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On advertising and education

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**BODY:**

All over the country just about now, adpeople are dressing up in rented tuxes (some of the creatives wear tails and sneakers, to keep up the image) and giving little "Aw, shucks" speeches as they accept awards for work my students might not get a "B" for.

"How can that be?" the kids want to know. "How come Kreative Koncepts got a Silver Key for that ad we tore apart in class? Who's wrong?"

"Well, um," I say, "It isn't exactly that anyone's *wrong* . . . you just have to understand what awards are for."

Weak answer. Bad answer. It *is* wrong, dammit. It *is* wrong for us to encourage so much mediocre work -- by the people who do it and the people who buy it -- with meaningless plaques and statues and desktop decorations at these annual rites of self-reassurance. Yes, yes, I know how clients use awards to justify their judgment to management. "See, it must have been a great ad; it won a Clemmie." And I know how agencies parade prospective clients down hallways lined with brass and laminated Lucite attesting to the wonders they've wrought for others.

Prospective recruits are no less awed by this glittering testament to the talent of the organization.

After all, aren't the NCAA banners hanging in the Dean Smith Center here at UNC the same thing? No. Because they were won *mano a mano*. They were won by scoring more points than the other guys. They were won not for behind-the-back passes and great fakes -- they were won for results. *Team* results, at that, not just individual brilliance.

When I was a young copywriter, a veteran art director named Walt Brzoza showed me a picture in AD AGE of a smiling well-tuxed creative director (no sneakers in those days) accepting one of the most coveted creative awards. Then he flipped to Page 3 and showed me a story about the agency losing the account. While the creative work was winning awards all over the country, the product was also setting records -- for longevity on the grocery shelf. "Never forget why you're doing this work," my mentor said.

Maybe that's why David Ogilvy stopped entering his agency's work for a time in all the Ollies and Follies and instituted instead an internal award. Named modestly for guess-who, the D. O. Award annually bestows \$20,000 on the team whose work *produces the greatest results for the client*. Maybe that disciplined orientation is one reason that agency won four of the five annual Stephen E. Kelly Awards for the best magazine advertising and was a finalist this year.

A key criterion in the competition is "How well did this work achieve the advertiser's marketing

objectives?"

Tom McElligott, whose Minneapolis agency is another perennial contender in that competition, says writers and artists must be simultaneously disciplined and undisciplined, to stay focused on the marketing challenge and yet do the divergent thinking that leads to powerful, breakthrough creative executions.

Neat trick; and that's exactly the balance meaningful awards should recognize.

Maybe lucre is worth more than Lucite, too, to attract first-rate entries.

As a Kelly judge three years ago, when the award was worth \$25,000, and this year, when the prize was upped to \$100,000 (*that* will get your attention!), I noticed a difference in the quality of the semifinalist campaigns.

In the judging process this January, I picked out a good, solid campaign as a standard and gave it respectable middle numbers across the board, planning to rank everything else above or below it.

Wrong.

I discovered that this excellent work was the standard for *admission*. There was *no* work among the 40 semifinalists that anyone wouldn't be proud to take credit for.

But there's another factor that may matter even more than the money: Like the D.O., the Kelly is a winner-take-all competition. In the end, there's *one* Kelly Award and a handful of finalists, out of all the work submitted.

Maybe the endless parade of silver and bronze awards at local and regional levels for creative work which merits no praise is what I'm really complaining about, what I'm hard-pressed to explain to the students and what provoked these musings.

Yes, I know, attendance at an award event increases geometrically with the number of awards given out, however minor; and, yes, I know that this may be the sponsoring organization's biggest fund-raiser of the year.

But is that what awards are about? Or are they to improve the breed, to raise standards, to give us all examples we can hold up high and say, "Yes, *that's* what we can do at our best; *that's* the level of work we should strive to do all the time."

Maybe even in local ad clubs there should be fewer categories, fewer awards, a celebration of only the very best, the true model. *One* winner.

It works for the Kelly. *That's* advertising I can show to my students.

It works for the American Advertising Federation's national college ad campaign competition, too. One winner.

"Look at this videotape." I can say. "This is 'A' work."

If somebody else wants to invite me to judge a competition that works that way, I'm willing to take the heat.