

Contact

BEING REASONABLE
BY MARC BABEJ

A Creative Roundtable



Much of what passes for creativity these days has become untethered from promoting actual products. The more untethered, it seems, the more "creative."

T WAS BORN AS A BUZZWORD AND IT BECAME GOSPEL. Now every agency claims that it, and it alone, has unlocked its secrets. No self-respecting advertising professional leaves home without it. Of course I'm talking about creativity.

A fellow columnist for this magazine predicts, "We can look forward to a creative renaissance in the industry, where the ideas and concepts that create good feelings are valued over formulae for communicating facts." The strategy director at a trendy boutique proclaims: "We've really integrated the consumer and strategic cultural brand with our creative thinking." A creative director announces, "We are not salesmen, we are craftsmen of what may be the most powerful art form on earth."

What do we get for all this "creativity"? We get metaphors without meaning: Financial services company Wachovia gives us "Uncommon Wisdom" but fails to tell us why we should choose it over the competition. We get sentiment without sell: Coca-Cola welcomes us "to the Coke side of life." And we get cutesiness without content: VW touts the Beetle as a "Force of Good." Much of what passes for creativity these days has become untethered from promoting actual products. The more untethered, it seems, the more "creative."

Call me an ignoramus, an ogre, or a blasphemer for ranting against creativity. But you'll find me in outstanding company. Here's my virtual interview, reconstructed from interviews in the public domain, with none other than David Ogilvy, Bill Bernbach, and Rosser Reeves, the father of the Unique Selling Proposition (USP).

» *What do you think of "lifestyle" advertising?*

Bill Bernbach: "The magic is in the product... No matter how skillful you are, you can't invent a product advantage that doesn't exist. And if you do, and it's just a gimmick, it's going to fall apart anyway."

Rosser Reeves: "The writer must make the *product itself* interesting. Otherwise, a great part of his ingenuity and inventiveness will be used in devising tricks which lower the efficiency of advertising, rather than raising it."

David Ogilvy: "If you spend your advertising budget

entertaining the consumer, you're a bloody fool. Housewives don't buy a new detergent because the manufacturer told a joke on television...They buy the new detergent because it promises a benefit."

» *But isn't the most important thing to break through the clutter?*

Ogilvy: "When you write an ad, I don't want you to tell me that you find it 'creative.' I want you to find it so persuasive that you buy the product."

Bernbach: "Getting a product known isn't the answer. Getting it wanted is the answer...Be sure your advertising is say-

ing something...that will inform and serve the consumer, and...saying it like it's never been said before."

Reeves: "Such [creatives] have a pseudo-rationale for this striving after mere 'difference,' and they plead it with passionate earnestness: 1) Advertising (not the product) must compete with a tremendous number of other advertising messages. 2) Therefore, the advertisement (not the product) must get attention. 3) Therefore, a given advertisement (not the product) must be different...It is a classical example of confusing the means with the ends."


» *Bill, your creative revolution was, in many ways, a revolution against Rosser and his supporters. How do you define breakthrough creative?*

Bernbach: "The creative person has harnessed his imagination. He has disciplined it so that every thought, every idea, every idea, every word he puts down, every line he draws, every light and shadow in every photograph he takes, makes more vivid, more believable, more persuasive the original theme or product advantage he has decided he must convey."

» *Bill and David, both of you were creatives. What does "creativity" mean to you?*

Ogilvy: "I am supposed to be the No. 1 creative genius in the whole world, and I don't even know what the hell the word 'creativity' means... But I'm not afraid to tell creative phonies that their commercials are utter nonsense."

Bernbach: "Today everybody is talking 'creativity,' and, frankly, that's got me worried...I fear all the sins we may commit in the name of 'creativity.' I fear that we may be entering an age of phonies."

» *Gentlemen, thanks for the uncommon wisdom.* 

Marc Babej is president of Reason Inc.
(m.babej@reason-inc.com, www.being-reasonable.com)

DAVID OGILVY, INTERVIEW WITH STUART ELLIOTT, THE NEW YORK TIMES, 10/30/91.
BILL BERNBACH, BILL BERNBACH'S BOOK (LEVENSON & BERNBACH).
ROSSER REEVES, FROM REALITY IN ADVERTISING.