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"I have learned that you can't have good advertising without a good client and that you can't keep a good client without good advertising."
— Leo Burnett

DAN O'DAY'S COMMERCIAL COPY MAKEOVER

ADVERTISING AFTER SEPT. 11, 2001

By Dan O'Day



DAN O'DAY

A reader asks: "How about some pointers for 'crisis' ads? All I did the week after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks was pull and replace spots. It seemed difficult to make the transition back to regular business afterward. It felt odd putting that club or casino back on."

Dan replies: The day of the attacks, my two children went to school, and not one of their teachers worried about offending their "customers" (that is, the students' families) by doing their jobs.

Being too lazy to cook, I went to Jack In The Box several times that week. None of the Jack In The Box employees seemed sheepish about accepting my money for their grilled chicken sandwiches and Jumbo Jacks.

The postal carrier on my route didn't once seem embarrassed to be delivering my mail after the attacks. When I took my car in for its scheduled servicing the following week, the auto mechanic didn't appear shamed by keeping the appointment he had made to give my car a checkup.

If you work at an American radio station, then on Sept. 11 and maybe the 12th, you might have canceled all your commercials. Trying to sell at that very moment of tragedy probably would have offended your listeners and, perhaps, your own sensibilities. But if you're a commercial station, you did have to return to delivering the services that pay your bills.

And that — finally — brings me to my point. If you have to ask, "How can we go back to doing what we usually do without offending people and without appearing to be callous and soulless?" then maybe there is something wrong.

If, after the tragedy America suffered, you found yourself uncomfortable airing the kinds of commercials that you routinely aired before the attacks, maybe you should have felt uncomfortable airing those commercials before Sept. 11.

There, I've said the unspeakable: If your station's policy has always been to air any commercial that isn't patently illegal....

If your station's policy has always been "If the check clears, we'll say whatever the advertiser wants us to say in any way the advertiser wants us to say it...."

Then perhaps your shame began before Sept. 11.

The stations that had the biggest problem returning to their normal advertising were those whose commercials:

- Scream at the audience
- Use insulting ethnic stereotypes (for "humorous" purposes, of course)
- Use inappropriately violent story lines (for "humorous" purposes, of course)
- Represent advertisers whose very presence offends listeners

"How," you ask, "could I go back to playing those commercials with car dealers screaming at our listeners about their 'Low, low prices during their big factory blowout, which is this weekend only'? People

don't want to hear garbage like that when the news is so awful."

No, they don't. And they didn't want to hear it before Sept. 11, either. But the car dealer insisted on it, and your station took the money and played the spot.

Let me tell you about one major-market station. The station's billing is very high, due to its powerhouse morning show.

Its commercial spotload is heavily laden with spots for such clients as:

- Strip clubs
- Penile-enlargement products (I'm not making this up)
- Bogus "miracle diets"
- Lawyers who specialize in defending drunk drivers (The slogan of one of the advertisers: "Friends don't let friends plead guilty")

A radio station that is typified by the kinds of advertisers listed above brands itself as a purveyor of those kinds of products and services. This particular radio station strengthens that brand with its choice of programming: deliberately rude, combative, incendiary talk hosts.

Unlike many stations that canceled all their commercials for at least a day, this station resumed its full commercial schedule at 6pm on Sept. 11, and it was absolutely right to do so.

Why? Because the people there know what types of commercials dominate their stopsets. They know that they accept and air virtually any commercial that someone will pay for. They know that some of their commercials make questionable claims. The commercials and promos that are written inside that radio station are also deliberately sleazy and rude.

Guess what? If their listeners weren't offended by those commercials and promos before the terrorist attacks, there's no reason for them to be offended now. This particular radio station — whether deliberately or blindly — has established a strong brand for itself, defined partly by the commercials it airs.

Your station probably hasn't adopted such a sleazy image. But if you worried about your commercials being inappropriate in the wake of a tragedy, then perhaps you should've been concerned long before Sept. 11.

DEFEND YOURSELF, DAN!

Q: Hey, Dan, haven't you forgotten about a little something called the First Amendment? Freedom of speech, ever hear of that?

A: The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution forbids the government from limiting free expression. It does not require radio stations to air every commercial that advertisers want them to play, any more than it requires them to air every record, news release or public affairs announcement they receive.

Q: You ridicule those "screaming car dealer" commercials. But they work, don't they? Isn't that why car dealers insist on airing them?

A: No, they don't work. Those ads increase the public's awareness of the car dealer not because they scream, but because they air so frequently. They could simply repeat "Ed's Toyota is a wonderful place to buy a new car," and if that message aired as often as the screaming spot, it would deliver results at least as good. When your local screaming car dealer says, "We scream because it works," the truth is simply that it works because they make full use of radio's reach and frequency.

Q: Obviously, you live in an ivory tower where you don't have

to get your hands dirty working with real clients and meeting a payroll. Our radio station is a business, and we won't turn away customers just because they don't happen to fit some arbitrary definition of what is appropriate and what is not.

A: Yes, you will. Want me to prove it? OK, here's a legal client offering a legal service. It's willing to pay cash up front, and here's its commercial:

The Smallville Abortion Clinic is offering free abortions to the first 100 women to respond to this offer! Some restrictions apply; see website for details.

Will your station air that completely legal commercial? No? Then you will reject some commercials that you believe are inappropriate. It's just a matter of where you draw the line.

(By the way, I appropriated that analogy from promotion genius Dan Garfinkel.)

TALK TO YOUR LISTENERS

In the aftermath of a massive calamity that is deeply felt by your audience, when your advertisers come back on the air, just have them talk to the listeners and make the sales offer in a calm, respectful manner. (As most of them should have been doing anyway.)

A full week after the terrorist attacks, Americans were still reeling from the enormity of such wanton death and destruction. And, at the same time, they were getting on with their lives.

If you think advertising means getting people's attention or getting your name in front of the public, then you probably did have trouble knowing what to do. But if you realized that advertising solves problems, your job would have been much easier: Respectfully offer to solve a problem. For example:

This Friday night you'll have a rare opportunity to hear one of the all-time original rock 'n' rollers, as Jerry Lee Lewis appears at the XYZ Club....

The casino should not, at this time, be pushing its "Slots o' Fun." But it can have the voice talent say:

My wife thinks I like dinner buffets because I can pig out. But she's wrong. I love not having to limit myself to just one great menu item. I like variety, you know? Let me give you an example: XYZ Casino has a nightly dinner buffet that includes shrimp, king crab, prime rib, fried chicken and a dessert selection that I, personally, cannot resist sampling. Of course, you probably have more willpower than I do, so you can skip the desserts. But if you love to eat and you love variety and you don't mind getting a great deal on the best buffet in town, maybe I'll see you at XYZ Casino one night this week."

The car dealer? Radio commercials for automobiles are so consistently done in a misguided fashion that I'll have to save that for a future issue.

But, for now, please remember: In general, people don't like to be screamed at. Not even if *We've got to get rid of this year's models to make room for the new ones, and no reasonable offer will be refused!*

This column is excerpted from *The Dan O'Day Radio Advertising Letter*. For your free e-mail subscription, send your request to: danoday@danoday.com with "R&R Ad Request" in the subject line, or subscribe online at www.danoday.com.