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TEAR SHEET
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A complaint about your ad is information. *It is not a verdict.*

My billboard was canceled in 1994. It was back up in 24 hours. What one bar owner taught me about the difference between a complaint and a verdict.



BY STEPHEN E. TERRELL
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The board, Fort Lauderdale, October 1994. Painting: Hippolyte Flandrin, 1836, Musée du Louvre. Photo: the author.

In the fall of 1994, I put a naked man on a billboard in Fort Lauderdale. He lasted six days.

In fairness, he had already lasted 158 years. He was the young man seated by the sea in Hippolyte Flandrin's 1836 painting, which hangs in the Louvre, where to my knowledge nobody has ever called 3M about it.

The board was for Page & Associates, a Cleveland company that bought life insurance policies from people who were dying, so they could have the money while they were still alive to spend it. In 1994, that mostly meant gay men with AIDS. The copy ran five words: "terminally ill… there are options." Then a phone number. No logo the size of a Buick. No starburst.

If you will not stand behind your ad for 24 hours, *why would anyone stand behind your brand for 24 years?*

I chose the painting because my audience already knew it. For years, a print of it on a gay man's wall was a signal flag hidden in plain sight. Any other gay man who walked into that home knew exactly what it meant. Everyone else saw a nice museum reproduction. I took the flag off the living room wall and ran it up a billboard.

It also stood directly above a sports bar.

The owner complained. He told the local paper the message was one thing, but the naked man was tasteless. 3M, which owned the board, took it down six days into a 60-day contract.

Today, that is where the story ends. The brand posts a statement. The creative disappears. Somebody junior gets blamed, and everyone is at lunch by noon.

Here is what happened in 1994. The board went back up the next day. Nobody apologized. Nobody painted on a fig leaf. The company's attorney made a call, and then a 3M representative did something radical. He sat down with the bar owner and explained what the ad was for. According to 3M's spokesperson at the time, the owner had not fully understood it. Once he did, he agreed to have it back.

One conversation. Twenty-four hours. Same naked man.

Three questions

He taught me three questions I still ask before anybody touches a campaign.

Who is complaining? The man downstairs was not my audience. My audience was in traffic, memorizing a phone number.

Do they understand it? He saw a nude. He did not see men in his own city who were out of money and out of time. Somebody told him, and he changed his mind. People do that more often than a crisis plan assumes.

Is the audience you built it for complaining? Because when they are, you pull it, and you say thank you. I have done that too.

Read the complete article *in Ad Age.*

adage.com/opinion/aa-stephen-e-terrell-complaint-is-not-a-verdict

SCAN TO READ

Excerpt. Text is from the author's submitted manuscript; Ad Age's edit, art and closing sections are not included.