

Re:Focus

simple ideas to help you thrive

by Simon Sinek

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I hate you: a tale about advertising

What do you do if nearly every consumer hates nearly every product you produce?

This is exactly what has happened with advertising today.

Think about the lengths people go to to avoid watching ads on TV. As soon as they come on, we lunge for the remote to change the channel. We buy expensive DVRs that advertise the ability to skip ads AS A BENEFIT. And we willingly pay a premium for some websites or iPhone apps for which the only additional value is that the paid version is free of advertising. How embarrassing is that? That people are paying NOT to consume your product.

The irony is, the advertising industry knows everyone hates what they produce. This is why they keep looking for new ways to force people to stay tuned. There are now ads at the beginning of online news clips or other online video content that are impossible to skip. It's infuriating. There are ads on BlueRay DVDs now that we can't fast-forward or skip to the main menu until we've endured the pitch.

But here's a more interesting question - how did it come to pass that modern day advertising so painful?

The reason is simple, and it has nothing to do with the rise of the internet and other technologies. The reason we hate advertising is because the ad industry has no idea who its customer is; it is we - the general public who are the final consumer of their product. Ironic that an industry devoted to telling others who to focus on doesn't know who to focus on. Probably not so ironically, it's the same issue that stymies the music industry, the publishing industry and every other industry that seems to be struggling "to define itself" in this internet generation. They are all looking for an internet strategy when its their customer they are ignoring.

Steve Jobs recently shared his thoughts about how the entire music industry failed to innovate something like iTunes. His answer was as profound as it was simple (fancy that). The music industry, he expounds, thought their customer was Tower Records or Virgin MegaStore...but it never was. Those were their

distribution channels. The actual customer is the person who consumes the music. And it is the end user, not the intermediaries, whom Apple focuses on in all they do.

The ad industry thinks their clients are their customers. They think the companies who pay for the production are the ones they are supposed to serve. So the ads they produce make their clients happy...but infuriate the rest of us. So much so, that the only innovations in the industry are the new ways they find to force us to watch what we are actively trying to avoid watching. Like the music industry, the corporate marketers are the distribution channel. They pay for the production and the media to distribute the creative product. But it is the buying customer who consumes the media.

Like any other industry on the planet that has a problem with selling their product (and in the case of advertising, selling doesn't mean pay for - it means pay attention to), the first thing they do is improve the quality of their product. In this case, that means making something people like, something people will watch without being forced.

Leave America and you'll find that the consumers in many other countries enjoy watching advertising. Not because the products are better, but because the ads are produced to be entertaining. Sometimes they are funny. Sometimes they are dramatic. Sometimes they are just beautiful. But they are, on balance, produced to be more appealing for the people watching them.

Here's what I propose: the ad industry should work to improve the quality of their product to a point where people want to watch it. American companies do this once a year on the Super Bowl - the only time of the year Americans enjoy watching advertising. Why is that quality of entertainment not being produced the other 354 days? Simple - because what gets measured gets done. And the Super Bowl is the only day of the year that the quality of ads is measured based on its entertainment value.

The quality of advertising should always be measured based on how entertaining or engaging it is. They should stop measuring how many people are forced to watch (reach and frequency) and start measuring how many people choose to watch. Count how many people skip an ad versus how many opt to keep watching it. The more people that watch means you have produced better, more compelling advertising.

Producing a product for the consumers who are the ones actually consuming the product makes more business sense, too. Clients would be able to spend less on media because the work would be more memorable. Plus, if people

CHOOSE to watch the ads then they are more likely like the brands, products and companies featured in those ads. In other words, if advertising was made for consumers and not clients the ultimate benefactor would actually be the client...and isn't that supposed to be the job of good advertising?