



By Richard D. Czerniawski

HOW TO TALK TO CREATIVES – THE OVERVIEW

“Tell me short and tell me true or else my dear to h&l with you”.*

Worldwide Creative Director

Agency account personnel often take the role of translators for clients responding to creative work. I was often troubled whenever they attempted to come between me and the creatives. I was never into playing the telephone game as the message is often changed when it reaches the final recipient. I wanted my message to be clear. And, after all, we speak the same language. Or, do we?

Well, not exactly. It turns out that many marketers do not know how to talk to creatives. Specifically, they don't get down to what they think of the agency creatives' work, nor do they provide sound direction. Instead, they tend to offer gratuitous and false praise and then go on to "evaluate" the work, which is to find and highlight faults with it.

The best way to talk with creatives when responding to their work is to start with an "overview." The overview addresses what they need to know from you, "What is it that you think of the work?" It tells them in no uncertain terms where you stand and frames your direction. While the Worldwide Creative Director's quote referred to the use of key copy words, this is wise advice when delivering your comments to the creative team or, for that matter, when providing feedback to anyone's work. Be honest (true) and get to the point (short) with an overview.

The overview is not a note of "thanks" to the agency: "Thank you agency for all your hard work." Nor is it a "knuckle sandwich," which starts with a positive comment, expresses the negatives (what you don't like) and then ends on a positive note. The positive comments usually ring false, because they are, and fool no one. We've all served or been served a knuckle sandwich. It goes something like this, "I really appreciate all your hard work. You've done a great job! Now, the work fails to capture our third benefit, 'convenient.' But I want you to know it was great." While this is short it is certainly not telling "true."

Think of the overview as your "conclusion" regarding their question, which may be unstated, of what you think of the work. They want to know if they're on target. They want to know if there is

anything that they've shared that you feel is worth pursuing and what that might be. They want to know if more work is needed and, if so, what.

In order to have a conclusion you need to know how to assess the work. But that's another story for another time dealing with the Campaign Idea. Once you have assessed their work then you are ready to deliver your conclusion in the form of an overview that's short and true.

Your overview will be a variation of one of the following three examples:

1. *Overall, this is truly outstanding work. You have several ideas that I'd like to pursue as I believe they're potentially big ideas.* This will be rare as it is the result of thoughtful collaboration, a strategically appropriated and single-minded benefit, providing ample time for creative development and frequent feedback – that are all too frequently missing. By the way, the work is never outstanding or great if there's nothing there that you are ready to pursue and/or you don't believe is capable of achieving the communication behavior objective.
2. *Overall, I'm very encouraged as I see a few potentially compelling ideas that with some additional work could become big ideas.* This is the most likely conclusion as there are so many really smart and creative people involved in creative development from both the client and agency teams. It's important, however, for the client to be able to review the work with a "half-full" versus "half-empty" mindset so they can spot potential and provide the necessary direction to help the agency realize it.
3. *As much as it pains me to say this, I believe we need to go back to the drawing board and start anew.* This is the result of a lack of leadership and effective management. It is likely the fault of the client team resulting from the client not knowing what s/he wants to communicate, inconsistent and poor direction, and too many benefits and/or "cooks in the kitchen." It is also least likely to be delivered as many clients are apt to lack the courage to be honest. So, they will go around and around with the agency, cycling through numerous creative reviews, poisoning the relationship.

It will serve all marketers well to learn how to talk to creatives. Prepare yourself with the aforementioned overview examples so as to tell the agency creatives "short and true" what you think of their work. It is a practice of sound coaching.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard Czerniakowski". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.



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