

## BIGGER AGENCY DOESN'T EQUAL BETTER AGENCY

*Quality creative work comes from individual excellence, not a corporate process document.*

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Dear Clients:  
Wake up! You've been duped.  
Educate yourself and start demanding excellence.

The Internet industry is guided by a dangerous and costly misassumption, one that has resulted in countless clients fueling the growth of their Web agencies at the expense of their own bottom lines.

The misassumption: Hiring a big Web agency provides a high guarantee of quality.

Fueled by their lavish self-promotion and propaganda, we have actually begun to believe that these major Web-design brands stand for something! Clients have been seduced into believing that those fat (v)alley cats — who went public, grew international organizations and spent profits on acquisitions — deliver better products and services.

The reality: The only measure of quality is that of the individuals that work on your project.

Web advertising, marketing and product development are fundamentally creative processes. Consequently, the only way to predict quality of service and workmanship is by analyzing the experience and talent of the individuals assigned to your team.

How did things go so wrong? How did so many brick-and-mortar corporations manage to squander millions of dollars on ineffective online marketing campaigns while ambitious Web-design agencies skyrocketed to fame and fortune by creating those same campaigns?

The answer lies in the misleading nature of a Web agency's two most seductive sales tools — the corporate portfolio and the process document.

*Argument No. 1: The (v)alley cats' corporate portfolio is a bogus sales vehicle.*

A portfolio exists to give potential clients a sampling of the vision, expertise, innovation and workmanship the company will deliver. It is a promise that builds confidence for a sale.

As a Web agency grows, the way it chooses to represent this growth in its corporate portfolio reveals a use or abuse of this sales tool. Unfortunately, many companies choose to define their new portfolio by selecting the marquis clients from across their multiple branches. This kind of expanded portfolio is a hodgepodge of the combined work of multiple offices, the portfolios of acquired companies and the residual projects spearheaded by past employees or creative folk from disparate branches. This document has very little bearing on the work you receive.

The promises conveyed by this work sample can be as sensational as the "before and after" photos used in diet ads. They make overgeneralized and misleading claims. Rather than gaining value over time, the (v)alley cat's portfolio instead gradually loses its integrity as a representational sales tool.

The only way to predict success is to examine the abilities of the individuals on your team, who will develop your product, and their experience working together. What is their track record for on-time delivery? How much individual integrity and talent do they possess?

How much insight can they apply to your problem? How experienced are they with your target market?

Like the major brands they serve, (v)alley cats leverage press and advertising to build brand awareness and position their product. However, unlike the major brands that manufacture products, creative corporations can't possibly guarantee consistency across the board.

The people working on your account — and not the brand — determine the quality and character of the product they deliver. You cannot review a (v)alley cat's portfolio of marquis Fortune 500 clients and expect to gain the same insight about the entire brand that you'd get by test-driving a Lexus before purchase. Similarly, (v)alley cats cannot guarantee the same level of consistency across offices that you'd find at Burger King drive-thru windows from Long Island to Los Angeles.

*Argument No. 2: The process document can guarantee what the deliverables will be — but not their quality.*

Agencies claim that the process document sets the standard for a successful Web site. While the document does list what is required for success, it doesn't explain, or provide a plan for, how to get there.

In other industries, comparable documents enable companies to deliver on the promise made by their brands. The manufacturing standards of Levi's or the operations standards of Kinko's are used to set and achieve standardization — a standardization that embodies the brand promise, be it the performance we would attribute to Volkswagen or the comfort, predictability and consistency that we get with that cup of Starbucks on the way to work.

Somehow, the belief took hold that the big-agency process document offers the same kind of brand guarantee.

Nonsense! These promises reflect a naiveté regarding the sophistication of interactive design — one that has cost corporations millions of dollars. Designing and marketing Web products is fundamentally different from assembling a Whopper at Burger King or a hatchback at a Volkswagen factory.

The Web industry thrives on innovation, vision and insight. These are not duplicable, formulaic, codifiable or trainable processes. There simply is no process document that will ever guarantee a killer tag phrase or a paradigm-shifting positioning strategy. No protocol could produce a hit product or an indelible logo.

In their zealous pursuit of profits and growth, the (v)alley cats forget that we are involved in a fundamentally creative enterprise, where individuals mark the difference between failure and success.

If you care about your bottom line, never lose sight of this fact.

Take control. Size up your Web agency with fresh insight.

Good luck!

Heidi Dangelmaier and Scott Davidoff

*P.S.* Once you're armed with this insight, apply it. Quality advertising, marketing and PR demand individual creativity. Re-evaluate these relationships. Make sure you're not buying burger-flippers disguised in Armani suits.