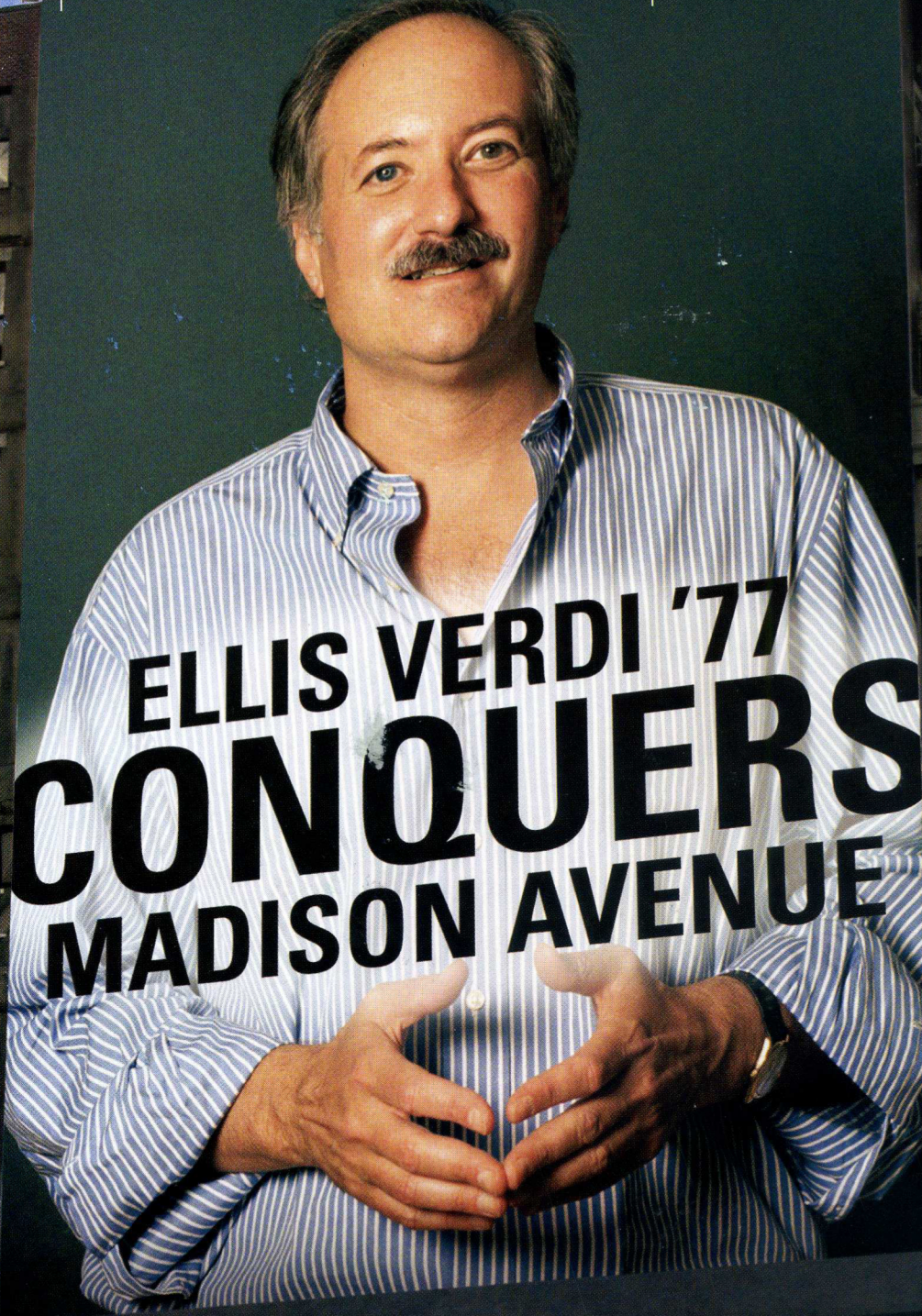


Volume 27 Number 3

Brandeis

| university magazine |



**ELLIS VERDI '77
CONQUERS
MADISON AVENUE**

Strange Matter | The Other Dr. Ruth | Post Cards from the Past



M2
M3
M5

East Village
East Village
Greenwich Village
5 Avenue &
West 20 Street

GIFT BASKETS

BRAVO



SHIRT.



BULLSHIRT.

DAFFY'S





Whether the product is
KOSHER CHICKEN,
a **U.S. FIRST LADY**, or
THOROUGHbred RACING,
you can't get it out of your
mind when **ELLIS VERDI '77**
whispers the message.

BY DAVID E. NATHAN

SELLING THE **SHIRT** AND **BULLSHIRT**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIC WEEKS

The workplace of Ellis Verdi has no pictures of Hillary Clinton or other high-profile clients on the walls. There are no ADDYs and Clios, the cutesy trophies emblematic of advertising greatness. No framed magazine feature stories or collages of memorable print ads, either. And, as for client gifts, there's not a bottle of Grey Goose vodka or a matchbox-sized BMW in sight.

The space lacks the conspicuous signs of success you would expect in the office of the president and founder of DeVito/Verdi, a New York advertising powerhouse with \$200 million-plus in annual billings, 140 employees, a client roster that is the envy of the industry, and a reputation for smart, edgy, forward-thinking ads that resonate.

But this *is* Verdi's office—and the décor is just the way he wants it. His design choices reveal much about the man and the way he runs his company.

"I try to focus on the issues, problems, and challenges in front of me, not what we did in the past," the fifty-two-year-old explains. "You can always do better. I don't want to get too cozy or too comfortable about where we are."

Verdi would need to double the size of his office to display properly all the hardware his agency has collected in the last decade and a half. The American Association of Advertising Agencies has named D/V the

few summers ago, the One Club Gallery in New York hosted a retrospective of the advertising agency's work in honor of its first ten years.

"If you're not being smart and there's no surprise, there's no reason to advertise," Verdi says. "We believe in advertising that has a strong point of view and gets to the heart of the issue."

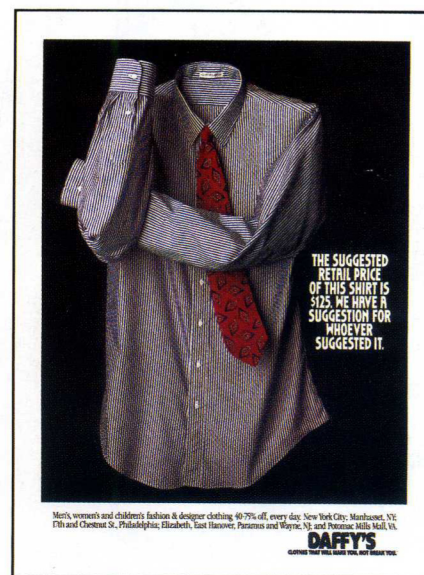
GUTSY FROM THE GET-GO

Just as his agency specializes in bucking standard practice, Verdi himself prefers the nontraditional route. Throughout his life, he has relied on his instincts rather than convention—and they have rarely failed him.

After graduating from Brandeis High on New York's Upper West Side in 1973, Verdi left the city, where he had lived most of his life, for Brandeis University. The tree-lined suburban campus was worlds away from the gritty, urban neighborhood he had always known.

"After high school, I felt I was ready to go out on my own in the world and leave New York," he says. "I was ready to challenge myself in a different environment."

At Brandeis, Verdi majored in political science. Outside the classroom, he joined some friends to organize on-campus screenings of first-run movies. Verdi was also a bit of a legend at the Castle for his unusual hobby—he kept two tropical fish tanks stocked with baby piranhas.



country's most creative agency six times in the last ten years. D/V has won all the big industry awards—ADDY, Clio, ANDY, Radio Mercury, Cannes, and One Show—many times over.

Verdi chooses to display the awards in the lobby, where they fill several shopping carts provided by a client, the large Midwest grocery chain Meijer. The message is unmistakable: Without the clients, there would be no awards.

D/V recently added Sports Authority to a list of clients that over the years has included BMW, Grey Goose, the American Civil Liberties Union, Office Depot, Legal Sea Foods, Mount Sinai Medical Center, National Association of Broadcasters, Sony, Canon, Circuit City, *People*, *Esquire*, Jackson Hewitt, Hotwire.com, CarMax, and many more.

The agency's work is considered so pioneering that some observers credit D/V for establishing a new genre of in-your-face advertising. A

"I grew up as a student, and I grew up socially," he recalls. "I found myself at Brandeis."

Verdi graduated without a clear sense of what he wanted to do, although he had a notion to go to law school. He moved back to New York, found a cheap apartment, and held a succession of uninteresting, short-term jobs.

He finally found something he enjoyed when he accepted a position as an assistant media planner at SSC&B, an ad agency. He later took a job with American Home Products, where he worked on the Woolite and Black Flag brands. Verdi's next move took him to Pepsi as marketing director for the company's diet brands. He later returned to the agency side at industry giant Grey Advertising.

In 1989, he made his boldest career move, bolting his comfortable job as a vice president at Grey for the great unknown. (In a delicious twist, D/V just beat out Grey for the \$100 million Sports Authority account.)

"I did not see myself progressing in that environment anymore," he remembers. "I always had this feeling that I could do better on my own."

He launched Ellis Verdi & Partners with no partners (so much for truth in advertising!), no office, and no solid sales leads. Verdi had only his stubborn conviction that he could marry the strategic and creative sides of the advertising business in a way that had not been done before.

He set up shop in his one-room apartment and began contacting potential clients, making as many as one hundred calls in a day. He blasted faxes all around town, once inadvertently sending the same fax hundreds of times to the same company. His girlfriend, Marcy (now his wife), answered the phone, making it appear as if Verdi & Partners were more than a one-man operation.

Finally, after eight months of calling and faxing, he got his first nibble. Allied Old English, a firm owned by fellow Brandeis graduate Fred Ross '67, wanted to more aggressively push its line of fruit spreads. Verdi joined forces with creative director John Follis, they developed some ideas the company liked, and newly named Follis & Verdi had its first client.

In a sign of things to come, the campaign was controversial (it poked fun at industry heavyweight Smucker's), generated media attention (a

clothier Daffy's (memorable ads included "Marry for love. Look like you married for money" and "Friends don't let friends pay retail") and Solgar (a vitamin ad showed a chewed-on pencil with text that read, "For too many New Yorkers, this is lunch").

Verdi and DeVito are the odd couple of New York advertising. They're both natives of the city, but the similarities end there. Verdi is tall, DeVito compact. Verdi is easygoing and approachable, DeVito combustible and intimidating. Verdi graduated from Brandeis, DeVito from SUNY-Farmingdale. Verdi handles the client side, DeVito takes care of the creative.

Since the beginning, the guiding principle of their partnership has been producing quality work. Even early in D/V's existence, when the agency could have used the business, Verdi rejected a \$16 million account because the client would not allow the agency the freedom to develop the right ads.

"Even back when I was making cold calls, I followed the mantra 'You're better defined by those clients you reject than those you take on,'" Verdi says. "We don't want to sacrifice our creative reputation just to grow the business."

An incident during the early days of their alliance confirmed for both Verdi and DeVito that the collaboration would endure. After successful presentations to two groups from South Street Seaport, Verdi

Hey You, In The Taxi.
Nice Shirt. You Could've Gotten
It For Less At Daffy's. But You're
Used To Being Taken For A Ride.

Daffy's, 17th & Chestnut.

Daffy's

"It is a constant challenge to make sure ads transmit something significant but also get attention . . . Using the actual strategy language in an ad typically results in very boring communications . . . This outdoor billboard dramatically illustrates the 80 percent off message . . . It fulfills the challenge and furthers the ultimate goal of building the client's business."

story in *Forbes* on the value of comparative advertising), and enhanced the product's visibility.

"I realized then," Verdi says, "that I could have an agency."

FELIX FINDS OSCAR

Perhaps the most important call he placed in those early years was to Sal DeVito, a rough-edged industry veteran who got his start in the business designing matchbook covers. After twenty-five years at ten different agencies, the out-of-work creative director told an *Adweek* columnist he was looking to join up with someone who had "brains and balls."

"Ellis was the only one to call," DeVito says. "He called, we chatted, and we gave it a shot."

In 1993, Follis left the firm and DeVito/Verdi was born. Soon after, the new alliance developed award-winning campaigns for discount

and DeVito shared their work with a third set of people representing the potential client.

"They started rewriting the copy and suggesting different visuals," DeVito says. "I looked at Ellis and we said, 'Let's go!' and we left. I knew then that I could count on him in combat. I don't think he has any fear. He'll do whatever has to be done."

"A lot of guys in the ad business can be kiss-ass people," DeVito says. "Ellis won't do that, no matter the client."

The story ended happily. A few days later, South Street Seaport called back and hired the agency.

D/V's early clients were located in New York, so the ads had a distinct, hard-edged voice appropriate for a New York audience. An ad for *TimeOut* magazine, for instance, read, "Our magazine is a lot like the average New Yorker. It'll tell you where you can go and what you can do with yourself." Another for Daffy's had a picture of two shirts with

A

It Takes An Even Tougher Man To Make A Kosher Chicken.

No chicken goes through more inspections than a kosher chicken. And no kosher chicken goes through more inspections than an Empire.

EMPIRE KOSHER CHICKEN

B

IS YOUR SPORTS MAGAZINE TRYING TO TAKE YOUR MIND OFF THE GAME?

Our focus is sports. And only real sports. That's what we promise. That's what we deliver. And that's why dedicated sports fans like you turn to our magazine, SportingNews.com and Sporting News Radio.

SportingNews

C

THE MAN ON THE LEFT IS 75 TIMES MORE LIKELY TO BE STOPPED BY THE POLICE WHILE DRIVING THAN THE MAN ON THE RIGHT.

It happens every day on America's highways. Police stop drivers based on their skin color rather than for the way they are driving. For example, in Florida 80% of those stopped and searched were black and Hispanic, while they constituted only 5% of all drivers. These humiliating and illegal searches are violations of the Constitution and must be fought. Help us defend your rights. Support the ACLU. To learn more and to send your Members of Congress a free fax go to www.aclu.org/racialprofiling.

american civil liberties union
125 Broad Street, 18th Floor, NY, NY 10004 www.aclu.org

D

Take away a woman's right to choose and she's left to take matters into her own hands. Please support keeping abortion safe and legal. 1 (888) 253-CHOICE. www.protectchoice.org. It's 19 to *para-cho* (see *para-cho* *choice*).

THE PRO-CHOICE PUBLIC EDUCATION PROJECT


E

F


The two old Patricia Pains sat on her mother's lap, unable to hear the gentle voice that tried to comfort her. Dead from birth, her life in Romania was lived in silence. But a month after undergoing cochlear implant surgery at Mount Sinai, the silence was filled with the sounds of a world Patricia never knew existed. "I feel like I've just given birth to this child for the second time," her mother said tearfully. "But this time she hears." 1-800-442-5242 • www.mountsinai.org. Another day, another breakthrough.

MOUNT SINAI

**WE TURNED
A CHILD WHO
COULDN'T HEAR INTO
A TYPICAL 2 YEAR
OLD WHO DOESN'T
LISTEN.**




G

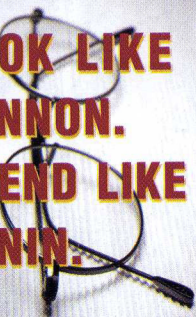


FOR TOO MANY NEW YORKERS, THIS IS LUNCH.

Solgar
It's A Tough Town. You Need A Tough Vitamin.



**LOOK LIKE
LENNON.
SPEND LIKE
LENIN.**



FOR EYES

THE STORE FOR PEOPLE WHO CAN'T SEE PAYING A LOT FOR GLASSES.

H

A: Empire Kosher Chicken

"I was desperately looking for a strategy that would differentiate this chicken from others among 'crossover' consumers—those who buy Perdue and other mainstream chickens but might be tempted by a better product and would be willing to pay a higher price . . . Everyone loved the ad we developed, but it was difficult to sell the concept to a committee of rabbis."

B: The Sporting News

"After studying competitors *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN [The Magazine]* and speaking to many readers, the *Sporting News* stood out as authentic to us . . . We thought an ad spoofing the *SI* swimsuit edition was a perfect way to juxtapose the *Sporting News* and its mission."

C: American Civil Liberties Union

"What makes this ad so effective is that the argument it makes is essentially 'air tight' (or as close as possible in advertising) . . . Originally, it was presented to [creative director] Sal [DeVito] as a black person on the left and a white person on the right. Adding the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Charles Manson as visuals makes the concept even more powerful."

D: Legal Sea Foods

"These street signs were constructed and erected by the agency next to the New England Aquarium . . . They are an example of the best of 'guerilla' marketing because they aren't just clever for the sake of being clever, they have a message: Legal Sea Foods has the freshest fish . . . No word yet on what the Aquarium thinks of the street signs."

E: The Pro-Choice Public Education Project

"To some people, the images of back-alley abortions are so strong that they can alienate, but it's necessary when the opposition has a very simple argument ['killing babies'] and a significant funding advantage . . . Additionally, kids today who did not fight for abortion rights take it for granted, so it helps to visualize the truth from the not-so-distant past."

F: Mount Sinai Medical Center

"This campaign uses real examples of successful outcomes to prove the value of Mount Sinai, which was facing possible closure . . . We relied on print and radio, mediums generally considered to be difficult forums to deliver emotional messages."

G: Solgar

"This campaign grew directly out of life in New York and many of the truths about how we eat and stress . . . An additional challenge was to develop long, skinny units that would work on the sides of buses . . . The campaign built a sizable lead for Solgar versus all other competitors."

H: For Eyes

"Not spending too much on glasses is a common theme, but when expressed in this way in local transit in a number of markets you have an effective breakthrough . . . The campaign helped boost business by double digits."

different price tags. "Shirt" appeared under the \$20 item, "Bullshirt" below the one costing \$68.

Over time, the agency branched out, luring national accounts and advocacy organizations, including the ACLU and Pro-Choice Public Education Project. Now more than three quarters of D/V's work is for clients outside the New York area.

A FIRST LADY'S CHOICE

While D/V spent the 1990s designing campaigns for companies that sold everything from cars to copiers and helping advocacy groups refine their messages for the public, the firm had not ventured into the venomous world of political advertising. That changed in 1999, when Verdi received a call from Hillary Clinton's office. The first lady was planning a run for the U.S. Senate in New York.

"Can you come to Washington to meet with Mrs. Clinton?" the caller requested.

"Sure! Where will we meet?" Verdi asked.

"The White House," the caller responded.

Verdi and several of his colleagues headed to the nation's capital a few days later. After the delegation met with some of the first lady's political team in a White House anteroom, she joined the group in the cinema for D/V's presentation.

Verdi led the presentation, sharing the agency's ideas about the campaign and the candidate. He typically can gauge the effectiveness of his pitch, but he could not get a read on this situation.

"I felt very good about it, but I just wasn't sure," Verdi recalls. "We weren't a political agency."

They were soon. With the endorsement of President Clinton—Verdi was told that the president "absolutely loved" D/V's work—they were hired.

"We were thrilled, but at the same time we were very concerned," Verdi says. "Political advertising is so different. The daily strategic challenges are unique."

Both the candidate and the agency were up to the challenges. Entrusted with developing ads to effectively position and launch Hillary Clinton's candidacy, D/V produced an ad that portrayed the candidate as a pioneer with a number of "firsts" to her credit. It concluded by saying, "Not *just* the first lady." D/V also created an ad comparing her opponent, state senator Rick Lazio, to an ostrich with his head in the sand. The ads were credited with helping the candidate win support among conservative upstate voters who traditionally voted Republican.

Clinton, of course, went on to win the race, and D/V later established a unit focused on political advertising. The agency worked on six different Senate races in 2004.

SAY WHAT?

D/V doesn't purposely develop ads to breed controversy, but its on-the-edge approach has put the agency in the spotlight frequently over the years. That's OK with Verdi. He knows that when an ad becomes the story, both the client and the agency win.



In 1997, playing on then mayor Rudy Giuliani's well-known penchant for self-promotion, D/V designed ads for the sides of city buses that touted *New York* magazine as "possibly the only good thing in New York Rudy hasn't taken credit for."

An infuriated Giuliani demanded that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, a quasi-governmental agency under his control, remove the ads immediately. *New York* magazine sued to have the ads restored, and lawyers argued the case all the way to the state Supreme Court. In a landmark decision affirming that advertising was covered under the free speech provisions of the First Amendment, New York's highest court ordered Giuliani to put the ads back up.

Newspapers and TV stations latched onto the story of the tough-talking, thin-skinned mayor of the nation's largest city going to court to protect his carefully crafted image. In the middle of it were Verdi and his up-and-coming agency that had the temerity to take on mighty Rudy.

Giuliani's loss proved to be a win for everyone else involved: *New York* magazine's newsstand sales jumped significantly and advertising

ultimately sign of respect in the ad world, D/V does not need to show work in advance and gets hired based on its reputation alone.

Clients seek out D/V not only because of the agency's ability to produce a compelling message, but also for its knack of devising creative ways to deliver it.

"Today there's a broader mix of ways to get to the customer," Verdi says. "People talk about 'new media.' Even 'old media' can be new again if used in the right way."

D/V produced an award-winning ad for thoroughbred racing for radio, an often-overlooked medium. In the spot, a voice mimicking a race call started by saying, "And they're off. Out of the gate is Dinner Date. Dinner Date starts strong. But here comes No Reservation, followed by Hours of Waiting." The spot concluded with, "For a better time, go to the track."

To promote a client's one-day holiday sale, D/V dropped hundreds of wallets outside a competitor's store. When curious shoppers picked up the wallets, they found nothing inside but a message on a slip of paper: "This

Possibly the only good thing in New York
Rudy hasn't taken credit for.

NEW YORK
The magazine for the center of the world.

reached an all-time high, while D/V reaffirmed its position as a brassy, provocative firm that delivered for its clients.

"Hitting a nerve with people is our job," Verdi says. "Sometimes it hits different people differently."

Several years earlier, Perdue Farms sued Empire Kosher Poultry, claiming trademark infringement after Verdi's agency designed an ad that tweaked Perdue pitchman Frank Perdue's trademark line "It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken."

Empire's ad showed Moses holding up a tablet above text that read, "It takes an even tougher man to make a kosher chicken."

"A lot of guys in the ad business can be kiss-ass people. Ellis won't do that, no matter the client."

Mental health advocates failed to find the humor in one of D/V's ads for Daffy's. The print piece featured a picture of a straitjacket. The text read, "If you're paying over \$100 for a shirt, may we suggest a jacket to go with it?"

Charging that the ad stigmatized the mentally ill, mental-health professionals demonstrated outside Daffy's stores and D/V's office. Demonstrators also filled a city block outside a New York industry awards show at which D/V captured several awards.

"What an entrée that turned out to be," Verdi says. "We were instantly the most-talked-about agency around."

A DIFFERENT DRUMROLL

Gone are the days when Verdi placed hundreds of cold calls a week to land customers. He receives the calls now, from potential clients wanting D/V to compete with other agencies for their business. Sometimes, in the

is how much money you need to walk out with new furniture today." The flip side of the paper promoted the client's deferred payment schedule.

As part of a campaign for Mount Sinai Medical Center, D/V developed print ads telling the story of a patient who was running in the New York Marathon a year after undergoing life-changing heart surgery. But instead of relying on traditional print vehicles, the agency placed posters in bus shelters along the marathon route. The accompanying copy made for a forceful message: "If you want to see what a repaired mitral valve looks like, be at the finish line."

"The ads were so creative and so different from what anyone else was doing," says Mount Sinai's Marianne Coughlin, who worked closely with D/V on the campaign. "We didn't have the budget for TV ads, but we overcame that by using Ellis's ideas about placement."

To escape the hundred-hour workweeks, constant travel, and round-the-clock client calls that are part of running an agency, Verdi enjoys traveling, scuba diving, and spending time with his family. Son Marshall, age seventeen, and daughter Jessica, thirteen, also serve as a focus group of two for some of D/V's new ad ideas.

"They'll say, 'That's lousy!' or 'That's great!'" Verdi says. "When you get older, you overthink it. The kids have a very good instinct for what works. They have a different way of seeing it."

Every few months, Verdi gets a call from a big advertising conglomerate or private-equity firm interested in purchasing D/V. The answer is always the same: No thanks.

"I've worked so hard to do it my way that I won't undo that at any price," Verdi says. "I don't think we can run the agency we want to run with outside ownership."

Verdi expects D/V to be winning clients and collecting awards for many years to come. Just don't look for any of the evidence in his office.

David E. Nathan is the director of development communications in the Office of Institutional Advancement at Brandeis.