

EDITORIAL:

***The New Yorker* article on "Do ads still work?" and the sad state of environmentalism**

Not sure who, if anyone, reads these occasional ramblings of mine, but I do know I've attempted some fairly novel work in mass communication of ocean conservation over the past two years with our two PSAs which has left me with some clear opinions. And those opinions found a tiny bit of comfort in two things I read this weekend.

I complain a lot about the sad state of mass communications in the world of environmentalism, and sometimes it seems like its just me, until I read something like this in Friday's issue of *The Grist*. And it just makes me think, "Honestly. How sad." That environmentalists can feel so totally adrift that they are actually still willing to be danced in circles by "the big boys" simply because they think that if you hire the person with the biggest resume you're guaranteed success.

It all reads like a big exercise in the blind leading the blind. The official "blind" (the Green Group) went and hired George Lakoff, who is probably largely blind when it comes to environmentalism because he is focused on larger issues. From what the article says: **"He flaked," said a top-level Green Group participant who spoke on condition of anonymity. "He's in big demand right now, and the project apparently wasn't a priority. He has bigger fish to fry."**

Way to go blind greenies.

On a more practical note, there is an excellent article in the March 28 issue of *The New Yorker* by ace veteran Ken Auletta titled, "The New Pitch: Do ads still work?" It details the recent collapse and restructuring of the advertising world. Madison Avenue is no longer headquarters to the advertising world, and advertising strategies of just ten years ago no longer work.

Advertisers are THE CUTTING EDGE of mass communication in our society. Long before Jon Stewart, Michael Moore, and Al Franken, they

realized that entertainment and humor are the most powerful and effective means of reaching the public in an information glutted society. They also realize you have to throw large amounts of money at advertising efforts. Its very difficult to quantify the exact small scale effectiveness of the effort, but when Aflac more than doubles its sales in four years and the only thing they can point to that changed in their business practice was they came up with a hugely popular duck for their ads, you know there's a reason why companies throw so much money at it.

In November of 2002 I gave a talk at Scripps in which Gordon Moore, CEO of Intel, was in the audience. I said, "If someone will give me \$3 million right now I'll make an effective ocean conservation ad, we'll air it during the Super Bowl, and by March the entire nation will know the oceans are in crisis." Someone asked Mr. Moore later what he thought of my talk, he said he thought it was, "cute." No one came forward with the funds (we made our hugely successful Ocean Symphony PSA for only \$50,000 and spent the same on distribution – imagine if we had spent 40 times that amount as I wanted, and as a certain other failed ocean communication campaign is rumored to have spent).

At any rate, advertising continues to get more challenging, particularly with people like me getting TiVo and being freed from the torture of pharmaceutical ads (thank you, Jesus, for giving us the TiVo). There's no doubt it is difficult, but its not impossible. And as the key advertising exec interviewed in the article says, "if advertising didn't work, the generic brands of every category would be selling out." It just needs to be conducted in a manner that is in touch with the world of today, not the America of forty years ago where people had only three television channels and listened closely to all serious messages.

And more importantly, there has to be some level of “belief” in your “gut instinct,” just as Malcolm Gladwell urges in his new book, “Blink.” You can’t put all your faith in test groups, polling, and focus groups. As the New Yorker article says, the Aflac duck tested FIFTH out of five advertising concepts with focus groups. Imagine if they had followed that lame approach.