

FULLY UPDATED SIXTH EDITION  
INCLUDES CONTENT CREATION, SOCIAL AND DIGITAL

# HEY WHIPPLE, SQUEEZE

**THIS.**

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THE CLASSIC GUIDE TO  
CREATING GREAT ADVERTISING BY  
**LUKE SULLIVAN**

FOREWORD BY ANSELMO RAMOS

ADWEEK

WILEY



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WHIPPLE,  
SQUEEZE**

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*To my dear wife, Curlin,  
and our two grown-up sons,  
Reed and Preston*





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# FOREWORD

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When Luke Sullivan invited me to write the foreword to the sixth edition of *Hey Whipple, Squeeze This* I panicked.

Not because Mike Hughes or Alex Bogusky had written previous forewords for this classic guide to creating great ads. Or because lots of people in marketing and communications from all over the world would read it.

I panicked because Luke Sullivan would read it.

Luke Sullivan was a name I used to see usually followed by a series of numbers. It'd be something like this: "Luke Sullivan, 17, 18, 19, 47, 48, 56, 57, 80, 93, 94, 95, 110, 111, 130, 147, 158, 159." Those were all the page numbers showcasing Luke Sullivan's work on the One Show Annuals.

When I was a junior writer starting my career in São Paulo, I would spend all of my entry-level salary on imported, expensive advertising annuals instead of basic items like food and clothing. It was all Luke Sullivan's fault.

I would buy any One Show, Communications Arts, and D&AD annuals available for international shipping. Back then, it would take months to arrive.

I still remember the feeling of opening up the box, tearing off the plastic wrap, and taking a deep breath: "Ah, the new imported advertising annual smell." It was the smell of a foreign, unattainable world. A world where advertising was clever, witty, funny, inspiring, emotional, and groundbreaking. The opposite of that promotional radio spot waiting to be written.

I was so moved by that kind of work that one day I sat in front of my parents and said, "Mom, Dad, thanks for everything. I'm moving to Minneapolis."

"But why, son?"

“Because that’s the place doing the best advertising in the world right now. I’ll arrive at the airport, hail a cab, and say, ‘Take me to Fallon!’”

“Son, do you realize the average temperature in December is 20° Fahrenheit?”

Anyway, a couple of years later I moved to Miami.

My English was intermediate at best—I’m still learning every day.

During my entire first year in the US, I’d take daily English classes during my lunch break. I’d bring advertising annuals to Mary, my English teacher, and go over every single ad. I’d be especially interested in the work coming out of Fallon McElligott in Minneapolis. I still remember campaigns like The Episcopal Church, Federal Express, *Rolling Stone*, Hush Puppies, Jim Beam, Lee, and Porsche. I wanted to study the language and the thinking behind every headline and every long copy ad. The same name would show up over and over again on the credits: Luke Sullivan.

So, in a way, Luke Sullivan didn’t only teach me advertising but also English.

I first read *Hey Whipple, Squeeze This* in 1998. I remember thinking, How can someone teach advertising so well? How can someone write so well? How can someone be such an ad nerd?

This book should be required reading for every student, every agency, every client, and anyone remotely working in advertising. They should revoke your advertising license if you haven’t read it.

Because I’m a proud ad nerd, before writing this foreword I decided to read this book again 23 years later. I realized that, consciously or not, I still use a lot of the teachings from this book. It influenced and shaped my career forever. And probably some of my tweets, too.

It’s incredible how the world has changed from the first to the sixth edition. Before it was all about print, TV, radio, and billboard—the original four. Now it’s also about branded content, social media, mobile, tech, and every imaginable form of advertising.

That’s why this book is even more necessary now. Because the media landscape and consumer habits might change by the minute, but the principles of coming up with powerful ideas that build long-term brand love and generate results haven’t.

It starts with being passionate about what you do. Obsessed even.

Unfortunately, there’s a lot of cynicism in our industry right now. There are more pessimistic gurus than optimistic makers out there. And there’s a bunch of important senior ad people proclaiming advertising is over and that media-buying robots will take all our jobs.

The truth is, advertising is alive and well. Creativity has always been, and always will be, the ultimate competitive business advantage.

*Hey Whipple, Squeeze This* is the best guide to help you create the 5 percent of advertising out there that matters: the kind that doesn't suck.

As Luke reminds us, we're lucky to get paid to think, put our feet up, and talk about movies. On the worst days, your idea will get killed by a thousand cuts. (So what? You can always come up with a better one.) But on the best days, you'll influence pop culture, globalize icons, and change the behavior of whole continents. And every once in a while, you'll have an undeniable feeling that advertising is the world's best art form.

This is indeed a great business.

If you ever doubt, even for one second, the power of advertising, just grab this book and open it on a random page.

It will make you fall in love with advertising all over again.

It just happened to me.

Anselmo Ramos  
Founder, Creative Chairman, GUT





# PREFACE

---

This is my fantasy.

We open on a tidy suburban kitchen. Actually, it's a room off to the side of the kitchen, one with a washer and dryer. On the floor is a basket full of laundry. The camera closes in.

Out of the laundry pops the cutest little stuffed bear you've ever seen. He's pink and fluffy, he has a happy little face, and there's one sock stuck adorably to his left ear.

"Hi, I'm Snuggles, the fabric-softening bear. And I . . ."

The first bullet rips into Snuggles's stomach, blows out of his back in a blizzard of cotton entrails, and punches a fist-sized hole in the dryer behind. Snuggles grabs the side of the Rubbermaid laundry basket and sinks down, his plastic eyes rolling as he looks for the source of the gunfire.

Taking cover behind 1/16-inch of flexible acrylic rubber, Snuggles looks out of the basket's plastic mesh and into the living room. He sees nothing. The dining room. Nothing.

Snuggles is easing over the backside of the basket when the second shot takes his head off at the neck. His body lands on top of the laundry, which is remarkably soft and fluffy. Fade to black.

We open on a woman in a bathroom, clad in an apron and wielding a brush, poised to clean her toilet bowl. She opens the lid.

But wait. What's this? It's a little man in a boat, floating above the sparkling waters of Lake Porcelain. Everything looks clean already!

With a tip of his teeny hat, he introduces himself. "I'm the Ty-D-Bowl Man, and I . . ."

Both hat and hand disappear in a red mist as the first bullet screams through and blows a hole in the curved toilet wall behind Ty-D-Bowl Man.

Water begins to pour out on the floor as the woman screams and dives for cover in the tub.

Ty-D-Bowl Man scrambles out of the bowl, but when he climbs onto the big silver lever, it gives way, dropping him back into the swirling waters of the flushing toilet. We get two more glimpses of his face as he orbits around, once, twice, then down to his final reward.

We open on a grocery store, where we see Mr. Whipple, scolding a group of ladies for squeezing some toilet paper. The first shot is high and wide, shattering a jar of mayonnaise. . . .





*Figure 1.1 Back when Mr. Whipple's commercials aired, we had to WALK to the television to turn down the sound.*

—1—

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF WHY EVERYBODY HATES ADVERTISING

*AND WHY YOU SHOULD TRY TO GET A JOB THERE.*

**I GREW UP POINTING A FINGER GUN** at Mr. Whipple. You probably don't know him, but he was this irritating guy who kept interrupting my favorite television shows back in the day.

He'd appear uninvited on my TV, looking over the top of his glasses and pursing his lips at the ladies in his grocery store. Two middle-aged women, presumably with high school or college degrees, would be standing in the aisle squeezing rolls of toilet paper. Whipple would wag his finger and primly scold, "Please don't squeeze the Charmin!" After the ladies scurried away, he'd give the rolls a few furtive squeezes himself.

Oh, they were such bad commercials. The thing is, I'd wager if the Whipple campaign aired today, there would be a hundred different parodies on YouTube tomorrow. But back then? All we had was a volume knob. Then VCRs came along and later DVRs, and the fast-forward buttons became our defense. We can now just tell Whipple to shut the hell up, turn him off, and go get our entertainment from any number of other platforms and devices.

To be fair, Procter & Gamble's Charmin commercials weren't the worst thing that ever aired on television. They had a concept, although contrived, and a brand image, although irritating—even to an eighth grader.

If it were just me who hated Whipple's commercials, well, I might shrug it off. But the more I read about the campaign, the more consensus I discovered. In Martin Mayer's book *Whatever Happened to Madison Avenue?* I found this:

[Charmin's Whipple was] one of the most disliked . . . television commercials of the 1970s. [E]verybody thought "Please don't squeeze the Charmin" was stupid and it ranked last in believability in all the commercials studied for a period of years. . . .<sup>1</sup>

In a book called *The New How to Advertise*, I found:

When asked which campaigns they most disliked, consumers convicted Mr. Whipple . . . Charmin may have not been popular advertising, but it was number one in sales.<sup>2</sup>

And there is the crux of the problem. The mystery: how did Whipple's commercials sell so much toilet paper?

These shrill little interruptions that irritated nearly everyone, that were used as fodder for Johnny Carson on late-night TV, sold toilet paper by the ton. How? Even if you figure that part out, the question then becomes, why? Why would you irritate your buying public with a twittering, pursed-lipped grocer when cold, hard research told you everybody hated him? I don't get it.

Apparently, even the agency that created him didn't get it. Advertising veteran John Lyons, worked at Charmin's agency when they were trying to figure out what to do with Whipple.

I was assigned to assassinate Mr. Whipple. Some of New York's best hit teams before me had tried and failed. "Killing Whipple" was an ongoing mission at Benton & Bowles. The agency that created him was determined to kill him. But the question was how to knock off a man with 15 lives, one for every year that the . . . campaign had been running at the time.<sup>3</sup>

No idea he came up with ever replaced Whipple, Lyons noted. Whipple remained for years as one of advertising's most bulletproof personalities.

As well he should have. He was selling literally billions of rolls of toilet paper. *Billions*. In 1975, a survey listed Whipple's as the second-most-recognized face in America, right behind that of Richard Nixon. When Benton & Bowles's creative director, Al Hampel, took Whipple (actor Dick Wilson) to dinner one night in New York City, he said, "It was as if Robert Redford walked into the place. Even the waiters asked for autographs."

So on one hand, you had research telling you customers hated these repetitive, schmaltzy, cornball commercials. And on the other hand, you had Whipple signing autographs at the Four Seasons.

It was as if the whole scenario had come out of the 1940s. In Frederick Wakeman's 1946 novel *The Hucksters*, this was how advertising worked. In the middle of a meeting, the client spat on the conference room table and said, "You have just seen me do a disgusting thing. Ugly word, spit. But you'll always remember what I just did."<sup>4</sup>

The account executive in the novel took the lesson, later musing, "It was working like magic. The more you irritated them with repetitious commercials, the more soap they bought."<sup>5</sup>

With 504 different Whipple toilet tissue commercials airing from 1964 through 1990, Procter & Gamble certainly "irritated them with repetitious commercials." And it indeed "worked like magic." Procter & Gamble knew what it was doing. Yet I remain troubled by Whipple. What vexes me so about this old grocer? This is the question that led me to write this book.

What troubles me about Whipple is . . . he isn't *good*. As an idea, Whipple isn't any damn good.

He may have been an effective salesman (billions of rolls sold). He may have been a strong brand image. (He knocked Scott tissues out of the number one spot.) But it all comes down to this: if I had created Mr. Whipple, I don't think I could tell my son with a straight face what I did at the office. "Well, son, you see, Whipple tells the lady shoppers not to squeeze the Charmin, but then, then he squeezes it *himself*. . . . Hey, wait, come back."

As an idea, Whipple isn't good. To those who defend the campaign based on sales, I ask, would you also spit on the table to get my attention? It would work, but would you? An eloquent gentleman named Norman Berry, once a creative director at Ogilvy & Mather, put it this way:

I'm appalled by those who [judge] advertising exclusively on the basis of sales. That isn't enough. Of course, advertising must sell. By any definition it is lousy advertising if it doesn't. But if sales are achieved with work which is in bad taste or is intellectual garbage, it shouldn't be applauded no matter how much it sells. Offensive, dull, abrasive, stupid advertising is bad for the entire industry and bad for business as a whole. It is why the public perception of advertising is going down in this country.<sup>6</sup>

Berry may well have been thinking of Mr. Whipple when he made that comment in the early 1980s. With every passing year, newer and more virulent strains of vapidness have been created. Writer Fran Lebowitz may well have been watching TV when she tweeted, "No matter how cynical I get, it's impossible to keep up."

Certainly, the viewing public is cynical about our business, due almost entirely to this parade of idiots we've sent onto their screens. Every year, as long as I've been in advertising, Gallup publishes its poll of most and least trusted professions. And every year, advertising practitioners trade last or second-to-last place with used car salespeople and members of Congress.

It reminds me of a paragraph I plucked from our office bulletin board, one of those emailed curiosities that makes its way around corporate America:

Dear Ann: I have a problem. I have two brothers. One brother is in advertising. The other was put to death in the electric chair for first-degree murder. My mother died from insanity when I was three. My two sisters are prostitutes, and my father sells crack to handicapped elementary school students. Recently, I met a girl who was just released from a reformatory where she served time for killing her puppy with a ball-peen hammer, and I want to marry her. My problem is, should I tell her about my brother who is in advertising? Signed, Anonymous

---

### THE 1950S: WHEN EVEN X-ACTO BLADES WERE DULL.

My problem with Whipple (effective sales, grating execution) isn't a new one. Years ago, it occurred to a gentleman named William Bernbach that a commercial needn't sacrifice wit, grace, or intelligence to sell something. And when he set out to prove it, something wonderful happened.

But we'll get to Mr. Bernbach in a minute. Before he showed up, a lot had already happened.

In the 1950s, the national audience was in the palm of the ad industry's hand. Anything advertising said, people heard. Television was brand-new, "clutter" didn't exist, and pretty much anything that showed up in the strange, foggy little screen was kinda cool.

Author Ted Bell wrote, "There was a time when the whole country sat down and watched 'The Ed Sullivan Show' all the way through. To sell something, you could go on 'The Ed Sullivan Show' and count on everybody seeing your message."<sup>7</sup>

World War II was over, people had money, and America's manufacturers had retooled to market the luxuries of life in Levittown. But as the economy boomed, so too did the country's business landscape. Soon there was more than one big brand of aspirin, more than two soft drinks,



more than three brands of cars to choose from. And advertising agencies had to do more than just get film in the can and cab it over to Rockefeller Center before “The Colgate Comedy Hour” aired.

They had to convince viewers their product was *the best in its category*, and modern advertising as we know it was born.

On its heels came the concept of the *unique selling proposition*, a term coined by writer Rosser Reeves in the 1950s and one that still has some merit. It was a simple, if ham-handed, notion: “buy this product, and you will get this specific benefit.” The benefit had to be one the competition either could not or did not offer, hence the unique part.

This notion was perhaps best exemplified by Reeves’s aspirin commercials, in which a headful of pounding cartoon hammers could be relieved “fast, fast, fast” only by Anacin. Reeves also let us know that because of the unique candy coating, M&M’s were the candy that “melts in your mouth, not in your hand.”

Had the TV and business landscape remained the same, perhaps simply delineating the differences between one brand and another would suffice today. But then came “advertising clutter”: a brand explosion that lined the nation’s grocery shelves with tens of thousands of logos and packed every episode of “I Dream of Jeannie” with commercials for me-too products.

Then, in response to the clutter came “the wall,” which was the perceptual filter we put up to protect ourselves from this tsunami of product information. Many products were at parity. Try as agencies might to find some unique angle, in the end, most soap was soap and most beer was beer.

Enter the Creative Revolution and a guy named Bill Bernbach, who said, “It’s not just what you say that stirs people. It’s the way you say it.”

---

### **“WHAT?! WE DON’T HAVE TO SUCK?!”**

Bernbach founded his New York agency, Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB), on the then-radical notion that customers aren’t nitwits who need to be fooled or lectured or hammered into listening to a client’s sales message:

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 to you if you’re not interesting, and you won’t be interesting unless you say things imaginatively, originally, freshly.<sup>8</sup>

This was the classic Bernbach paradigm. From all the advertising texts, articles, speeches, and awards annuals I've read over my years in advertising, everything that's any good about this business seems to trace its heritage back to this man, William Bernbach. And when his agency landed a couple of highly visible national accounts, including Volkswagen and Alka-Seltzer, he brought advertising into a new era.

Smart agencies and clients everywhere saw for themselves advertising didn't have to embarrass itself to make a cash register ring. The national TV audience was eating it up. Viewers couldn't wait for the next airing of VW's "Funeral" or Alka-Seltzer's "Spicy meatball." The first shots of the Creative Revolution of the 1960s had been fired.\*

How marvelous to have actually been there when DDB art director Helmut Krone laid out one of the very first Volkswagen ads (Figure 1.2): a black-and-white picture of the simple car, no women draped over the fender, no mansion in the background, and a two-word headline: "Think small."

Maybe this ad doesn't seem earth-shattering now; we've all seen our share of great advertising. But remember, DDB first did this when other car companies were running headlines such as "Blue ribbon beauty that's stealing the thunder from the high-priced cars!" and "Chevrolet's three new engines put new fun under your foot and a great big grin on your face!" Volkswagen's was a totally new voice.

As the 1960s progressed, the Creative Revolution seemed to be successful, and everything was just hunky-stinkin'-dory for a while. Then came the 1970s. The tightening economy had middle managers everywhere scared.

And the party ended as quickly as it had begun.

---

## THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK.

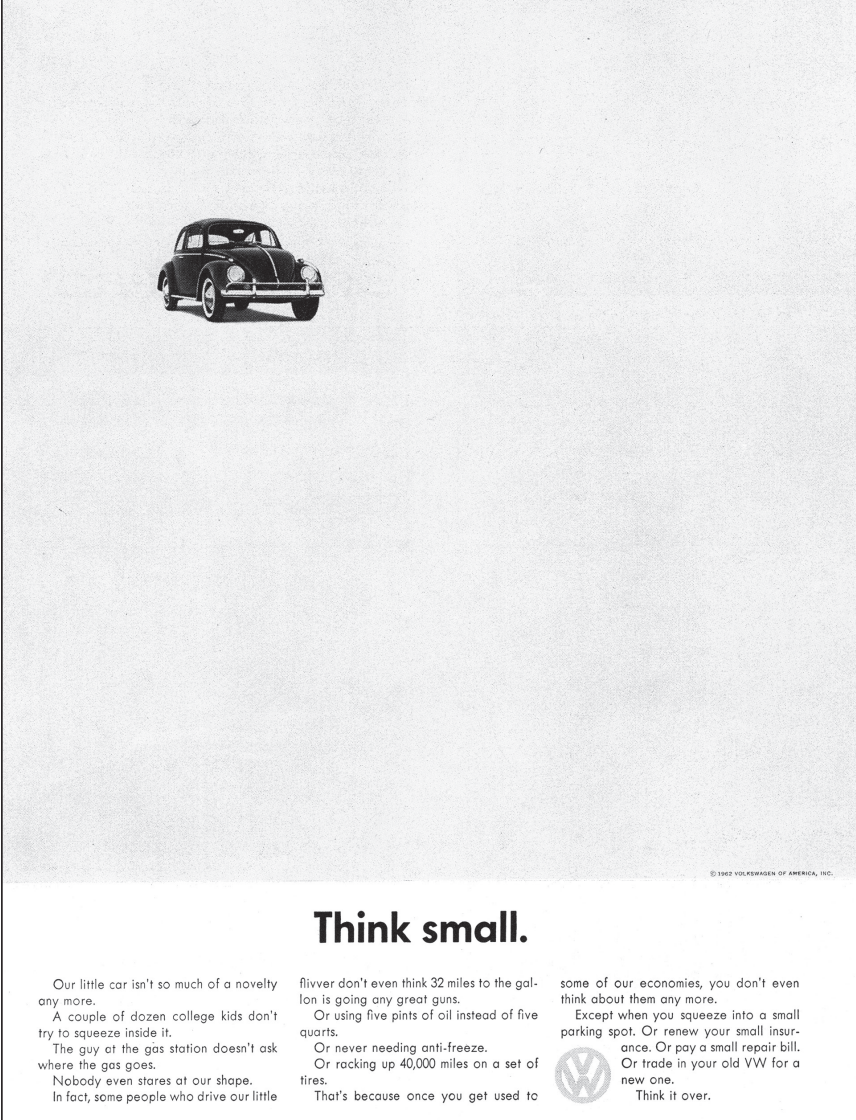
The new gods wore suits and came bearing calculators. They seemed to say, "Enough of this creativity krap-ola, my little scribblers. We're here to meet the client's numbers. Put 'new' in that headline. Drop that concept and pick up an adjective: crunch-a-licious, flavor-iffic, I don't care. The client's coming up the elevator. Chop-chop."

In *Corporate Report*, columnist William Souder wrote:

Creative departments were reined in. New ads were pretested in focus groups, and subsequent audience-penetration and consumer-awareness

---

\*You can study these two seminal commercials and many other great ads from this era on YouTube as well as in Larry Dubrow's *The Creative Revolution, When Advertising Tried Harder* (New York: Friendly Press, 1984).




**Think small.**

Our little car isn't so much of a novelty any more.  
 A couple of dozen college kids don't try to squeeze inside it.  
 The guy at the gas station doesn't ask where the gas goes.  
 Nobody even stares at our shape.  
 In fact, some people who drive our little

flivver don't even think 32 miles to the gallon is going any great guns.  
 Or using five pints of oil instead of five quarts.  
 Or never needing anti-freeze.  
 Or racking up 40,000 miles on a set of tires.  
 That's because once you get used to

some of our economies, you don't even think about them any more.  
 Except when you squeeze into a small parking spot. Or renew your small insurance. Or pay a small repair bill. Or trade in your old VW for a new one.  
 Think it over.



© 1962 VOLKSWAGEN OF AMERICA, INC.

Figure 1.2 Doyle Dane Bernbach's David, about to take on Goliath.

quotients were numbingly monitored. It seemed with enough repetition, even the most strident ad campaigns could bore through to the public consciousness. Advertising turned shrill. People hated Mr. Whipple, but bought Charmin anyway. It was Wisk for Ring-Around-the-Collar and Sanka for your jangled nerves.<sup>9</sup>

And so after a decade full of brilliant, successful examples such as Volkswagen, Avis, Polaroid, and Chivas Regal, the pendulum swung back to the dictums of research. The industry returned to the blaring jingles and crass gimmickry of previous decades. The wolf was at the door again—wearing a suit. It was as if all the agencies were run by purse-lipped nuns from some Catholic school. But instead of whacking students with rulers, these Madison Avenue schoolmarms whacked creatives with rolled-up research reports like “Burke Scores,” “Starch Readership Numbers,” and a whole bunch of other useless intellectual nonsense.

Creativity was gleefully declared dead, at least by the fat agencies that had never been able to come up with an original thought in the first place. And in came the next new thing—*positioning*.

“Advertising is entering an era where strategy is king,” wrote the originators of the term *positioning*, Al Ries and Jack Trout. “Just as the me-too products killed the product era, the me-too companies killed the image advertising era.”<sup>10</sup>

Part of the positioning paradigm was the notion that the average person’s head has a finite amount of space to categorize products. There’s room for maybe three. If your product isn’t in one of those slots, you must de-position a competitor in order for a different product to take its place. 7UP’s classic campaign from the 1960s remains a good example. Instead of positioning it as a clear soft drink with a lemon-lime flavor, 7UP took on the big three brown colas by positioning itself as “The Uncola.”

Ted Morgan explained positioning this way: “Essentially, it’s like finding a seat on a crowded bus. You look at the marketplace. You see what vacancy there is. You build your campaign to position your product in that vacancy. If you do it right, the strap-hangers won’t be able to grab your seat.”<sup>11</sup> As you might agree, Ries and Trout’s concept of positioning is valid and useful.

Not surprisingly, advertisers fairly tipped over the positioning bandwagon climbing on. But then a funny thing happened.

As skillfully as Madison Avenue’s big agencies applied its principles, positioning by itself didn’t magically move products, at least not as consistently as advertisers had hoped. Someone could have a marvelous idea for positioning a product, but if the commercials stank up the joint, sales records were rarely broken.

---

“Historians and archeologists will one day discover that the ads of our time are the richest, most faithful daily reflections any society ever made of its whole range of activities.”

—Marshall McLuhan

---

Good advertising, it has been said, builds sales. But great advertising builds factories. And in this writer's opinion, the "great" that was missing from the positioning paradigm was the original alchemy brewed by Bernbach.

"You can say the right thing about a product and nobody will listen," said Bernbach (long before the advent of positioning). "But you've got to say it in such a way people will feel it in their gut. Because if they don't feel it, nothing will happen." He went on to say, "The more intellectual you grow, the more you lose the great intuitive skills that really touch and move people."<sup>12</sup>

Such was the state of the business when I joined its ranks way back in 1979. What's weird is how the battle between these opposing forces of hot creativity and cold research rages to this hour. And it makes for an interesting day at the office.

As John Ward of England's B&B Dorland noted, "Advertising is a craft executed by people who aspire to be artists but is assessed by those who aspire to be scientists. I cannot imagine any human relationship more perfectly designed to produce total mayhem."<sup>13</sup>

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### **PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG HACK.**

When I was in seventh grade, I noticed something about the ads for cereal on TV. (Remember, this was before the Federal Trade Commission forced manufacturers to call these sugary puffs of crunchy air "part of a complete breakfast.") I noticed the cereals were looking more and more like candy. There were flocks of leprechauns or birds or bees flying around the bowl, dusting sparkles of sugar over the cereal or ladling on gooey rivers of chocolate-flavored coating. The food value of the product seemed to get less and less important until it was finally stuffed into the trunk of the car and sugar moved into the driver's seat. It was all about sugar.

One morning in study hall, I drew this little progression (Figure 1.3), calling it "History of a Cereal Box."

I was interested in the advertising I saw on TV but never thought I'd take it up as a career. I liked to draw, make comic books, and doodle with words and pictures. But when I was a poor college student, all I was sure of was I wanted to be rich. I went into the pre-med program, but the first grade on my college transcript (chemistry) was a big, fat, radioactive F. I reconsidered.

# History OF A Cereal Box

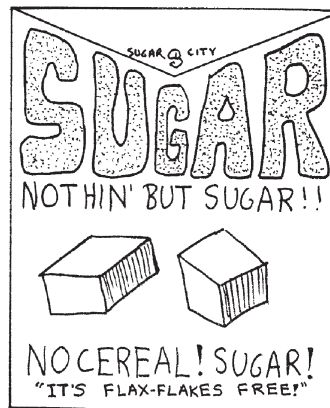
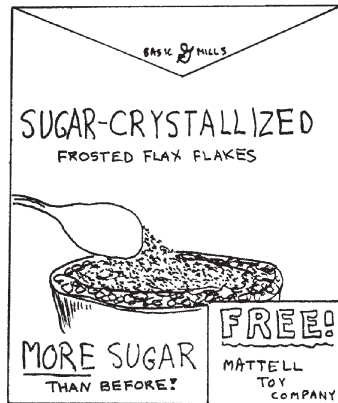
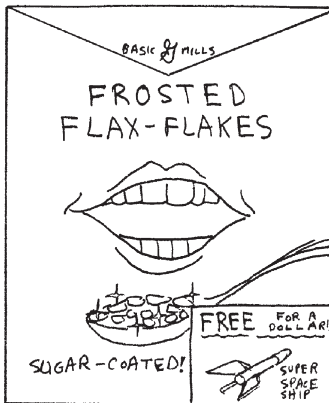
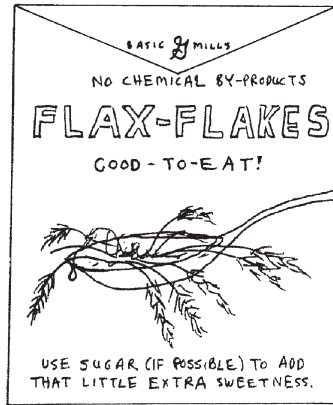


Figure 1.3 When I was 12, I was appalled by the stupidity of all the cereal commercials selling sugar and drew this progression of cereal boxes.



I majored in psychology. But after college I couldn't find any businesses on Lake Street in Minneapolis that were hiring skinny chain-smokers who could explain the relative virtues of scheduled versus random reinforcement in behaviorist theory. I joined a construction crew.

When the opportunity to be an editor/typesetter/ad salesperson for a small neighborhood newspaper came along, I took it, at a salary of \$80 every two weeks. (Thinking back, I believe I deserved \$85.) But the idea of sitting at a desk and using words as a career was intoxicating. Of all my duties at the little newspaper, I found selling ads and putting them together were the most interesting.

For the next year and a half, I hovered around the edges of the advertising industry. I did pasteup for another small newsweekly and then put in a long and dreary stint as a typesetter in the ad department of a large department store. It was there, during a break from setting type about "thick and thirsty cotton bath towels: \$9.99," I first came upon a book featuring the winners of a local advertising awards show.

I was bowled over by the work I saw there—mostly campaigns by Tom McElligott and Ron Anderson from Bozell & Jacobs's Minneapolis office. Their ads didn't say "thick and thirsty cotton bath towels." They were funny or they were serious—startling sometimes—but they were always intelligent.

Reading one of their ads felt like I'd just met a very likable person at a bus stop. He's smart, he's funny, he doesn't talk about himself. Turns out he's a salesman. And he's selling . . . ? Well, wouldn't you know it, I've been thinking about buying one of those. Maybe I'll give you a call. Bye. Walking away, you think, nice enough fella. And the way he said things was so . . . interesting.

Through a contact, I managed to get a foot in the door at Bozell. What finally got me hired wasn't my awful little portfolio. What did it was an interview with McElligott—a sweaty little interrogation I attended wearing my shiny, wide, 1978 tie and where I said "I see" about a hundred times. Tom later told me it was my clearly evident enthusiasm that finally convinced him to take a chance on me. That and my promise to put in 60-hour weeks writing the brochures and other scraps that fell off his plate.

Tom hired me as a copywriter in January 1979. He didn't have much work for me during that first month, so he parked me in a conference room with a three-foot-tall stack of books full of the best advertising in the world: the One Show and *Communication Arts* awards annuals. He told me to read them. "Read them all."

He called them “the graduate school of advertising.” I think he was right, and I say the same thing to students trying to get into the business today. Study as much award-winning advertising as you can and read, learn, and memorize. Yes, this is a business where we try to break rules, but as T. S. Eliot said, “It’s not wise to violate the rules until you know how to observe them.”

As hard as I studied those awards annuals, most of the work I did that first year wasn’t very good. In fact, it stunk. If the truth be known, those early ads of mine were so bad, to describe them accurately I have to quote from Edgar Allan Poe: “A nearly liquid mass of loathsome, detestable putridity.”

But don’t take my word for it. Here’s my very first ad. Just look at Figure 1.4 (for as long as you’re able): a dull little ad that doesn’t so much revolve around an overused play on the word *interest* as it limps.

Rumor has it they’re still using my first ad at poison control centers to induce vomiting. (“*Come on now, Jimmy. We know you ate all of your grandma’s pills and that’s why you have to look at Luke’s bank ad.*”)

The point is, if you’re like me, you might have a slow beginning. Even my friend Bob Barrie’s first ad was terrible. Bob is arguably one of the best art directors in the history of advertising. But his first ad? The boring, flat-footed little headline read: “Win A Boat.” We used to give Bob so much grief about that, it became his hallway nickname: “Hey, Win-A-Boat, we’re goin’ to lunch. You comin’?”

There will come a time when you’ll just start to get it. When you’ll no longer waste time traipsing down dead ends or rattling the knobs of doors best left locked. You’ll just start to get it. And suddenly, the ideas coming out of your office will bear the mark of somebody who knows what the hell they’re doing.

Along the way, though, it helps to study how more experienced people have tackled the same problems you’ll soon face. About mentors, Helmut Krone said:

I asked one of our young writers recently, which was more important: Doing your own thing or making the ad as good as it can be? The answer was “Doing my own thing.” I disagree violently with that. I’d like to pose a new idea for our age: “Until you’ve got a better answer, you copy.” I copied [famous Doyle Dane art director] Bob Gage for five years.<sup>14</sup>

The question is, who are you going to copy while you learn the craft? Whipple? For all the wincing his commercials caused, they worked. A lot of people at Procter & Gamble sent kids through college on Whipple’s nickel. And these people can prove it; they have charts and everything.



# INVESTORS. THIS SHOULD ATTRACT YOUR INTEREST.

We'll admit, up till now, Savings & Loans have been able to offer you that one-quarter percent more interest. But now, because the Federal Reserve Bank has amended its law, that's all changed.

Now we can offer you the *same* interest rate as any Savings & Loan when the Federal rate is 9% or more on a 26-week certificate.

And with a minimum deposit of \$10,000, you have a risk-free way of capitalizing on the highest interest rate allowed by law: 9.437%\*. No other bank, no other Savings & Loan can offer you a higher rate.

Ask about it. It's our Investor Certificate.

We'll  
take the time  
to know  
you

\*Interest rate week of April 2.  
\*Federal regulations prohibit the compounding of interest during the term of non-negotiable deposits of \$10,000 or more.  
†Substantial penalty for early withdrawal.

## First Savings Bank of Mankato

Member F.D.I.C.  
© 1979 Bank Systems, Inc.

Figure 1.4 My first ad. (I know . . . I knnooww.)

Bill Bernbach wasn't a fan of charts:

However much we would like advertising to be a science—because life would be simpler that way—the fact is that it is not. It is a subtle, ever-changing art, defying formularization, flowering on freshness and

withering on imitation; what was effective one day, for that very reason, will not be effective the next, because it has lost the maximum impact of originality.<sup>15</sup>

There is a fork in the road here. Mr. Bernbach's path is the one I invite you to come down. It leads to the same place—enduring brands and market leadership—but it gets there without costing anybody their dignity. You won't have to apologize to the neighbors for creating that irritating interruption of their sitcom last night. You won't have to explain anything. In fact, all most people will want to know is, "That was so cool. How'd you come up with it?"

This other road has its own rules, if we can call them that—rules first articulated years ago by Mr. Bernbach and his team of pioneers, including Bob Levenson, John Noble, Phyllis Robinson, Julian Koenig, and Helmut Krone.

Some may say my allegiance to the famous DDB School will date everything I have to say in this book. Perhaps. Yet a quick glance through their classic Volkswagen ads from the 1960s convinces me the soul of a great idea hasn't changed in these years.\*

So, with a tip of my hat to those pioneers of brilliant advertising, I offer the ideas in this book. They are the opinions of one writer and the gathered wisdom of smart people I met along the way during a career of writing, selling, and producing ideas for a wide variety of clients. God knows, they aren't rules. As Hall of Fame copywriter Ed McCabe once said, "I have no use for rules. They only rule out the brilliant exception."

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\*Perhaps the best collection of VW advertisements is a small book edited by the famous copywriter David Abbott, *Remember Those Great Volkswagen Ads?* (Holland: European Illustration, 1982).



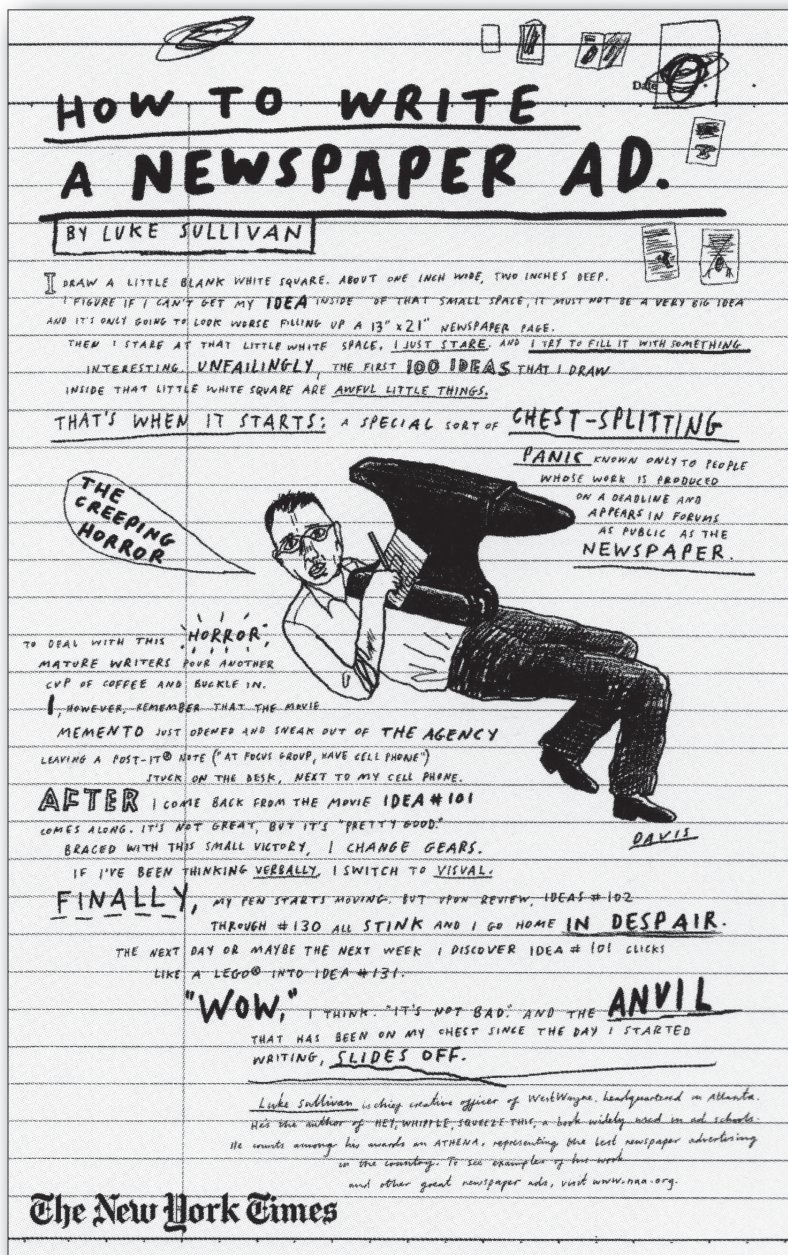


Figure 2.1 The Martin Agency asked me to contribute my creative process to a series of ads they made on behalf of the National Newspaper Association.

–2–

## THE CREATIVE PROCESS

*OR, WHY IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO EXPLAIN WHAT  
WE DO TO OUR PARENTS.*

**AS AN EMPLOYEE IN AN AGENCY** creative department, you will spend most of your time with your feet up on a desk working on an idea. Across the desk, also with their feet up, will be your partner—in my case, an art director. And my art director will likely want to talk about movies.

In fact, if the truth be known, you will spend a large part of your career with your feet up talking about movies.

The brief is approved, the work is due in two days, the pressure's building, and your muse is sleeping it off a drunk behind a dumpster somewhere and your pen lies useless. So, you talk about movies.

That's when the project manager comes by. Project managers stay on top of a job as it moves through the agency. This means they also stay on top of *you*. They'll come by to remind you of the horrid things that happen to snail-assed creative people who don't come through with the goods on time.

So, you try to get your pen moving. And you begin to work. And working, in this business, means staring at your partner's shoes.

That's what I did from 9:00 to 5:00 for almost 35 years—staring at the bottom of the disgusting sneakers on the feet of my partner, parked on the desk across from *my* disgusting sneakers. This is the sum and substance of life at an agency.

In movies, they almost never capture this simple, dull, workday reality of life as a creative person. Don't get me wrong; it's not an easy job. In fact, some days it's almost painful coming up with good ideas. As author Red Smith said, "There's nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter, open your veins, and bleed."<sup>1</sup> But from the way it looks on TV, in series like "Mad Men," creative people solve complicated marketing problems in between cigarettes, cocktails, and office affairs.

But this isn't what agencies are like—at least not the five or six places where I worked. Again, don't get me wrong. An ad agency isn't like a bank or an insurance company. There's a certain amount of *joie de vivre* in an agency's atmosphere.

This isn't surprising. Here you have a tight-knit group of young people, many of them making big salaries just for sittin' around with their feet up, solving marketing problems. And talking about movies.

It's a great job because you'll never get bored. One week you'll be knee-deep in the complexities of the financial business, selling market-indexed annuities. The next, you're touring a dog food factory asking about the difference between a "kibble" and a "bit." You'll learn about the business *of* business by studying the operations of hundreds of different kinds of enterprises.

The movies and television also portray advertising as a schlocky business—a parasitic lamprey that dangles from the belly of the business beast. A sort of side business that doesn't really manufacture anything in its own right, where it's all flash over substance and silver-tongued salespeople pitch snake oil to a bovine public, sandblast their wallets, and make the early train for Long Island.

Ten minutes of work at a real agency should be enough to convince even the most cynical that an agency's involvement in a client's business is anything but superficial. At a good agency, every cubicle on every floor is occupied by someone intensely involved in improving the client's day-to-day business, shepherding its assets more wisely, sharpening its business focus, widening its market, improving its products, or creating new ones.

Ten minutes of work at a real agency should be enough to convince a cynic you can't sell a product to someone who has no need for it. That you can't sustain a business by selling a product to people who can't afford it. And that good advertising is about the worst thing that can happen to a bad product. (Good advertising gets the word out, people try the product, then their word gets out—"This product sucks"—curtain falls.)



Advertising isn't just some mutant offspring of capitalism. It isn't a bunch of Red-Bull guzzlers dreaming up clever things to say about products. Advertising is one of the main gears in the machinery of a huge economy, responsible in great part for creating and selling products that contribute to one of the highest standards of living the world has ever seen. Like it or not, advertising's a key ingredient in a competitive economy and has created a stable place for itself in the global business landscape. It's now a mature industry, and for most companies, a business necessity.

Why most of it totally *blows chunks*, well, that remains a mystery.

Carl Ally, founder of one of the great agencies of the 1970s, had a theory about why most advertising stinks: "There's a tiny percentage of all the work that's great and a tiny percentage that's lousy. But most of the work—well, it's just there. That's no knock on advertising. How many great restaurants are there? Most aren't good or bad, they're just adequate. The fact is excellence is tough to achieve in any field."<sup>2</sup>

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## WHY NOBODY EVER CHOOSES BRAND X.

There comes a point when you can't talk about movies anymore and you actually have to get some work done.

You are faced with a blank slate, and in a fixed amount of time you must fill it with something interesting enough to be remembered by a customer who, in the course of a day, will see thousands of other ad messages.

You are not writing a novel somebody pays money for. You're writing something most people try to avoid, which includes your parents and probably all your friends. This is the sad, indisputable truth at the bottom of our business. Nobody wants to see what you are about to put down on paper. People are either indifferent to advertising or actively hostile.

Eric Silver, chief creative officer of McCann, put it this way: "Advertising is what happens on TV when people go to the bathroom."

So, you try to come up with some advertising concepts that can defeat these barriers of indifference and anger. Maybe it's an ad. Maybe it's an online experience. Whatever the ideas may be, they aren't conjured in a vacuum, because you're working off a *key message*—a sentence in the creative brief that describes what your idea must communicate.

In addition to a creative brief and an overall strategy, you're working with a brand. Unless it's a new one, the brand brings with it all kinds of baggage, some good and some bad. Ad people call it a brand's *equity*.

A brand isn't just the name on the box. It isn't the thing in the box, either. A brand is the sum total of all the emotions, thoughts, images, history, possibilities, and gossip that exist in the marketplace about a given company.

What's remarkable about brands is, in categories where products are essentially alike, the best-known and most well-liked brand has the winning card. In *The Want Makers*, Mike Destiny, former director for England's Allied Breweries, was quoted: "The many competitive brands [of beer] are virtually identical in terms of taste, color, and alcohol delivery, and after two or three pints even an expert couldn't tell them apart. So, the customer is literally drinking the advertising, and the advertising is the brand."<sup>3</sup>

A brand isn't just a semantic construct, either. The relationship between the brand and its customers has monetary value; it can amount to literally billions of dollars. Brands are assets, and companies rightfully include them on their financial balance sheets. In Barry's *The Advertising Concept Book*, he quotes a smart fellow named Nick Shore on the power of brands: "If you systematically dismantled the entire operation of the Coca-Cola Company and left them with only their brand name, management could rebuild the company within five years. Remove the *brand* name and the enterprise would die within five years."<sup>4</sup>

When you're writing for a brand, you're working with a fragile, extraordinarily valuable thing. Not a lightweight job. Its implications are marvelous. The work you're about to do may not make the next million for the brand nor bring them to Chapter 11. Maybe you're working on one little branded post for Instagram. Yet it's an opportunity to sharpen that brand's image, even if just a little bit. It's a little like being handed the Olympic torch. You won't bear this important symbol all the way from Athens. Your job is just to move it a few miles down the road—without dropping it in the dirt along the way.

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## STARING AT YOUR PARTNER'S SHOES.

For me, writing any piece of advertising is unnerving.

You sit down with your partner and put your feet up. You read the strategist's brief, draw a square on a pad of paper, and you stare at the damned thing. You stare at each other's shoes. You look at the square. You give up and go to lunch.

You come back. The empty square is still there. Is the square gonna be a poster? Will it be a branded sitcom, a radio spot, a website? You don't know. All you know is the square's still empty.



So, after talking about movies for a bit, you quit dilly-dallying and face the problem which, let's say, is for a small bourbon brand. You both start to go through the brand stories on the client's website. You read what people are saying about the brand and its competitors in reviews, blogs, social media. You go through the reams of material the account team left in your office.

You discover the bourbon you're working on is manufactured in a little town with a funny name. You point this out to your partner. Your partner keeps staring out the window at some speck on the horizon. (*Maybe it's just a speck on the glass?* She isn't sure.) She just says, "Oh."

Down the hallway, a phone rings. Paging through an industry magazine, your partner points out that every few months the distillers rotate the aging barrels a quarter turn. You go, "Hmm."

On some blog, you read how moss on trees happens to grow faster on the sides facing the distillery's aging house. Now that's interesting.

You feel the shapeless form of an idea begin to bubble up from the depths. You poise your pencil over the page . . . and it all comes out in a flash of creativity. (*Whoa. Someone call 911. Report a fire on my drawing pad, 'cause I am SMOKIN' hot!*) You put your pencil down, smile, and read what you've written. It's complete rubbish. You call it a day and slink out to see a movie.

This process continues for several days and then, one day, completely without warning, an idea just shows up at your door, all nattied up like a Jehovah's Witness. You don't know where it comes from. It just shows up.

That's how you come up with ideas.

Sorry, there's no big secret. That's basically the drill. A guy named James Webb Young, a copywriter from the 1940s, laid out a five-step process of idea generation that holds water today:

1. You gather as much information on the problem as you can. You read, you underline stuff, you ask questions, you visit the factory.
2. You sit down and actively attack the problem.
3. You drop the whole thing and go do something else while your subconscious mind works on the problem.
4. "Eureka!"
5. You figure out how to implement your idea.<sup>5</sup>

This book is mostly about step 2: attacking the problem.