

Creative Rules

Creative Rules is a headline that you can read two ways:

- 1) there are rules (there are)
- 2) creative is king (it is)

Good creative teams (designers; ad copy, dm and web writers; illustrators; graphic artists) know how to get the job done. They know the rules by which good creative delivers. They aren't flying by the seat of their pants and it isn't simply "opinion."

Creatives should be asked to do their job – not the client's. Creative is not the work of committees or contests. Crowd-sourcing) has a place, but not often at the creative table. As the saying goes, a camel is a horse designed by a committee. Your team's "buy-in" (or ownership) on a campaign or project shouldn't come about by hijacking good creative work.

Of course creatives need the direction of the client ([creative bill of rights](#)) whether that's a business or an organization. Clients direct the creative team by setting the budget, objectives, providing a market profile – who do you want to reach – and details of the product or service. This is often outlined in a Creative Brief. It states in real words what it is you want to accomplish, who you want to reach, and imparts the client vision to the creatives.

No organization or business should ask its creative team to define its brand. You should have that part figured out before you come looking for an "ad campaign." If you don't know who you are, creatives can't do the work very well.

Sound sensible? It is amazing how many clients expect that determining their marketing strategy is the job of the creative team. I was invited to a meeting by a food manufacturer who wanted me to develop some "creative." When I asked even the most basic of questions about products and markets, he really didn't know why or to whom he wanted to sell. Instead, he made broad blanket statements such as, "we want everyone to enjoy our food."

A client needs to know who they are, why they are different ([value proposition](#)) and who their markets are. The more you know about your market, the better. The creative team needs to know who they are if the creative work is going to speak to them in ways that attract their attention and resonates with their lives.

So, if the client knows who the market is and what the business point of difference is why bother telling an outside creative team? Why don't they just do their own creative?

Some have tried, many have failed. And this is what I mean about creative rules. There are some; and good creatives have learned them through training, education and experience. Without them, your copy may read like jargon or your objective gets used as a headline.

For example, let's talk a bit about print advertisements.

In most print work, the logo should be a sign-off; it goes at the bottom of an advertisement. (There are exceptions, but people who successfully break the rules need to know what they are first). It's embarrassing to see a logo taking up most of the valuable real estate on a print ad. Headlines are essential. Yes, customers need to know who is sending the message, but it is the message that is essential for customer engagement. Unless you are Coca-Cola (who invests millions each year in reinforcing their brand) your logo is generally not a solo message.

Ah, the message! What is the take-away? What is the call to action? Ads can fail by burying the message in unnecessary details or worse, jargon. Non-profits especially seem to suffer the most here, but any business can make the same mistake. Jargon makes poor copy and is even worse for a headline!

A marketing wag once said: "Don't tell me about your grass seed, talk to me about my lawn." It is a truism that remains valuable. Put the target market first and foremost in the message and speak to his future and needs.

Clients sometimes make assumptions about their markets based on their own views. The client is not the market. I was once told by a client that all the copy for a campaign (print, DM, web) needed to be changed because it used contractions. Why? His receptionist told him contractions were *bad* grammar.

Keep the focus on the customer. One way we do this is to talk about [benefits, not features](#). Benefits are what your product or service will do for your customer, for example "I haven't bought gas in a month" is a powerful benefit statement about a fuel efficient car. The features are the list of specs that make this possible, engine size, miles to the gallon, etc.

And if you confuse your strategy objectives with your creative, you may end up with ineffective advertising that doesn't compel your audience. For example, "Make Grey your Playground" seems less a headline than a statement of campaign objective: Let's get the Greater Toronto Area and our own residents to use *our* region as *their* "playground."

No brand, no creative brief, no direction – no good.