



When Avis tried harder*

In the early 1960s, when Robert Townsend was CEO of Avis Rent A Car, he knew one thing for certain. His biggest competitor, Hertz, was spending five dollars on advertising for every one dollar that Avis spent. So Avis's advertising needed to have five times the impact of Hertz's. So Townsend called Bill Bernbach, creative director of the legendary Doyle, Dane, Bernbach.

Bernbach told him that most clients put their advertising through an approval process that destroys the work and kills the morale of the creatives. "If you promise to run whatever we recommend, Bernbach offered, every creative in my shop will want to work on your account".

Townsend agreed. Ninety days later, Bernbach came back with a campaign that casually admitted Avis was only the number two rental car company and promised: We Try Harder. Everybody at Avis disliked the campaign on sight and there was empirical evidence to indicate it was a horrible mistake. For one thing, it was well known in the advertising business at the time that you NEVER admitted you weren't number one. Nobody at Avis had ever seen anything like this crazy campaign before and that alone should have been enough to kill it.

But Townsend had agreed to run whatever Bernbach recommended. And to make certain his executives lived up to his promise, Townsend wrote the following memo and had it framed in everyone's office at both Avis and at DDB:

Avis Rent A Car

Advertising Philosophy

1. Avis will never know as much about advertising as DDB and DDB will never know as much about the rent a car business as Avis.
2. The purpose of the advertising is to persuade the frequent business renter to try Avis.
3. A serious attempt will be made to create advertising with 5 times the effectiveness of the competition's advertising.
4. To this end, Avis will approve or disapprove, not try to improve, ads which are submitted. Any changes suggested by Avis must be grounded on a material operating defect (a wrong uniform for example).
5. To this end, DDB will only submit for approval those ads which they truly as an agency recommend. They will not "see what Avis thinks of that one."



The memo seems pretty straightforward but look again at the simple elegance of Point 4: “Avis will approve or disapprove, not try to improve...” In other words, since Avis executives were constrained from becoming would-be creative directors, they had to focus solely on advertising strategy and factual information. Nothing else. Which was, in point of fact, their job.

Take a look at Point 5: “DDB will only submit for approval those ads which they truly as an agency recommend.” In other words, no trials. Don’t present anything you don’t truly believe in. If the campaign fails, you’re fired. You can’t blame it on Avis’s meddling because we’re not allowed to meddle. Total responsibility for the campaign resides with the agency. Which was, in point of fact, their job.

So everybody sticks to their own job description and they know in advance they’ll be held accountable. No finger pointing. No covering up. Just put-up or shut-up. This agency/client relationship raises the bar for performance and any agency that doesn’t actively seek this kind of relationship is afraid of its own mediocrity.

The Avis campaign ran just the way DDB presented it. Avis sales rose from a 10% annual increase to a 35% annual increase and “We Try Harder” became one of the most famous campaigns in advertising history.

Go to www.avis.com and one of the first things you’ll see is a button that says: We Try Harder. That campaign is 40 years old now.

*This story is taken from Townsend’s book, “Up the Organization,” published in 1970 by Knopf.