

Copyranter: How to tell if your agency is 'creative'

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Everybody is an ad agency these days. [Thirty-billion-dollar accounting firms](#) are **ad agencies**. [Thirty-billion-dollar consulting companies](#) are ad agencies. [Billion-dollar media companies with a history of viciously mocking the ad industry](#) are now ad agencies. Even groups of anti-social 20-something coder techies are (terrible) ad agencies.

It's getting so much harder to separate the **creative** wheat from the poseur chaff. Of course, if the agency's work week-in and week-out is **creative**, well then whether they claim to be or not, they are a **creative** agency. A good creative agency.

But an agency doesn't have to do good work to be allowed to call itself a "creative" agency, not at all! That's the beauty of our industry: how meaningless the word "**creative**" is.

There are certain tells to look for:

The digs.

Start with the agency's office, how it looks, how it's designed:



Is their lobby a little too ... in your face? Are there meeting teepees (yes, teepees, ask Alex Bogusky) in their office? Are there “funny” signs on the bathrooms? Do they have an in-office drone?



The marketing.

Another key to look for is how the agency promotes itself, with their ads, through public relations, and on their website: Does the agency's name sound nothing like an agency name, and even a little pornographic? (Wexley School for Girls, Naked, Mother, etc.) Is their logo an [animal](#), or better yet, a [mythical animal](#)? Have they ever — dead seriously — used the word “brave” to describe their work and/or the word “fearless” to describe themselves? Do they, with complete earnestness, call themselves “the world's only cultural movement [agency](#)”? Have they ever — purposely, officially — shot staff photos butt-naked (but unsexy)?

The staff.

Next, take a good look at the **creative** employees themselves, first the creative director(s): Does he wear a [tiny hat](#)? Does he habitually wear dress shoes without socks? Does he dress “urban” at the office even though he's 58 (hoodies, sagging jeans, etc.) Does he “paint”?



But the best way to tell if an agency is “**creative**” is to hang out in its creative department for a day and observe the CWs and ADs closely. What to look for: Do you see weird, even idiotic, eyewear everywhere? Is there an ex-Buddhist monk on staff who conducts weekly mind-clearing sessions? Are there 0-1 women in the department? (Remember, this is not about good creative shops, just “creative” shops.)

Is the word “fuck” exclaimed loudly in the department 10-plus times a day (usually because of “clueless” client **creative** feedback or “stupid” account executive creative feedback)? Are

the **creatives** alcoholics? Of course, many are drinkers. But at “**creative**” agencies, some of them are blackout-drunk-every-night drinkers. How you spot them is they often stagger in around 2 p.m. to start their workday (see: [Augusten Burroughs](#)).

If the answer to more than half of those questions is “yes,” then you’re looking at a “**creative**” agency. Update your websites and pitches accordingly.