



# THE BRAND WAGON

## THE HOOK, THE LINE, & THE UNSINKABLE DEVITO/VERDI

By Don Winter & Rory Winston

**I** feel like the advertising of the 60's, they were nervier. You know why?" proclaimed Jerry Seinfeld, "Because there was less at stake." Although someone like Don Draper of *Mad Men* would likely have disagreed with the assessment of having less at stake, he would most certainly have noticed our present zeitgeist's shift away from creative prowess towards one of engineered results. In today's cautious market, it's almost hard to imagine the enormity of the paradigm shift that initially took place when agencies like those representing Volkswagen veered away from the usual hard-sell rhetoric and started using slogans like "Think Small" and "It's ugly but it gets you there." At a time when everyone else was on a bigger-is-better binge, it was a courageous few that changed course. As William Bernbach (of DDB) who came up

with the renowned VW ad said, "The truth isn't the truth until people believe you, and they can't believe you if they don't know what you're saying, and they can't know what you're saying if they don't listen to you, and they won't listen if you're not interesting, and you won't be interesting unless you say things imaginatively, originally and freshly." If there is one company that's managed to retain this 'classic advert' ideal of 'bold inventiveness, imagination, originality, and fresh candor,' it's Devito/Verdi.

DeVito/Verdi creates brilliant ads in much the same way that people in the music industry make 'unforgettable hooks.' They know the history of their art form; they play off references, provoke, surprise and entertain. Just as no amount of music theory

or polished production can save a song that is devoid of a genuine melody and mood, Devito/Verdi realizes that understanding the market is nothing without a powerfully original concept and a knockout delivery. In the words of Duke Ellington, "it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing". And so, Devito/Verdi always comes out swinging: a discount clothing chain with a straightjacket to go with overpriced shirt purchases, a drugstore ad that reads 'Germs are everywhere and so are we.' While others have gone in the direction of flashy aesthetics and target-specific advertising, DeVito/Verdi retains wit, allusion, and shocking surprise.

In an age when ever-greater value is placed on the science of advertising – focusing on target audience awareness,

brand research and big-data analysis – Devito/Verdi has remained committed to smart slogans and crisp concepts.

With fiendishly clever phrases, highly evocative images and a high-impact sensibility, Devito/Verdi keeps to classic standards retains a classic comic sensibility in what has otherwise become a more uniformed world of glitzy show-and-tell.

### From Hooks to Hooked

"Your comparison to comedy is fair," states Ellis J. Verdi, President of Devito/Verdi. "In a sense, like comedians we're revealing truths. The better the truth and the more incisive, the greater the reaction. If you go to a stand-up show, you laugh because the guy just said something that was in the back of your own mind. The words reso-

nate because deep down you thought the same but may not have had the courage to voice the absurdity. Like comedy, our ads also play off expectations – and there is often that surprise twist at the end."

"But," Verdi added alertly, "While I'm flattered that you refer to our stuff as highly entertaining comedy," stipulates Verdi, "the entire campaign would be meaningless if the viewer left laughing but didn't leave with brand recall. We can't be self-indulgent and make some film length TV commercial in a world where even 60 to 90 second formats cost a fortune and, really, anything over 30 seconds tends to be less effective. We are conscious of our mission throughout."

### One-Liners & Bottom-Lines

Qualifying the term entertainment, Verdi explains, "What you call our classic comedic bent, I'd say is more a witty smart sensibility that has always been an integral part of advertising. A bottom-line exists; and we need to get business results whether that means getting people to buy or simply making an impression. There is accountability. We vie for maximum impact in relation to dollars spent. If we're not getting the brand to hit between the eyes – which is a quality we're so famous for – then, no matter how entertaining, we'd have missed the mark."

"Being aware of ad history is a crucial ingredient for us," Verdi states emphatically. "If you check the awards agencies receive at festivals - and I mean going back over an indefinite amount of years – you notice the most lauded ads have had an element of humor because humor helps you remember. Comic observations have a longer shelf life than ads solely intent on looking trendy."

Like with most arts, the best ads have no strict time stamp or date of expiration on them. If you consider the classic Life commercial with Mikey – the boy who likes the cereal because his parents didn't tell him it was good for him (another classic by DDB) - you notice that the ad (made in 1972) was shown in rotation for nearly 12 years.

"Good ads are about way more than simply looking cool," Verdi continues. "They have staying power. They make a point. We don't work with an 'Or' situation – functionality or entertainment, content delivery or style, funny or poignant, storytelling or delivering a message; it is an 'And situation' where we are expected to do all the above. This is true whether we do funny ads or emotional ones."

By now, it's unlikely that there's a single health-related organization that isn't famil-

iar with Devito/Verdi's very touching hospital ads – ones that highlight both the warm vaudevillian personalities that survive difficulties and those poor souls who may have chanced into the wrong institutions. With a devotion to sociological and emotional observations, their ads take risks in that they rarely settle for the staple 'designed' or polished look.

### The Norm & Function

When asked if people are tired of flashy aesthetics and crave more classical storytelling, Verdi unhesitatingly responds, "It depends on what the idea demands. We've always built visuals around concept. The look follows from the content. Young, old; no matter... The style is in service of what's being told and not just something there to look cool for its own sake. It has to resonate with us before it can hope to get a reaction from the consumer. And the reaction has to be the right kind. At one time, the fashion industry was pushing the envelope with overtly sexual stuff. But it was meaningless. Pushing the envelope just to get attention without a real concept is just boring. In fact that kind of 'let's be wild and crazy for the sake of it' is as dull as the safest 60's Proctor and Gamble ad."

Thinking of Devito/Verdi's brilliant ads for Bernie and Phil's furniture store, and the way their agency pushed the envelope by getting clients to go along with self-deprecatory humor, I asked about how difficult it was to get clients aboard to their way of thinking. "Aside from a few robots out there," says Verdi, "most clients have come from a place where if you make them smile or feel something, they know that so will the audience. Sure there's some back-peddling... But in the end of the day if they see the benefits of pushing the envelope they go for it."

### On the Road, Off-the-Wall

Recalling the highly successful campaign DeVito/Verdi devised for Hillary Clinton's senate race and the hilarious NY Magazine ads from the late 90's that read "Possibly the only good thing in New York Giuliani hasn't taken credit for," we asked whether the agency was still involved with political campaigns.

"We had a little political division," explained Verdi, "but in the end it took so much of our focus that we felt we were straying too far from what was essential for our business and our core clients so we stopped. We wouldn't have felt comfortable making less of an effort so we stopped."

### The Climate

In a world where even cartoonists get attacked what kept DeVito/Verdi unafraid? "We have a sense of right and wrong," explained Verdi. "While we never tell our crea-





tive team where to go in advance, there is only about 5% that might stray into ethically iffy territory. Still I would assess that it's hard to go too far if you are being smart and witty as opposed to outrageous for its own sake. Often it is companies trying to mimic us in the wrong way that screw up."

### The Talent

"Sal DeVito taught in the School for Visual Arts for years and knows what to look for", explains Verdi. "It's also not the kind of work anyone can do. It's a lot of talent, a lot of late nights staring at blank sheets, and a lot of understanding the many genres out there and grasping the overall history of advertising. And yes, it is blind to age, ethnicity and gender. And not because we made a special point of 'ooh let's have diversity' but simply because that's how talent works. Very different kinds of people and mixed groups often bear the most interesting results. It's not even like we have a perfume and say, oh we need a woman... or it's beer, so let's call a man. Often it just depends on someone really getting a given product. I'm not about predetermining what creative goes on what assignment. If you understand the principals of a great ad, the results come."

### Playing field

As Verdi explains about the process,

"We have very good account people who delineate the pace and explain the parameters of the work involved like establishing the walls of the playground before the talent starts playing. Being Medium sized we



have services at a very high level (digital, media etc.) while still being in screaming distance of one another. TV, PR, Tadio, Outdoor, homneboard, print ad... we use whatever combination suits the given project.

Some ideas are perfect for very specific environments while others work across the board."

"We consider the medium we use very carefully because it's not like in the days when the whole family sat down in front of the TV set and all you needed was that 'one very potent ad'. Flexibility is important. We've gone to unexpected places to maximize visibility while minimizing costs. We've misdirected people by taking classified ads and spaces in the middle of the real estate section. We have tons of 15-second TV spots, loads of bus sides, billboards and print."

'The art of advertising is still out there', Verdi seems to be saying, 'you just have to recognize that the canvas has changed.' "Although many may think this is not the days of the Mad Men where Creativity is king, it does still counts for a hell of a lot. Underappreciated? Definitely. Essential? Of that we at DeVito/Verdi remain certain."

**For more information:**  
[devitoverdi.com](http://devitoverdi.com)