



Dealing With Creative Approval By Committee

Two's The Limit When It Comes To Creative Sign-Offs

I recently met with a client who sells hot tubs. The owner, a very nice woman, introduced me to her equally pleasant daughter, a marketing major at our local university. Upon hearing the words marketing major, my antennae were out. The only thing worse for a copywriter is to hear that your client is an English major with a minor in creative revisionism. It was tangible, I could smell it in the air, over the chlorine and other hot tub chemicals: an impending advertising-by-committee scenario.

Sure enough, Momma hot tub told me that her daughter serves as her marketing director, and that the two of them would be the arbiters of whether or not the script passed muster. By my own definition, a committee comprises two or more people. I felt put upon enough, just knowing there'd be two disparate critiques in my future. Matters went downhill from there.

I soon learned that the two of them had turned the script over to all 10 employees at three of their hot tub locations. I received back a mish-mash of penciled scripts with 12 different sets of input. Worse, I had violated my own sacrosanct rules from the "Too Many Cooks Spoil The Spot" handbook by not nipping this in the bud. I'll tell you how I remedied the situation; but first, here are my tips on how to avoid this sorry state of affairs from the onset.

1. AE TRAINING

Sales 101 mandates that the AE determines who the contractual decision-maker, i.e. the check-signer, is. I take that a step further. In AE training sessions, I stress the importance of identifying the creative decision-maker or -makers. This is often not the same person as the one who signed the initial contract and writes the checks. Before any spot is written, I want to know if more than one person will be in the approval chain of command and, if so, who they are and how many there will be.



2. CLIENT TRAINING

If the answer is more than one person — the second is most often a partner, spouse, or key employee(s) — I ask that, if possible, we limit the number of counter-signatures to two people. Since almost all clients sell something, I call on their own sensibilities and remind them how difficult it is to close the deal when there's more than one decision-maker involved.

I then request that both participants — critique-makers — enter their changes on one script, and that both signatures or initials appear

on the edited script. It might seem like a trivial point, but if each of the decision-makers turns in an independently edited script, conforming them both is almost impossible. My requirement also assures that both participants have seen the other's changes.

However, as was the case with the hot tub clients, sometimes things go awry. I had been under the impression there were just two masters I needed to serve. I forgot the two cardinal rules: 1. Almost all preconceived notions about clients will eventually be proved wrong; and 2. there is no second rule, rule #1 always comes true. Ergo ...

3. AFTER THE FACT

Damage control. In the case of the two hot tub clients, they weren't even aware of the scope of the problem, being too busy selling and marketing hot tubs to have noticed how many different scripts had been collated and turned in to the AE. I requested a meeting I showed them the 10 different scripts. Logic prevailed. I wondered aloud how they would deal with a family of 10 people, each of whom got to separately amend the sales contract of an impending deal. In this case, the result was a good laugh. So we started from scratch, with the covenant that only the two of them would have input into the process, and it went smoothly from there.

As I've stated in earlier columns, the Law of Conservation of Creativity states that for every great vision, there will always be an equal and opposite revision. With a little bit of preplanning and a game plan all the players can agree upon, making that vision and revision singular in nature isn't all that difficult a prospect. ☞

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- Avoid the "Too Many Cooks Spoil The Spot" scenario by limiting the number of people who review the script.
- The AE should determine who the client's creative decision-makers are.
- If more than one person must review the script, request that they both counter-sign on one script.