



And now...McEditing

by Nancy Vonk | September 1, 2007

A few weeks ago as we finished a job at a favorite editing house, I noticed business was surprisingly slow. Our editor chalked it up to a trend: editing moving in-house at agencies.

At first glance it sounds smart: in the wake of agencies losing huge amounts of revenue, particularly post- 9/11 (marketing budgets slashed; services shifted to lesser, cheaper vendors; cost consultants proliferating; compensation dwindling), new sources of income are the order of the day. With equipment costs plunging and technology making it possible for anyone to take a lunge at it, why not offer editing - certainly for the day-to-day jobs. Can you say cha-ching?

Here's why every art director, writer and CD should link arms against this model: the top editors we all prefer won't exist anymore. Their employers will be out of business. All those bread and butter jobs are crucial to the financial viability of a School, Rooster, Panic & Bob et al.

We won't see great editors join the agency alternative. As Griff Henderson, editor at Toronto's School puts it, "You can't grow or be happy on a limited diet of accounts and creatives, however great they may be. And the honeymoon will be over when the creatives tire of working with one flavor."

Our favorite editors learned from the best. Tomorrow's talent is potentially looking at a model of learning from good but not great, in an environment lacking the diversity of an editing house. And they'll probably be working on equipment likely to be chronically out of date. Editing houses typically invest huge amounts of capital in state of the art equipment every three years. The agency is unlikely to have that agenda. Nor would they prioritize being on top of every development in the editing world.

Producers under pressure to get the best for a price as low as in-house say, "I've got \$12,000, take it or leave it." The \$35,000 job of 10 years ago is \$22,000 today at School. Cost consultants preach that good is good enough to clients that aren't sensitized to the value of the best. And lately one leading CD is encouraging his staff to use in-house for even some of the best jobs.

Burke Moody, executive director of the Association of Independent Creative Editors, reports markets like New York, Detroit, San Francisco and Toronto are feeling the pain and are filled with alarm.

Our best editors can migrate to features, docs, television and other opportunities. It's the agency's product that stands to dim as we head down the slippery slope. As our stories are told with less actual skill, the kind built on years of experience working on countless brands with countless creative partners and using the best facilities, we can expect the agency's value to continue to erode.

Agencies should have many areas of excellence under the roof and offer clients expertise and innovation that's being lost to others. But editing isn't a craft that's wisely moved wholesale under the agency banner. The cost of McEditing will be too great. To quote Rooster's Mary Beth Odell: "Use it or lose it."

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