

Viewpoint

'An audience need you could drive a Hummer through'

by John Burghardt
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I had lunch with a guy the other day, and the guy made sense.

His name is John Bradley. He has spent 24 years on the client side of the desk, most recently and notably as a senior veep at Cadbury, and now he isn't there any more. Like so many of us, he now faces the world with renewed vigour simply because he no longer sits in a traditional corporate setting. (This vigor has led him to publish one recent article in this section of Strategy, and he seems to be headed for several more.)

John has started a new company to consult to the marketing industry, but he has not chosen to offer his services to his client brethren. Like any good marketer, John is matching product to audience need - and where he sees the greatest need, by far, is with agencies.

The product John is offering goes under the name "HOW TO BE A TRUSTED ADVISER." And from the Viewpoint of the other John B, the one you're reading, this is an audience need you could drive a Hummer through.

A wonderful colleague of mine used to run house ads headed "We are not our clients' agency. We are their partners." It was true then (with minimal allowance for creative puffery). Not true now, no way. As Bradley puts it in his presentation, today's agency reality is "Stewards of this year's ad campaign prior to next year's pitch run by the Procurement Dept."

Ad people have always had an image problem with the general public, because we interrupt their favourite programs, because we put billboards in front of rolling river valleys, and also because professorial types have told them we're manipulators. (Guilty as charged. Show me a human being who isn't a manipulator, please, and don't start your search in a singles bar or a political press conference.)

But once upon a time, corporate executives greatly valued their agency people. To quote Bradley yet again, agencies had "a metaphorical seat on the Board." Client-agency relationships lasted for decades, there were strong personal ties at the top, and agencies contributed strong ideas not only to "the creative" (an unknown term at the time) but to the packaging, the distribution, the trade allowances, even the pricing.

And of course, Canada now has its own extra added attraction to promote client-agency trust (said Burghardt, dripping with sarcasm). It's the Ottawa sponsorship scandal. As a friend at a major crown corporation recently said, "They just used to think I was incompetent because I work here. Now they think I'm a crook." What's more, as Strategy editor Duncan Hood eloquently editorialized in this publication, the agency industry is doing nothing to counter that impression.

John Bradley wants to talk to the good agency executives, the ones who get it. (A wise segmentation - the others won't listen anyway.)

He wants them to benefit from his quarter-century as a client, and he wants to counsel them as to what today's marketing veeps want and what they don't want. He thinks a lot of agency people may be surprised.

I rarely use this precious space to tout an individual or an organization, and that's because frankly, damn few of us are offering anything that's really unique. I think John Bradley is. I think a few smart people out there ought to be talking to him.

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*John Burghardt has been president of a \$35-million advertising agency, written films for the Shah of Iran, brought home a Cannes Gold Lion, and godfathered the Cookie Monster with Jim Henson. Not considering himself a Type A personality but acting like one, he is currently involved in two New York State theatre projects, a children's multimedia concept, and a new tourism communications firm known as Geo*dentity. He also returns phone calls and e-mails, at 416 693-5072 and burgwarp@rogers.com, respectively.*