

CRAPPY PRODUCT, CRAPPY MARKETING COMPANY

As many of you know, I used to do work for the auto industry. And I can assure you, the single most important thing Ford could do to turn itself around would be to fire its long-time ad company, J Walter Thompson. Everyone knows it, too, in all parts of the world. From local to regional to global, folks in the auto industry know that JWT keeps designing Ford crappy campaigns based on one generic consumer, even though not all of Ford's vehicles (and none of the vehicles with any growth potential) are really targetted toward that one generic consumer. And just as awful, JWT does much of the consumer analysis that leads Ford to keep designing cars for non-existent consumers. Sad thing is, the JWT contract is the only one that seems to escape evaluation, even as all the auto companies strip one after another contractor of their contract. For some reason, Ford is committed to JWT, even if it means failure as a company.

I couldn't help but think of Ford and JWT as I skimmed the RAND study on how to brand the Iraq War more effectively. I got the same sinking feeling as I have gotten about all of the American car companies—thinking to myself, "but they're missing the key fact: product *does* matter." One of the reasons the Japanese are eating us for lunch is that their cars—even if they're marketed to a generic consumer that even JWT could love—are good products. (Which is not to say the American car companies don't have some good products, but you wouldn't know it with the marketing they've got.) But by any measure, the Iraq War is a crappy product, and at times, the market really is able to discern crap from quality.

But then there's the other question. If we're so excited about the lessons Madison Avenue can

offer us, then why did we give RAND \$400,000 to do this study? Can anyone think of any huge marketing successes RAND has had? Um, no. Rather than spending that \$400,000 on actual marketing experts, we spent it on some guy who apparently has no experience in marketing so he could go interview the authors of one book on branding (and some of these interviews are four years old—these guys were working very quickly) and read a bunch of WSJ columns on advertising. Best as I can tell, Todd Helmus didn't even crack the trade publications of the branding industry. The result is a bunch of "oh boy!" suggestions taken from a generic, elementary understanding of branding, with no consideration of how they might work in real life.

For example, does it strike you as strange that they keep suggesting blogs are a way local influencers might spread the good word? Call me crazy, but I think a focus on what little civil society there is (which unfortunately is largely religious) rather than jumping immediately to the hippest thing here in the US might be appropriate. And besides—shouldn't we first ascertain whether the power supply in Iraq is reliable enough to make blogs a valuable medium?

So right now we've got a military think tank and a Bush crony trying to brand our way out of a disastrous "product." I'm a big believer in the power of branding—but what makes anyone believe that choosing a crappy think tank marketing company to brand our crappy product is going to do any good?