

OFFENDING AD — in Mayor Giuliani's opinion — was among a slew of attention-getting work by DeVito/Verdi.

TODD MAISEL

Admen thrive on edge

By **PAT WINTERS LAURO**
Special to The News

When it comes to opportunism, New York's advertising agencies specialize in it.

But even in advertising, there's a brassy little agency in the city known for its chutzpah.

And the agency, DeVito/Verdi, is thriving.

Native New Yorkers Sal DeVito, 50, and Ellis Verdi, 42, have created advertising that has prompted a protest march, lawsuits and general threats.

Last fall, they so infuriated Mayor Giuliani that he directed the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to remove ads from the sides of city buses that advertised New York magazine as "possibly the only good thing in New York Rudy hasn't taken credit for."

New York magazine objected, a lawsuit followed and the courts upheld the ads on First Amendment grounds.

But all the noise over the ad wasn't new to DeVito/Verdi, which has made a name creating sassy and controversial work for clients such as Daffy's clothing stores and Circuit City.

"They are very New York," said Elefthera Parpis, creative editor for Adweek magazine in New York. "Brash, in-your-face. They are not fearful of controversy."

The owners say they don't intentionally seek controversy. "But it just happens to go there sometimes," explained DeVito, an art director.

In fact, DeVito/Verdi often creates ads that get a big reaction and garner the kind of publicity that can stretch a small budget.

In 1988, Verdi started the shop in his Manhattan apartment, where he found his first client by cold-calling potential customers. He teamed with DeVito in 1993 after the art director ran an advertisement in Adweek magazine seeking to run his own shop with "an account guy with brains and balls."

Now with a staff of 40, the agency is amid art galleries in SoHo, with stylish offices sporting natural wood floors, exposed pipes and metal and black leather furniture.

DeVito said his ad philosophy is simple: Get noticed, and sell.

"Most advertising these days is ignored — it's invisible," said DeVito, who has

taught a popular course on advertising at the School of Visual Arts for 17 years. "You notice our work — it's hard to ignore."

Take the campaign for Daffy's off-price designer clothing stores. The agency was attacked — and a protest was staged outside its offices — by mental health professionals for running an ad of a straitjacket with the headline: "If you're paying over \$100 for a dress shirt, may we suggest a jacket to go with it?"

A national mental health group and the city's Human

Little gall goes a long way for hot SoHo team

Rights Commission complained that the ad stigmatized the mentally ill.

Another Daffy's ad shows two identical shirts, one with a \$20 price tag, another with a \$68 tag, under the headline "Shirt/Bull Shirt."

Even where the ads appear are in your face. One Daffy's ad a few years ago was placed

near big department stores like Bloomingdale's that said, "In this neighborhood be sure to keep an eye on your wallet."

Some other controversial work includes:

■ "It takes an even tougher man to make a kosher chicken" ad for Empire Chicken that was a jab at competitor and industry leader Perdue.

■ A TV spot for Planned Parenthood that showed a condom with a voiceover set to a nursery rhyme stating, "Easier than putting on a diaper."

■ A radio spot of a couple in a romantic setting, with the ardor mounting when the action stops abruptly. "What's the matter? Is it on?" asks the woman. "It's half on," says the man. The closing is, "Half off is a lotta off," and promotes an eyewear chain's price strategy.

In comparison, the New York magazine ad seemed tame.

"We were more expecting [the mayor] to write a nice letter. We never expected he felt so strongly, that it would make him irate," Verdi said.

Verdi, in fact, thought the mayor would be more offended by another ad in the campaign that said: "Police brutality. School reform. And the issue closest to most New Yorkers? How to get a table at Balthazar."

The whole thing, he said, was innocent.

The copywriting team of David Brenner and Jeff Greenspan came up with the Rudy line after DeVito instructed them to come up with a big idea with a "New York feel."

Brenner said the idea sprang from his memory of Hizzoner's comments after the Yankees won the World Series.

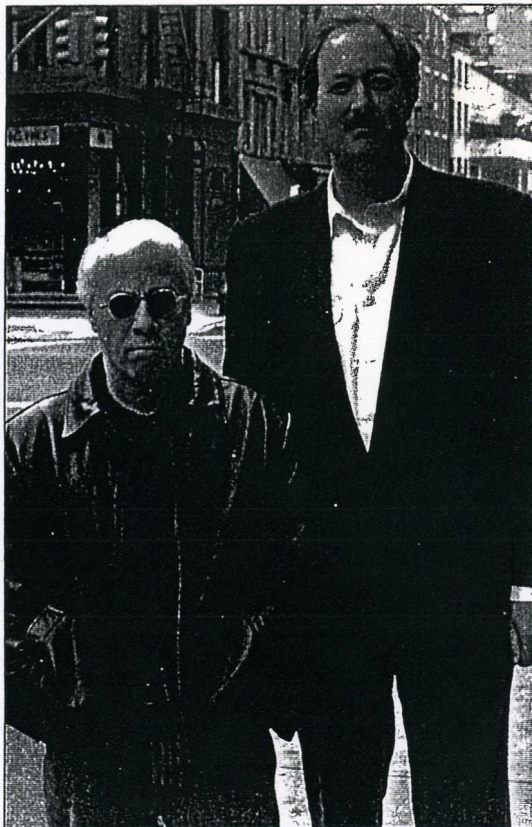
"We think he's a great mayor, and we voted for him," Brenner said. "There's a lot he should take credit for, but he takes it a bit far... He takes credit for everything."

The ad has been cited by one leading ad critic as a top ad in 1997.

That sort of success is reflected in annual billings of \$53 million, up from \$30 million in 1995, Verdi said.

More than half of the advertising the agency creates runs outside New York, Verdi said, and new clients include divisions of Sony and Canon.

"We've got some really big names now," said Verdi. "We're growing so fast, we have to double our space."



PARTNERS Sal DeVito (left) and Ellis Verdi.

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