

Review of Casting for Big Ideas, by Andrew Jaffe

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Business writers, unlike other social scientists, confront a common limitation. Without predictive models and theories to frame their findings, even the most insightful analysts must fall back on anecdote and case-lore, and hope that the exemplars of business success they celebrate don't end up in bankruptcy or felony court before he gets published.

Business writers in advertising face an even more formidable hurdle, because every advertising agency is so aggressively different from every other, that they are all blindingly similar, like so many snowflakes. Under the magnifying glass they each have unique characteristics, but when you pile them up, they're just snow.

Andrew Jaffe has done an admirable job of shoveling a path through this whiteout, with Casting for Big Ideas. His insider's view of this highly introspective industry is a good browse for someone looking to pick up new ideas for their agency, for the agency they wish they belonged to, or the one they want to form. His journalist's background also makes this a useful reference for agency insiders who need to know the conventional wisdom about the business. Much of the wisdom expensively gained from new-business consultants can be acquired here for the price of a book, and consumed at your leisure. And this is a quick read on the current state of industry thinking on such hot topics as media-neutrality, the decline of television as a medium, and how you get paid for the idea, not the ad.

I suspect that almost anyone, even if deeply involved in advertising, will find at least a few relevant ideas in here to stimulate new thinking about their business. For this author, many of the tips on pitching new business were familiar. But the simple truth that success in the pitch is directly related to how effective you are in making your own people comfortable in the pitch, was a thought that hit home.

Organizationally, looking at media as potentially the new center of the agency, managing unbundled services including creative, was an interesting reframe. Identifying media-neutrality as a driving force for big ideas, because it takes the focus off the thirty-second television spot, is another useful concept.

This book also stimulated some questions about fundamental paradigms that folks in the business have accepted without question. Why should an outrageously expensive multi-year relationship decision be determined in a 60-minute presentation? Don't these same advertisers spend weeks and months exhaustively interviewing senior executives before they make a hiring decision?

Shouldn't agencies demand the same level of due diligence in the agency-hiring decision?

Where the book falls short is that it is a bit of a grab bag, an inventory of best practices, rather than a clear set of recommendations. Ultimately it fails to recommend a single-minded path forward. The compensation issue in particular keeps resurfacing, but remains nearly as unresolved at the end as it was in the beginning. That may be unavoidable for such a knotty problem, but a clear point of view would be welcome.

Finally, it may be unfair to carp about a trout-themed book, but the fly-fishing motif seemed, to this non-fisherman, to be more artifice than substance.