



AWARD-WINNING JUDGEMENT OF STELLAR CREATIVE WORK

BY BOB KODZIS



Most people know what bad advertising looks like and can even spot a good ad when they see it. But then there are the advertising immortals — professionals who inspire us toward celestial greatness. Creative professionals stare in wonder at their award-winning work.

So what separates good advertising from award-winning greatness?

Because everyone has an opinion on the subject, and their responses are more diverse than the colors in a Crayola MegaPak, we turned to the judges of the American Advertising Federation's 2005 ADDY Awards — one of the largest and most respected creative competitions in the world. Out of the 12 ADDY judges, the seven who were interviewed for this article have 100-plus years of experience in advertising and have amassed hundreds of top awards. Having judged dozens of creative competitions, like the EFFIES, the OBIEs, the Clios and the ANDYs, it's clear why these professionals were selected to judge the national ADDY competition. Read on, and let their wisdom help your creative teams and minds reach for the stars.

What are the judges looking for? Each judge has a unique way of stating what has the power to make them want to slap a blue ribbon on a particular piece of work. Susan Credle, executive vice president, creative director, BBDO says: "I think doing award-winning work takes the right client, the right project, the right timing, the right budget, the right execution, and then something magical on top of all that. There is a reason that more often than not the same brands keep winning the top awards."

The following are among their recommendations to any creative seeking to win awards. None of these recommendations are mutually exclusive. In fact, the more of them you can employ, the more likely you are to walk away with the gold.

**"Great creative makes you stop for a moment...
or it reaches
out and grabs you by the collar."**

Make it fresh

Without exception, the judges pointed to originality. "One of the first questions I ask myself," says Noel Haan, executive creative director at Leo Burnett Chicago, "is 'have I seen this idea before?' If the answer is 'yes,' I'll most likely eliminate it as an option." While originality as a criterion may seem like a blinding flash of the obvious, many of the judges emphasize that in order to create truly fresh and original work, you need to know what's out there. That includes knowing what's in the market now and having a strong sense of all that has come before.

Give it stopping power

"Great creative makes you stop for a moment...or it reaches out and grabs you by the collar."

— Stephen Rogers, GKV Communications

The second most popular answer revolves around the ability of the work to stop the judges in their tracks. Although this "stopping power" is related to originality, it has more to do with immediate impact. It's

the ability to communicate the beauty and originality of a concept in a way that will allow the judge to get the idea and love it in the blink of an eye. No small task.



Above: Kansas City Film Festival poster/Barkley Evergreen & Partners/Advertising for the Arts & Sciences, Gold; Top: Julia Othmer Web site/Bernstein-Rein Advertising Inc./Best of Interactive (Images courtesy of AAF)

These judges are inundated with creative materials to review. At the 2005 ADDYs, judges estimate they reviewed 1,600 to 1,800 pieces of creative. "When you are judging that many pieces of creative work, an element of the consumer creeps in," explains Stephen Rogers, executive vice president, COO, GKV Communications, an industry veteran who has been a judge in more than 150 local, district and national ad competitions. "We are in the same position, facing a bombardment of messages and having to decide very quickly what is good and what is bad. You learn to gloss over anything that doesn't jump out."

Keep it simple

"Good ads are simple, fresh and uncluttered," says Cabell Harris, founder and executive creative director of WORK Advertising. Most of the other judges agree. "It's important to meet the client's de-



mands without squeezing a lot of extra stuff in," says Goodby, Silverstein & Partner's Creative Director John Matejczyk. "Compromised creative will be eliminated early in the judging."

Be relevant

"Great work is relevant to the client and the product. When they are doing the creative work purely for the awards, you can smell it."

– Noel Haan, Leo Burnett Chicago

Relevance is critical to the award potential of any ad. They know the industries and clients that present the toughest creative challenges and they are quick to reward extraordinary innovation in those mine-laden fields. Creative teams would do well to make sure the work they produce is very relevant. Joel Gehman, Refinery's senior vice president, client services, puts it simply: "It's not just about creative work. It's about creative that works."

Reach beyond the product

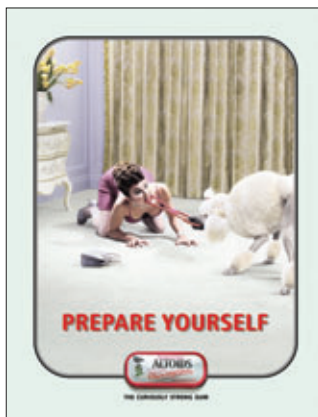
The soul of great advertising is often bigger than the organizations and the products it represents. It's one of the reasons Credle loves working in this business. "We have a huge opportunity to sell more than a product," says Credle. "Nike ads tap into that opportunity so well. When I watch those ads, I feel like Nike wants me to run more than they want to sell me their shoes." She points out that it takes an enlightened client to allow this kind of advertising to find its way to the consumer. "When a client is willing to own an emotional state, the work is much more moving."

Inspiration may be a fickle and elusive target, but it's clear that these judges know and love it when they see it.

Make something beautiful

Many of the judges talk about the "beauty" of really good advertising. Some refer to the craftsmanship and the art direction. Others talk about the almost cosmic connection between the visuals and the words. In any case, the ads that win awards are almost always easy on the eyes and easy on the mind.

"It's not just about creative work. It's about creative that works."



Top of page: Kraft/A-1 Steak Sauce/Foote Cone & Belding/Regional/National TV single spot/Gold; Phoenix School of Music Campaign/BBDO West/Advertising for the Arts & Sciences/Gold; Dairy Queen/Grey Worldwide/Television/Silver; Vintage Spyder Replicas/Barkley Evergreen & Partners/Out-Of-Home/Gold; Above: Altoids Four-color Campaign/Leo Burnett/Consumer Magazine/Gold (Images courtesy of AAF)

Matejczyk takes the issue of beauty to heart. "So much of what we are surrounded by is so ugly," he says with genuine revulsion, adding, "Fear of ugliness causes me to seek out beauty and that clearly affects my creative judgement." Other judges are quick to point out that beauty goes beyond visual stimulation. Brilliant headlines and well-crafted copy can be just as alluring as a great image. And the combination of the two has the power to move mountains, and the votes of the judges.

Show me the funny

One of the reasons I love advertising so much is that clever and funny so often go hand in hand. Although none of the judges specifically mentioned humor among their criterion for award-winning advertising, their actions speak louder than their words. The vast majority of ads that won awards at this year's ADDYs were humorous. Some were downright hilarious. Whether selling gum, scotch or guitars, most of the winning creatives showed their well-developed senses of humor and these judges responded with a lot more than laughter.

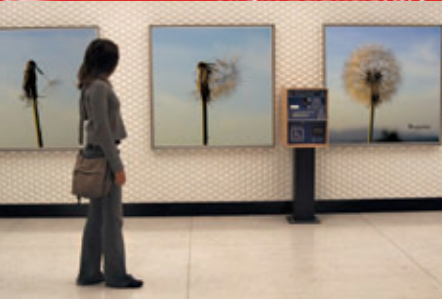
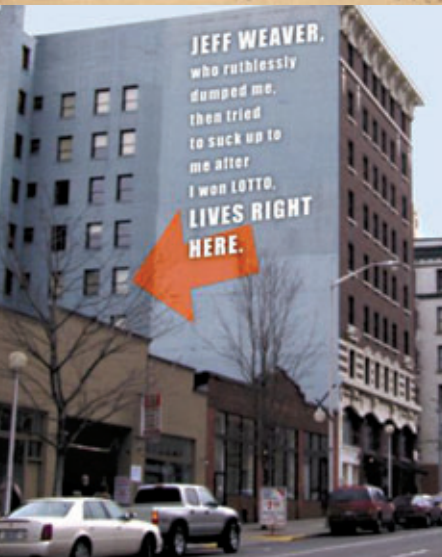
"I wish I came up with that idea"

Whether creative people are willing to admit it or not, this statement represents a common emotional response to a truly original work or a very profound concept. Creative judges are no different. Five of the seven judges whom I spoke with identified this sentiment as a clear signal they are looking at great creative work. Rogers put it well. "I know I've got something special when I look at a piece of work and say to myself 'Wow, I wish I had come up with that idea.' I say this, not with a sense of envy, but with a sense of awe."

Stay open to feedback and input

"The best atmosphere is when there's an open drawing board – where the creators invite other people to share their thoughts and opinions before the ad is produced. The opposite is to treat the idea like a giant secret to be revealed only when it is finished."

– Cabell Harris, WORK Advertising



Advertising is not for the weak of heart. Sometimes opinions can be brutal. Still, many of the judges point to the value of feedback before the ads are produced and pitched to the client. It makes for a better quality product in the end.

In a world where there are often walls between the creative side and the account management side of the business, Gehman works to build bridges. He feels that some of the feedback should come from outside the creative realm. "Great creative work should be a multidisciplinary process," says Gehman. "Creatives are an integral part of it, but it must start with strategy and be driven by insight."

Great creative judgement = broad experience + asking the right questions

When asked how one develops stronger creative judgement, Harris responds with great humility. "It isn't anything special. You don't have to go to school to know if an ad is good or bad. I can go through a stack of magazines and pull out the good ads and the bad ads. And someone who is not in advertising can do the same. Chances are we will be pulling out the same ads and putting them in the same piles."

Separating the good from the bad may be simple, but separating the good from the great takes something more. If there is one thing that sets a good creative judge apart from the man on the street, it's her/his depth and breadth of experience. Several of the judges interviewed recommend checking out publications like *CA (Creative Arts)* and *One Show*, which showcase fresh and exciting work. They also recommend reviewing the ADDY award winners (www.aaf.org) and visiting the Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival Web site (www.canneslions.com). Both sites promise to educate and inspire. With that recommendation, Harris cautions: "These resources help us to remember that there is a whole world of great thinking out there. But don't limit yourself [to these] or you'll end up trying to imitate what has already been done."

Rogers offers a practical twist to help improve your judging talents stating: "There are 200-plus AAF clubs that need volunteer judges on the local level every year. If you want to hone your creative judgement skills, volunteer to judge by contacting AAF nationally." Rogers should know. He has judged more creative competitions than most of the people on the planet.

Still, it takes more than broad experience to be a great judge of creative work. Most of the judges shared key questions they ask themselves when considering an ad for a particular award. If you can look at your work, honestly, and answer "yes" to the majority of these questions, you may be on your way to the winner's circle!

1. Is it fresh and original?
2. Is it fun?
3. Is it simple?
4. Does it accomplish something good for the client?
5. Does it communicate?
6. Does it break through the clutter...does it have stopping power?
7. Is it beautiful?
8. Is it smart?
9. Is it entertaining?
10. Is it relevant?
11. Is it bigger than the brand?
12. Can you explain why this a great ad?
13. Does it make the consumers care about the brand?
14. Will it stand the test of time?
15. Would you put your name on this ad?

Award-winning advertising is hard.

As a final note, it's important to know that all of the judges agree that creating award-winning advertising is hard work that requires creatives to step well outside of their comfort zones. As Credle puts it, "Breakthrough work is scary because we 'break' something to do it...tradition, expectations, tone. 'It's never been done before' is either terribly exciting or frightening. Great work makes you nervous when you're creating it. And when you're swinging hard, sometimes you miss completely."

And sometimes you hit a home run. ■

Until next time – stay inspired.

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Top of page: (top to bottom) Rainier Brewing Company/Cole & Weber/Red Cell/Best of Show/ Best Overall; Ambassador Scotch/Leo Burnett/Out-Of-Home/Gold; Cain's Ballroom/Raffe Photography, Inc./ Elements of Advertising/Gold; Washington State Lotto/SVC/Out-Of-Home/Gold; Virgin Atlantic Airways Web site/PointRoll/Interactive Media/Gold; Rogaine/Miami Ad School/Student/Gold

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