What Working in a Tattoo Shop Taught Me About Advertising's Creative Process

There's something about stabbing a stranger for several hours straight that reveals their true colors. Having previously worked in a tattoo shop, I learned early on in my career about people making questionable creative choices.

The tattoo parlor was a constant source of life lessons. For example, women have a much higher threshold for pain. You should never get a tattoo of your partner's name (it's truly a curse). And most people pick the wrong tattoo artist for the job.

While a tattoo shop is seemingly worlds away from advertising, choosing the wrong creative person for the job is something I've seen happen again and again. The fit matters.

The majority of tattoo hunters would walk in, flip through portfolios of amazing designs and then choose an artist whose work blew their mind. Maybe it was a black-and-white portfolio filled with incredibly detailed photorealism or an artist with a new-school style specializing in geometry.

> *Don't choose the people you like for a job; choose the people you need.*

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This happens all the time—not the karma frogs; choosing the wrong artist—and the end result could be worse than it sounds.

The mistake the clients made was not incorporating what they loved about the person they hired and letting that artist shine. Instead, they insisted upon an idea that was set in their heads, and they pushed aside the craft and brilliance that made the chosen creative special. At that point, anyone could be doing the work. And many would do a better job.

Advertising projects might be less physically painful, but just like tattoos, ads have a long lifespan, at least on the internet. Clients who create terrible work or hire the wrong agency might never live it down. And even worse, a lot of talent (not to mention money) is squandered when the person hired is a poor fit for the job.

I’ve long kept in mind what I learned from that old tattoo shop: Don’t choose the people you like for a job; choose the people you need.

Employers and recruiters are sometimes so dazzled by an up-and-comer’s portfolio that they immediately want to hire them. But all too often they quickly place these hires in situations where the thing that makes them unique is ignored.

You can be blown away by a person’s work and still say, “No, you’re not right for this position.”

On the other hand, you could be bowled over by a person’s work, keep an open mind and tap into what makes them special to make original work that shakes up your department and perhaps win some awards in the process. An open mind just might bring you years of pride and fewer regrets.

Giving someone space to deliver work that doesn’t precisely conform to your initial plan can be intimidating. It even goes against what many people believe an effective manager should do. But allowing that person to thrive and create is vital to truly brilliant work. If you don’t have some doubts during the creative process, you’re most likely doing it wrong.

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