

It's All About the WORK

Sweating for the shiver
down the spine

WANT TO CREATE GREAT WORK? THEN you have to hate advertising. You have to hate it with all your heart.

It's not that hard to do. We all know the majority of the work out there is nothing to be proud of. It's not smart or strategically based, and a lot of it is boring, outrageous for the sake of being outrageous, or simply clever wordplays that don't mean anything. The worst of it uses expensive talent or expensive production techniques to make up for its lack of ideas. There are so many ads out there that generate no reaction at all. They're not working, yet they cost the same as ads that do make an impact.

The sad part is, clients these days really want good work. But most agencies aren't doing it. The reason: It's too hard to do. It takes extra pain and sweat and time. There's so much work to be done by so few people, and the attitude becomes, "Let's just get it out the door."

No Ad Before Its Time

Great work takes longer; you have to kill a lot of good work in getting to it. You have to be willing to send it back again and again and again until it's truly breakthrough, and it's an arduous process to get to the core. At our agency, we often ask clients for deadline extensions, and when we get them, that extra week is always worth it.

Too many agencies have given up their creative reputations for the sake of building their business. They get bought and sold and bought and sold again, and in their quest for growth, they give up the one thing that mattered most: the creative product.

We feel fortunate that we're at a point where we still need to build our reputation. We need case histories, and that's all we can rely on. Money and all the other aspects that come with the business take a back seat to our reputation. It's all about the work.

We're striving to create the same kind of classic advertising that once rolled out of Doyle Dane Bernbach, Ally & Gargano, and Scali, McCabe, Sloves.

Hitting Them by Surprise

The old Perdue chicken ads, for example, were smart and strategic, with an edge and a bite that gave them memorability. Truly a big idea. The ads zapped consumers with a surprise — what we like to call the "hit" — that made people remember the message.

At the heart of all great ads lies a good concept and an undeniable truth about the product that doesn't have to be intellectualized.

When advertising is great, you definitely feel something. The little hairs on the back of your neck stand up a bit; you get a little shiver down the spine. You just feel it in your gut, and when it's right — oh, does it feel good. It's not unlike drugs: You get addicted, and you want more and more of that rush. Clients feel it, too. When it's right, they just go, "Wow." If they don't, we go on to the next ad.



Crown Jewels

We got that tingly feeling during our recent round of 15-second spots for Crown Books. The client had asked for price-based ads emphasizing the chain's discounts. We created a few of those, but we also came up with spots based on book titles that emphasize Crown's vast selection.

In one, a nerdy-looking guy gingerly touches the first Harley in a long row parked in front of a tough-looking bar and subsequently knocks them all over. *How We Die*, the title of a book by Sherwin B. Nuland, flashes on screen, followed by the tagline: "You name it, we've got it. Crown Books."

The spots are fresh, funny, and unexpected. They combine the price tagline, "When it comes to low prices, we wrote the book," with the selection story, and the combination is perfect.

We often end up running funny advertising, but we certainly never sit down to be funny. Nowadays, there's too much emphasis on funny rather than smart. Funny for the sake of funny — without a solid idea — is offensive and, worse, demeaning. The key behind great work is that it never forgets it's there to sell the product. If it can do so with some wit, that's a bonus.

Avoiding the Bull Market

Great advertising has to pass the "no bullshit" test. With this test, you say "bullshit" after reading an ad, and if it applies, the ad is dead. This eliminates puffery or bragging

or stupid statements like, "It's the best brand around."

Toyota's "Oh, What a Feeling" campaign never would have passed this inquest. It says nothing about the product and conveys no simple truths. Subaru's old "inexpensive and built to stay that way" tagline would pass, because it's a real idea.

Good research always helps, of course. We read it, and we use it, and then it's our job to convert it into advertising. We look at the advertising that's being done in the category and figure out how to separate from the pack.

If you start with a big idea, the overall theme and positioning will follow, as it did in our campaign for

Esquire magazine. Once we determined that it was the only intelligent men's magazine out there — unlike the others that seem to focus on tits and ass — the line "excite what's between your ears" just came. But we had to start with that thought first.

For Daffy's, an off-price apparel retailer, we created attention-getting ads with an attitude that emphasized the store's everyday low prices rather than boring consumers with endless rounds of price promotions. In one ad, the arms of a dress shirt are arranged to look like they're flipping the bird. "The suggested retail price of this shirt is \$125," the copy reads. "We have a suggestion for whoever suggested it."

Strait to the Heart

Probably the ad that garnered the most attention from that campaign was the one that featured a photo of a straitjacket and the tagline, "If you're paying over \$100 for a dress shirt, may we suggest a jacket to go with it."

In response to that one, we received visits from mental-health advocates and demonstrators, bomb threats, and lawsuit notices.

But we stood up for an ad that we believed in, and we believe it was one of the most effective ads Daffy's ever ran.

We're lucky that Daffy's has an adventurous attitude and gives us a lot of room to roam. They told us that if they were paying all that money for advertising, they wanted it to be noticed.

That creative freedom has spilled over into the media side of things, as well, prompting some fantastic collaborations between the two departments. During the holiday season, we placed billboards over Bloomingdale's that cautioned, "In this neighborhood, be sure to keep an eye on your wallet." We also placed outdoor ads in New Jersey that filled just 20 percent of the billboard, providing a dramatic setting for the tagline, "What 80 percent off actually looks like." Both of those campaigns would have been meaningless without the media buys.

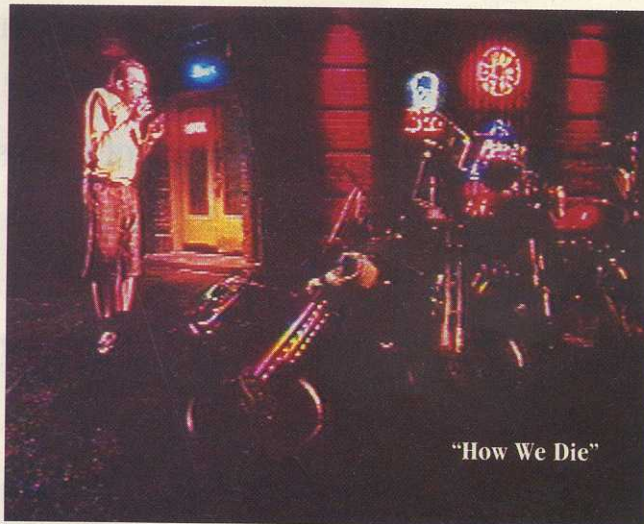
Simple Truths

We're able to do this because we're still small enough to be unencumbered by hierarchies and multiple tiers of management.

In our agency, we all sit on the same floor, work in the same conference rooms, brainstorm on the same projects. We work closely together, and that integration is potent, especially when you compare it to a large agency with 10 levels of management.

In the end, that shines through in our creative product. We really go deep inside ourselves to create great advertising, and we take this business very personally. Even though we hate it. **A**

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"May we suggest a
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Ellis Verdi.

