

# seismic shift

*Recent dour economic reports are hinting that the US advertising landscape is rocky, barren and risks a massive earthquake. Jef Loeb hitches a lift out of the promised land...*

Those of us who live on, adjacent to, or even within spitting distance of earthquake fault lines are highly attuned to what seismologists call "foreshocks" - the host of little temblors that precede Mother Nature's definitive demonstration that her cosmological Midol didn't exactly kick in as advertised. But while there's a certain life-lived-daftly joy to writing the foregoing sentence - almost certain to piss off women on at least three continents (especially if Midol's period pain relief isn't available where they live) - the real intent here is to point out that the foreshock metaphor now finds ready application to the advertising environment, simply because so many signs of underground tectonic activity - disjunctions appearing and fissures widening - portend serious disruption here on the surface.

We pause here to take shelter in the nearest reinforced doorway while preparing to itemise the tremors that might encourage you to cast a dour eye on the advertising surrounds.

First, despite fervent arguments to the contrary by El Presidente Bush - who, it seems, is a much better denier than unifier - there's a high probability of renewed recession. Thanks to a steady drip of grim economic reports, the consumer confidence that's sustained this economy is heading loo-ward. If the current downward spiral continues - reverse direction in Australia, of course - that flushing motion will carry away with it advertising budgets, advertisers' already thin creative courage and, you bet, a considerable number of the agencies that just barely recovered from the last economic storm.

Second, turning to a different pew in the same church, the short-term consequence of the recently settled Hollywood writers' strike will be a change in the way networks schedule annual programming and agencies

craft their yearly media plans. The bad news: if the old, odd, marketplace vanishes - what media mavens call the "upfront buy" - experience indicates that all vestiges of a rationalised competitive advertising pricing system will follow suit. Which will play hell with many advertisers' ability to afford any sort of broadcast schedule. So long Cannes film section, pal.

Third, adding even more uncertainty to the picture, is that it's now getting difficult to distinguish the major players, even if armed with a scorecard. Search engine giant Yahoo hits hard times thanks to Google. Microsoft, seeing the opportunity to shore up its pathetic performance in search, makes a bid for yahoo - giving pundits **much satisfaction** coining new company names, such as Microhoo, YahSoft - but offers shareholders much less than you might think. The deeply offended Yahoo board responds by making lascivious come-hither motions at Google (GooHoo?), which in turn prompts AOL, now on its own rocky ground, to enter its own bid for Yahoo (YAOL?).

Along the way, the US marketing community comes to realise that the one piece of the puzzle everyone thought well settled - search - has just shattered into a jillion pieces.

Of course that's what earthquakes, even advertising earthquakes, do. And we haven't even talked about the foreshocks coming from the social, technological, economic and political tectonic plates.

That's the thing about writing a column - you aim to enlighten and amuse, but you can also reveal seismic shifts that can only work up the mother of all headaches. Ladies, please, pass the Midol. I feel a bad one coming on... ☹

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