

THE AGENCY ANGLE



The Agency Angle: An Acquired Taste for Creatives

[By John Reams]

There are certain people who have said things that have always stuck with me throughout my career. For instance, it was a college classmate, Clay Macintosh, who told me to keep a journal and write down everything. Over the years, I've picked up several tactics for navigating agency life, sharpening my skills and generally keeping things interesting. Here are a few:

Be Prolific.

I first read this precept in *Hey, Whipple, Squeeze This* by Luke Sullivan in 1996. I thought I knew what it meant then, but I must be hard-headed because it's taken all of 13 years to put into practice the following components every time I work:

- Don't be afraid to put up something that's "bad."
- Don't stop working.
- Don't filter your thinking when concepting.

Rattle off lots of ideas, and be sure to always write them down. It sounds simple enough, but I can't tell you how many times a couple of us were tossing around ideas, and some momentum built, and the ideas were pretty good or at least laughable, and nobody was writing it down. I speak from experience; I've been the one who assumes someone else is writing it all down, and I've been the one writing it down. If you don't write ideas down, you will forget them — especially if, a few days later, you're preparing for a meeting and, sure enough, there are no notes on those ideas.

And remember: it's not just the writing; it's the speaking. It's our job to be prolific, not

perfect. If you find yourself in a concepting session about to say something and you don't, you've just limited your chances to be prolific. Your partner will almost always be able to work with what you suggest. Of course, it's his or her job not to judge either. The point is you never know if some random little idea in your "heinous" pile could spark something in your creative director.

"Be the Ninja."

Alex Bogusky said this when he came and spoke to our local AdFed. In a client presentation, there's a decent chance that you'll present your ideas and the client will methodically kill each one, as dearly as you love them. You'll walk out empty-handed. And those odds are high when pitching ideas to your creative director. So you have to take the attitude that everything you love may die.

The bright side is you get another turn at bat. For me, this was somewhat of a revelation. I just love the idea that your ideas, as golden as they may be, are like kindling. Those ideas that may have a great deal of thought behind them can just disappear back into the ether to germinate and be harvested at a better time. And if you're truly prolific, it's easier to walk away, because you know you have 75 more sparks waiting to feed on the ashes of your old ideas.

I'd always heard about "fighting for your ideas," so to me, this new way was a great approach. Now we encourage each other to "be the ninja" around the office, especially just before a meeting.

Time Management is for Creatives, Too.

I've struggled to keep all the balls in the air at once and have, in the past, chalked it up to the fact that I'm a "creative." It's true that those who have a propensity to think from the right side of the brain and use that side more often than the left have trouble being organized or almost always show up late for meetings, among other things. And those in the room who were on time might say, "Typical creative." I resent being called "typical," so I say that if you can be creative and be on top of your time management, you'll go far.

Managing your time effectively garners respect. Everyone else has to keep calendars. Who says creatives can't? We're usually the ones saying, "We won't know when the solution will be solved until we solve it." Fair enough, but there is value in the deadline, even if it's self-imposed.

The bottom line is that it frees your mind. Once you know that your week is planned to the point that you'll be working on a certain

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project on Thursday afternoon, that project won't haunt you. Therefore, you'll be able to focus on the task before you. I suppose this isn't news to those of you who have long since tamed the day planner, but I assure you it's a mysterious creature to the rest of us.

The next time you see your fellow creative in a tight ball of nerves with a panicked look, go and buy him or her the book *Organizing for the Creative Person: Right-Brain Styles for Conquering Clutter, Mastering Time, and Reaching Your Goals* by Dorothy Lehmkuhl. Buy the book mainly because it has a really long title.

Same Team, Right?

Your creative director, your writer (or art director), your account executive, your producer, your studio artist, and even your traffic coordinator are all on your side, even though sometimes it seems like you're alone in the struggle. Make them parts of your team, and they'll respond in kind.

That's the theory, anyway. I've been fortunate enough to have that experience. While I can't speak for the many who have experienced the opposite, I would say that it doesn't hurt to keep trying. Among all the people in the agency, surely you'll find one who is human enough to respond positively. Soon enough, your odds are bound to improve. Just as Paul Rudd's character in *Anchorman* reminds us, "60% of the time, it works...every time." Thanks, Mr. Fantana.

Make Up Stories About People.

A little game I like to play is seeing what kinds of stories I can create for those people who rise above the nameless crowd merely by their actions — the harried electronics consultant I see running down the moving walkway between terminals or the court employee who is standing in line for seven lattes, one with extra cream and one Americano, extra hot, no room. Who is he getting those for? Is one for the judge? And what if it's not hot enough? Will someone's small claims proceedings be interrupted by a "short recess"?

And what about the guy with the \$60 haircut and a super-thin silk tie who's clearly counting off minutes of free time at the downtown hotel bar? It's 3:00, and he's having another. He does have his satchel, which presumably contains a laptop full of great ideas in various and sundry Word documents, ready at a moment's notice to be printed in the business center. Is he here from Salina, Kansas, with the rest of the Wool Growers Convention?

These random people tend to become targets for my fill-in-the-blank game. I just observe everything that informs their appearance: what kind of shoes they wear, what material their watchband is made of, the title of the book in their clutches, the label on their carry-on, or their unusual gait.

Back at the airport, there's the guy who's doing the extra-slow heel-toe kick walk, as if

his flight won't be leaving until next Tuesday. He's checked his cell phone for messages 19 times by my count. Is he waiting for some compelling message that will require his immediate and excruciating attention?

I take all this in and silently assert my version of the details of each person's life and the errand he or she is on. But I take serious liberties when it comes to deciding where they're going next; maybe one of them is going to rendezvous with someone in his double life, or maybe another is picking out the ever-sold-out how-to manual on goat shearing the old-fashioned way. Or maybe it's some poor sap's last day on the job and he doesn't know it yet. Will his Dolce & Gabbanas be able to hold him up until he gets to his car to weep aloud?

Everyone's got a story; the guy with the sparkly Gemini tee may have as much to say as the three-piece Italian-wool suit. It's up to the beholder. For me, it inspires ideas.

I'm sure there are some other things more critical to being an integral part of the agency, but hopefully these have at least reminded you of some of the basics— or wasted enough of your time to let you become inspired.

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