OF COMMENTING

Those who have participated in one of our Positioning & Ad College programs know that we spend a great deal of time over the three days explaining the merits of (and getting participants to practice) “skillful means.” In case you’ve forgotten, or if the term is new to you, “skillful means” is a Buddhist concept that means achieving desired goals in a harmonious manner...in a way that fosters mutual respect and absolutely prevents “collateral damage.” Unfortunately, so many times in our zealous pursuit of business goals, we do not practice skillful means and end up with results accompanied by collateral damage: the marketing team that finally manages to produce a business-building ad campaign but destroys the agency relationship in the process is not operating with skillful means.

We tend to think of skillful means as an overriding philosophy—a more creative and open approach--for conducting our work. As such, it is really the antithesis of that older (outdated!) philosophy that espoused tight control by one party over another. So, in the old control method, we managed people and products; in the new creative approach we build relationships and manage ideas. In the old, control way we conducted transactions and delegated; in the new creative approach we are transformational and we collaborate. And, in the old control method we exchanged information and evaluated others’ work; in the new creative method we share understandings and coach the entire team to reach their best.

There are those who might say, based on this, that skillful means sounds soft. But actually, it is an inherently more demanding approach to achieving results: because it is anchored on the notion of directing and encouraging talented people to achieve their “personal best” every time, it ends up stretching everyone beyond their imagined limits. We have found time and again that it results in better work—promotions, merchandising tactics, new products, advertising campaigns.

But don’t take our word for it; rather, try it out for yourself. And what better way to try it out than when providing comments (direction, really) to your agency creative and account teams? Plus, in practicing the skillful means principles on a real time basis like this, you’ll be taking the concept out of the “macro-view” and into the “micro-view.” To help you get started, here are (1) a few sure-fire techniques that go along with skillful means commenting, and (2) an example—from recent Ad College program—that illustrates what is and isn’t commenting with skillful means.

Some sure-fire, skillful means techniques:

1. Each time you comment—even if you are the last person on your team to comment—provide your agency team with an Overview of the entire work. Remember that an overview is not a “thanks for coming out today” kind of remark (which is mere politesse). No, it’s an indication of where the work-to-date stands in your mind—really terrific and ready for the next stage of development (storyboard, production, etc.); making good progress but with more creative work needed; or, somehow off the mark and needing a re-boot. What makes an Overview such an important element in operating with skillful means is that it sets the listener up for wanting to hear more...it indicates that you care about the relationship as much as you do the work at hand.
2. Once you have given your overview, move on to some specific direction...and the skillful means way of offering this direction is to say what you would like to see (but don’t currently see) rather than what’s wrong or what you don’t like. Perhaps it sounds like a subtle difference, but the impact of one versus the other can be big. Truly, if you want someone to improve upon an idea or take it to a higher level, do you expect her or him to listen eagerly when you are pointing out her/his “mistakes”? Even more important, pointing out mistakes or shortcomings is not the same as directing or coaching a performance; but when you take the time to articulate what you don’t see yet that you believe would make the idea even stronger, you’re really pointing the way.
3. Another related skillful means technique when commenting on creative ideas is to “see the glass half full.” When you start commenting about ideas that have some merit (rather than starting with those which are off the mark), you are clearly signaling to your agency team that you can appreciate ideas—even germs of ideas, and that you are more interested in managing ideas than in managing subordinates or suppliers.

These skillful means commenting techniques seem so simple, but oddly enough, they don’t come naturally to most of us. At a recent Ad College a participant was asked to role-play as the client, reacting to a few campaign ideas. Here’s a paraphrase of what she said to start:

“It’s obvious you spent time on this work and so I would like to respond to each idea, one-by-one. The first idea is interesting in its use of “before & after” but it really doesn’t capture the strategy. In addition, I have a concern that the humor will be inconsistent with the brand character. And finally, I don’t quite see the breakthrough-ness of the brand.”

Here’s commenting that violates every principle of skillful means: no Overview of the entire work; leading with what’s wrong; seeing the glass half empty; and providing no sense of what specifically needs to be done. When asked, after this commentary, if the participant saw any ideas in those presented that he liked and were worth pursuing, he replied he did. But he wanted to make sure he spent time on those he found short of the mark so the agency would know better what not to bring him next time...it’s hard letting go of that old control approach.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS:

1. Practice skillful means in your own offices, before you try it out with your agency team. When one of your internal or external resources, or one of your subordinates, brings you ideas, give them an Overview and “glass half full” direction.

2. Take the time to talk offline with your agency team, both account and creative types. Ask them how their most admired clients comment to them; ask them how they would comment on your work.
3. Find a skillful means “mentor” within your organization...or at least someone whom you think tends to operate with skillful means. Ask her or him for some tips on what they find most effective in giving direction to the agency. Maybe even jot down some of their “lead-ins” or specific comments.
4. Talk to a sports coach you or a friend knows. Ask the coach for some pointers on getting talented people to want to listen to you and to follow your direction.

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