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Bill Hanley column: Is a virtual advertising agency campaign in your future?

In an emerging world of just-in-time manufacturing, rapid response marketing and telecommuting, there is another element bound to become standard. It's not happening to any large degree yet, but it's on the horizon and will have an impact in the business of marketing and advertising. It won't displace the traditional marketing agency, but will offer an alternative that some companies will find attractive.

It's the Virtual Ad Agency, and for many companies it may be the way future advertising will be done. The virtual advertising agency is a smaller, leaner outfit than the traditional agency. It may have just two or three creative individuals with an entrepreneurial spirit.

The people who make up this virtual agency know what's needed for any particular campaign and who's available to get it done. In other words, they will organize the independent art directors, copywriters, media buyers, creative directors and other expert professionals needed for any individual campaign. They will be general contractors for the campaign.

Why will this form of marketing and advertising develop? Telecommuting is now a well-established concept in many businesses. Experienced professionals often work better in an atmosphere of their own making, one that may not exactly fit in with the ambience created by a bricks-and-mortar agency.

Furthermore, geographic location may be critical to the individual. The world's greatest copywriter on paper industry technology may thrive in a Southwestern atmosphere. A top media buyer may prefer to live in New York or Cleveland or some other center of trade magazine publishing. Through telecommuting, these experts can be working for companies in the Fox Valley.

A company in northeast Wisconsin with a bare-bones creative department would contact the agency. That is, they would contact that individual independent account executive who would analyze the project to determine the extent of outside personnel needed.

These account executives could be, probably would be, specialists. They might specialize in the paper industry, food marketing or medical services. The account executive would study the project, the advertising or marketing campaign. He or she would then make the decisions about who the best people would be to accomplish the objectives.

In essence, this account executive would be assembling a "dream team" for each specific assignment. The account executive would be responsible for selection of the team, the

price negotiation and overseeing the project. The company would deal only with the account executive. This concept comes as a relief for many companies currently turning to freelancers to answer their creative campaign needs.

Each company can have a unique creative team to answer its specific marketing needs. There is no such thing as an "agency look." In a virtual agency, there is no limit to the number of styles available.

Is the virtual agency going to sound the death knell for the traditional bricks and mortar shop? Not at all. There will always be a need to sit face to face with the client and discuss an advertising campaign. It is often good to see the reaction a client gives to a tentative layout. There will always be times when there is no substitute for simply "being there."

There are other times, however, when the virtual agency works just fine. It works when you need top, name-brand talent and their work is more important than personal contact. It works when you want to take personalities out of the approval process and stay focused on the message and impact of the advertising. Come to think of it, that could be quite often.

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