

# KILL THEIR DARLINGS

--or--

There Are No Bells In Radio

by

Blaine Parker

The script arrives.

Oh, joy.

We've been locked into producing a client-written spot that opens with some fabulous slice-of-life scene. You know, the kind of dialogue that's oh so realistic because the characters call each other by name in every line.

The slice-of-life is contrived, uninteresting and has no strategic merit.

The good news? The slice of life doesn't truly hurt anything.

Discretion is the better part of valor (and sanity). And this is a situation where it's better to just let the client have his fun and move on. After all, 70% of the script is boilerplate announcer copy that says what needs saying. Not brilliant, but it puts the message out there to the people who need to hear it.

The spot gets produced, we move on to other projects.

The end? Of course not.

The rep forwards an e-mail from the client.

It says (I swear I am not making this up), "The beginning of the spot just sort of drops in, without much to grab the listener's attention. Please add a bell, or SOMETHING that says 'listen up people—new ad coming!'"

A bell. Really now. Why stop there?

Why not use the bell, with a town crier ringing it repeatedly as he calls out, "Hear ye, hear ye! New ad coming!"

But then, I've been wrong before. Maybe this really IS an idea whose time has come.

So I turn to a veteran copywriter I know, one whose resume includes such slacker agencies as Grey, Deutsch, McCann-Erickson, J. Walter Thompson and Ogilvy.

"The client thinks the spot needs more of an attention-grabber at the opening. Right before the slice of life starts, he wants to hear a bell."

There's a long, embarrassed pause, then the copywriter says, "Wow. In my

20 years in advertising, I never thought of The Bell."

Long story short, I'm able to make a diplomatic argument (really) against The Bell, and the spot airs as produced.

This wasn't a huge problem, but it points to something that is mantra among literary editors: Kill Your Darlings.

Every script contains a writer's pet joke or a favorite phrase or some other Darling. When editing, especially if things aren't working, The Darling is the first thing that dies.

The thing is, clients aren't writers. They never learned the big, bad reality about Killing Darlings. And with clients, their Darlings often come in the form of a complete script. They hand the Darlings to us, all tied up in a ribbon for their appearance in a bright, spanking new radio ad campaign.

Sometimes, The Darlings are viable.

But more often, we're forced to bring out the big, sinister hypodermic needle full of editorial "No," inject The Darling and kill it.

In the case of The Bell, we were handed a Darling that we allowed to live. The result? On some level, the client recognized his Darling was really a runt. Yet his own Creative Solution was to hand us yet another Darling, this one parading in much like Harpo Marx. (DOOR OPENS. ENTER: NEW SPOT! HONK HONK!)

Killing their Darlings is as painful for us as for the client, though for different reasons. And reps know it as well as we do, if not more so. They're usually the ones who have to deliver the bad news, and nobody wants to be The Messenger.

There is, however, a way to help ease everybody's pain, including the rep's.

Establish a policy with the Sales Department.. When a client trots out a Darling, reps should feel free to coo over it, rub its stomach and tell the client how beautiful it is.

Then, they should Warn The Client.

Warn them it's entirely possible that We Can't Use It.

If the client is assured that his Darling will go into the spot, one of a couple things happens: either we have to inject it full of "No," which hurts, or else we have to use it—resulting in a spot that isn't as effective as anybody would like.

That hurts more—especially when the client gets no results and walks away, telling all his friends Radio Doesn't Work.

If the client is told, "We'll see, let's talk to the Creative Department," then there's no requirement to renege on a promise to use client creative.

Something clients (and even reps) need to remember: we all live and die by the response to their ads. If their ads don't work, then neither do we. Personally, I enjoy getting that paycheck each week. And if the clients go away, ultimately so do we.

There are no bells in Radio. Life is much better when we let them know we may have to Kill Their Darlings.

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