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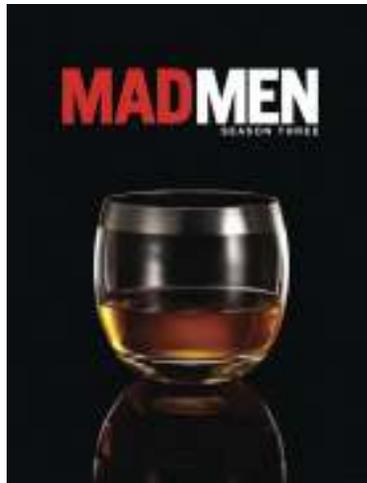
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The Sterling Cooper effect: How 'Mad Men' has changed contemporary advertising



"Mad Men" is changing the way advertising is done today.

"Mad Men" on AMC, which recently began its fourth season, is an excellent look at what the advertising industry used to be. But it turns out that the show is much more than a period piece: According to Ben Littlefield of Three Sixty Solutions, the mad men of Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce are actually setting the agenda for those who work in contemporary advertising.

"There's a new expectation of how an ad agency should look, how it should act, and how it's perceived based on people watching that show. In the last ten years, the whole ad industry has become very casual—what I call the 'shorts and T-shirts creatives.' Since 'Mad Men' came on the air, I have noticed a dramatic change in the perception that clients we engage have of people in the ad business," he said. "People who are hiring an ad agency for the first time are expecting Don Draper to walk in the door. When they see the guy in jeans and a T-shirt come in, they think 'who the hell are you?'"

In response to these expectations, Littlefield says that his company has gone retro by dressing like dapper Don Drapers when they meet with clients. And this change of style has paid off and increased the agency's bottom line.

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"We started this in September and since we've been doing it, our own engagements have almost doubled—even in this economy where people are cutting advertising and marketing budgets," he said.

In fact, Littlefield says he's sure that before Three Sixty Solutions received its sixties makeover, the company was actually losing business by not living up to prospective clients' "Mad Men" expectations.

Not only have the employees of Three Sixty Solutions changed their clothing, they have also adopted some of Don Draper's swagger when relating to their clients. Littlefield says the members of his team will not compromise the quality of their work to bow down to the whims of a client. Instead, they have taken an aggressive approach to working with clients—which he says has gained them more respect for their ideas and expertise.

Although the "Mad Men" approach to advertising has worked for Three Sixty Solutions in some ways, Littlefield notes that there are still limits to what is socially acceptable behavior in contemporary business.

"If I invite a client over to the office and we're talking, and I pull out booze and start smoking a cigarette, that's still not cool," he said.

This article originally appeared on my Workplace Communication Examiner page on November 8, 2009.