

Idea Factories

Lousy Agencies Have Foosball Tables, Too

The challenge of chronicling anything that is new and allegedly innovative, especially in the emerging subgenre of *unvertising* boutiques (ad agencies in denial), is that by the time you read this, the hot new shop may already have cooled down, grown too fast, become a casualty of a global economic downturn, closed its stunningly designed doors, dismantled its indoor skate park, or fired the in-house barista.

Or, it may have morphed into something else.

Or, if it's really hot, and especially successful, the founding partners who had touted themselves to the editors of *Creativity* and *Fast Company* as progressive, beyond-advertising-establishment rebels may already have done the unthinkable and sold a majority share of Crying Clown Inc. to one of the big-three global holding companies.

If any of the above is the case with the profiles of idea factories woven into the pages that follow, what can I tell you? Read them as cautionary tales, think of them as creative sorbets, or the contents of a time capsule labeled "One Jackass's Take on Innovative Ad Shops, Circa 2009."

Of the dozens of agencies I visited and the dozens of campaigns I pursued, the ones that captivated me most weren't the most suc-

cessful or recognizable or the biggest, but the most progressive, smart, and innovative.

What most interests me is ideas.

Compelling commercial ideas, and the different ways and reasons why people enjoy making them.

The Soundtrack to a Movie That Doesn't Exist

42 Entertainment

Somehow I can't imagine that Leo Burnett or David Ogilvy or Ray Rubicam—even twenty-first-century reincarnations of the legendary admen—would think that placing an object next to a public urinal in a rock concert arena would constitute anything close to the proverbial big idea upon which successful ad campaigns are built.

But if you happened to be taking a leak during a Nine Inch Nails (NIN) rock concert in Barcelona or Lisbon in 2007, there is a chance that you'd not only stumble (or urinate) upon a big idea, you'd become an integral part of it. How? As part of a marketing campaign/alternate-reality game (ARG)/performance-art spectacle on behalf of a forthcoming NIN album called *Year Zero*, the band's leader, Trent Reznor, and the marketing boutique 42 Entertainment went to unprecedented extremes.

It began with a series of highlighted letters on a 2007 NIN concert T-shirt that spelled out the message "I am trying to believe." Curious fans who had the wherewithal (and nothing-else-better-to-do-withal) to do a search on the phrase were then led to a series of 42 Entertainment-created Web sites about a fictional "Year Zero" that depicted a dystopian world where the government has taken complete control of society and imposed a Christian Fundamentalist theocracy that, among other things, drugs the public water supply and has an Orwellian "Bureau of Morality." The Web sites and

the blogs they spun off claimed to be the work of freedom-fighting rebels who were sending messages from the future (2022) to warn people in the year 2007 about the horrors to come.

Then, in addition to the above, came the infamous urinal drops. Specifically, USB (Zip) drives were left in bathrooms at NIN concerts. Along with further clues and warnings about the world of “Year Zero,” the drives contained unreleased tracks from NIN’s soon-to-come album, some in garage-band format, which would allow fans to remix and repurpose the music.

This is all brilliant for a number of reasons, especially since, in 2007, the release of a new Nine Inch Nails album was hardly a cause for mass celebration. Reznor’s audience, while substantial in Long Tail terms, had reached the point where it could most accurately be categorized as niche. But as it turns out, it was a rabidly devoted niche, willing to go to great lengths to find out more about the album, and the 42 Entertainment effort took full advantage of this fact. Also, the sensibility and overt antiauthoritarian politics of the album and the ARG campaign were a perfect ideological match for NIN’s industrial-rock fandom as well as for Reznor himself. *Year Zero* was to be his last release for a major label and a distribution model about which he’d become increasingly critical. And Reznor went out of his way to say that the buzz surrounding the album, which he called “the soundtrack to a movie that doesn’t exist,” was anything but advertising. “It’s not some kind of gimmick to get you to buy a record,” he told *Rolling Stone*. “It IS the art form.”

The art form, apparently, worked. Not only did *Year Zero* reach No. 2 on the *Billboard* chart after its release, it won a Grand Prix at the International Advertising Festival at Cannes.

I didn’t know a lot about Nine Inch Nails or Trent Reznor, but I had been following the “Year Zero” campaign for some time before its big win at Cannes. But what interested me most wasn’t simply the novel delivery mechanisms it employed; it was the ways in which

it used long-form narrative storytelling techniques to brand or (sorry, Trent) sell a product. This was notable in an industry that had by necessity placed a premium on brevity and overt calls to action, but what transfixed me is the fact that the “Year Zero” narrative form itself, long or not, was unlike anything I’d encountered in advertising or storytelling.

I met with Susan Bonds and Alex Lieu of 42 Entertainment on the veranda at the Carlton InterContinental in Cannes the morning after their big win. Bonds is president and CEO and Lieu is chief creative officer of the small Pasadena-based marketing and entertainment (anything but advertising) firm. Between half a dozen interruptions from well-wishers ranging from tech geeks in AC/DC concert T-shirts to Hollywood studio types to agency CEOs, they described how two people who never spent a day working at an ad agency ended up at the epicenter of adland.

“We’re an entertainment company that does original content that brings people together through storytelling. The fact that we both spent time at Disney helped us a lot in that regard,” Bonds explained. “Because at Disney, the audience experience always comes first.”

Instead of the traditional copywriter/art-director dynamic employed by most ad agencies, 42 Entertainment (which is also the company behind the campaign for the highly successful launch of the box-office-record-breaking Batman film *The Dark Knight*) typically relies on its alternate-reality-game background and involves everyone from sci-fi authors and sitcom writers to video game developers to create a storytelling experience that they say is exponentially more engaging and immersive than any traditional TV commercial.

Their creative process is different from the traditional advertising approach, said Lieu. “We always start by observing what people are doing new on the Web, and then we take that and think of how to build a compelling connection through stories.”

“Rather than tell a linear story in a classic arc,” explained Bonds, “we write the spine of a great story and then create the evidence as if it happened. Then the player collects that evidence and builds the story. Which is what we did with *Year Zero*.”

“And,” Lieu added, “unlike most agencies, we work very closely with the content creators, like Trent Reznor and [the *Dark Knight* director] Christopher Nolan.

“The industry is moving beyond sticking a message to content,” Lieu continued. “When the audience pieces a story together, the depth of engagement is phenomenal. We build the audience *into* the content. They own it.”

“We call it distributive storytelling or narrative,” Bonds explained.

So, rather than repeatedly shoving a commercial message down consumers’ throats, distributive narrative creates a thoroughly modern universe built upon the pillars of classic storytelling that not only engages consumers/players with a brand for *hours* (and, in the case of *Year Zero*, *months*) but also creates, click by click, a movement of brand believers that makes the participants feel as if they are part of—McLuhan-ites take note—a larger cultural movement.

I mentioned that in Cannes, there seemed to be a blurring of categories. YouTube hits were winning in the traditional film category. Cyber and viral and integrated each had its own category, but in truth it seemed that most work could have won in any category.

“All interactive marketing is supposed to be viral,” said Lieu. “For instance, we’re also entered in the Titanium Lions category. Even after fifteen years, the landscape of cyberspace marketing is changing so fast that people have a hard time benchmarking and finding value in it.” Bonds added, “They’re still trying to fit it into conventional advertising categories and media buys.”

All of which sounds perfectly believable when you’re promoting a summer blockbuster or a long-awaited album by a notoriously pro-

gressive artist to an already rabid audience. What about a campaign for something considerably less sexy? Does a person really want to have a “totally immersive audience experience” that revolves around toilet paper, or pudding? What about a packaged good with a product demo, or the lowly retail ad? How does this process fare with more traditional clients?

“Fine,” Bonds said. “We just did something for Toyota Camry [iflookscouldkill.com] that is far from traditional but is for a traditional category. Whatever we do is a holistic approach to connecting with consumers through storytelling.”

At the time of our conversation in late June, 42 Entertainment was already fully engaged in the covert guerrilla campaign for the upcoming Batman film, *The Dark Knight*. I’d heard stories of secret cards being placed in hard-core comic book hangouts and the release of other cryptic online clues. I asked if, since they’d already bragged about having worked so closely with Christopher Nolan, they could tell me more about the campaign.

Lieu sat back and folded his arms. “Oh, we can’t talk about something that’s still in play.”

Bonds shook her head. “Got to respect the fourth wall.”

Elf Yourself

Toy New York

The Grand Lodge of the Royal Order of Masons is located at the end of the same Flatiron district street as the small specialist/generalist agency Toy New York. For those unfamiliar with the ways of the Freemason, according to *American Heritage* it is, among other things (depending on the location of the lodge and the political climate), an organization based on “spontaneous fellowship and sympathy among a number of people.”

I know this because I looked up the definition electronically while standing on the sidewalk between the two buildings, fifteen minutes early for my first visit to Toy, a company whose nontraditional approach to advertising seems to be based on a similar faith in the power of spontaneous fellowship and sympathy among a number of people—but in Toy’s case, the fellowship does not exclude women, and the number of people came primarily via the Internet.

I was visiting Toy’s new loftlike digs on West Twenty-third Street after lots of people told me they were worth checking out because of the pedigree of the founding principals as well as the breakthrough online holiday campaign they had done for the OfficeMax chain, particularly a strange, corny, yet enormously successful Web site called Elf Yourself.

My memory of my first Elf encounter from the previous holiday season is foggy. I vaguely remember having been invited to “Elf Myself” by a friend who also worked in advertising, for a digital agency. I vaguely remember the dancing elves and something to do with downloading a photo of myself onto an elf’s face. However, I distinctly remember abandoning the project midway through the download, urging my then-nine-year-old daughter to take over. Which she did, pasting our faces on myriad dancing elves and sending them out into our digital community for, I’m thinking, hours.

I thought it was cute, and cool in a quirky way. What I didn’t know at the time is that we were taking part in a seminal online-marketing phenomenon, and the first digital effort to infiltrate pop culture since, well, the Subservient Chicken. Because if the chicken was the Jackie Robinson of digital advertising efforts, the talented and brave pioneer breaking down barriers and erasing stereotypes, the elves were Willie Mays and Hank Aaron, taking it to a whole other level.

One thing about having a loft as a company office space is that the layout doesn't work particularly well with the traditional lobby format. With lofts, where many of the idea factories I visited are situated, there is no soothing, receptionist-guarded barrier haven between the elevator banks and the chaos happening just around the corner. With lofts, when the elevator doors open, you're immediately released into the workplace, which in a way reinforces the "we're not an advertising agency" vibe and, more important, says "transparency." We have nothing to hide here, and we have no desire to impress you with a gilded atrium or a mahogany-paneled conference room. We're all about the work.

So I simply got off the elevator at Toy and started to wander around. Fortunately, the first person I stumbled upon was Anne Bologna, a founding partner and the president of Toy. Bologna did her best to make me feel welcome, even though the small staff was obviously busy. She introduced me to the other founding partners: David Dabill, the chief financial officer; and Ari Merkin, the creative director who was in the middle of writing a manifesto for a new business pitch for a fast-food chain.

Bologna led me to the open conference space toward the back of the loft. There was a large-screen TV on a freestanding shelf and another set of shelves filled with Elf-related booty—plaques and trophies from the spring awards-show season.

Bologna sat across from me and began to dispense with the list of "not's" that are a requisite part of every idea factory's creation story:

We are not big.

We are not fancy.

We are not an advertising agency.

We are not a TV-making factory.

We are not exclusively a digital agency.

We are not beholden to a big holding company.

We are not inherently evil.

And we are not, despite the author's prior insinuations,
Freemasons.

Part of the reason for my interest in shops such as 42 Entertainment, Toy, and other idea factories is that I never worked in a creative boutique, let alone an agency bold enough to have a subversive manifesto. I worked at huge, venerable agencies with global networks, hundreds of employees, shareholders to report to, and, in theory, financial stability. Creative shops were usually the opposite: small start-ups dependent on one account, run by an entrepreneurial creative team and account person. Creative shops were sexy, provocative, and swashbuckling. It took guts to open one and even more to work at one.

At least a half-dozen times over the years I entertained the idea of breaking off with a partner and doing my own thing. And every time, I chickened out. The challenge of running my own agency was always intriguing, but the financial risks and the life commitment always proved too daunting. Usually my plan was dependent on a client who liked me and my work but was unhappy with the agency I worked for. Starting a shop with a nationally known brand would certainly make things easier, but the flip side is that your entire livelihood, at least until you attracted additional clients, would be dependent on the emotional whims and career trajectory of one person. Plus, despite being competitive and intrigued by a challenge, I was never entirely convinced that I wanted to go all out, that I wanted advertising to dominate my life.

Bologna continued to explain why it was so important to emphasize what Toy is not.

"It's because it is extremely important that clients understand that we are operating under an entirely new model. That, in many

respects, the old model is incredibly flawed. By saying we're not a TV-making factory, we are saying that there are many, many ways to get your product noticed other than an expensive TV campaign. That is the structure they [big, old, evil ad agencies] sell to the client. They have legacy drag and holding company issues. There are beasts to feed, and this dramatically affects their ability to take risks. We believe in the new model. We believe in taking risks and being smart and nimble. So much so that we all jumped out of very comfortable jobs to prove it."

Oh yeah. Reason number seven why I never started my own shop: jumping out of the comfortable job.

The comfortable jobs that Bologna, Dabill, and Merkin left were at Fallon New York, where Bologna was president and Merkin was creative director. Prior to his gig at Fallon, Merkin worked at the rapidly ascending and now flat-out big Miami shop Crispin Porter + Bogusky, where he won numerous awards for his groundbreaking work for Mini Cooper, Truth Anti-Tobacco, and Ikea, for whom his "Lamp" commercial garnered a Grand Prix at Cannes.

"We all got along really well," Bologna continued, "and we all began to realize that there was a better way to do things, and that being attached to a legacy agency wasn't the answer. So, we're financially independent, we get to choose our clients and say no to them if it's a bad fit. It's our philosophy that under those conditions, creativity can flourish."

The abridged, PowerPoint-free version of "Elf Yourself, Part 1" is as follows.

In 2006, Bob Thacker, OfficeMax's senior vice president of marketing and advertising, contacted Bologna with a seemingly modest assignment. He wanted to seed the idea to consumers that OfficeMax, the number-three office supply chain behind Staples and Office Depot, was a viable holiday gift option. The only catch was that

the production budget for the effort was less than the cost of the average thirty-second TV commercial (around \$300,000).

So rather than creating one more commercial to throw into the network holiday din, Toy enlisted some of the best digital production companies around to produce twenty separate holiday Web sites that featured hours of OfficeMax-branded online content.

Nineteen of the mini-sites enjoyed modest success, but nothing like the level of action that came out of the Elf Yourself site. Created by Merkin and Jason Zada of the digital marketing firm EVB, Elf Yourself not only transcended the online genre; it transcended advertising and became the kind of cultural event that marketers dream of. Hosts of *The Today Show* and *Good Morning America* elfed themselves. The *New York Times*, CNN, and many others featured the site. And not only were millions of people elfing and forwarding greetings of themselves, but hundreds were uploading Elf Yourself videos onto YouTube. Bologna ran through some of the numbers for me. Half a billion hits and thirty-one million visitors in less than five weeks. When most Web marketers measure how long visitors spend on their site, they speak in terms of minutes. For Elf Yourself, Toy measured it in *years*. Bologna and company slipped this factoid into its OfficeMax case history: the total time spent online by Elf Yourself visitors was more than six hundred years.

From a creative standpoint, the aesthetic of the site was crude and basic, and the act of elfing was painfully simple. Plus, there was no overt brand message burned into the process. Yet people of every age embraced it. Most likely because, unlike so many online-marketing experiences, Elf was such a simple, joyful experience that people felt compelled to pass it along and share.

Just as was the case with Burger King's Subservient Chicken, everyone wanted to know if all the online hype translated to an increase in holiday traffic. Online tracking services said that Office-

Max's brand awareness absolutely went up as a result. Thacker told *Ad Age*, "We were looking to build the brand, warm up our image. We weren't looking for sales . . . [but were] trying to differentiate ourselves through humor and humanization."

In addition to the OfficeMax account, Toy was doing work for the Oxygen network, including a promotion for the *Janice Dickinson Modeling Agency* program that included a faux downtown New York City modeling agency storefront, replete with a window poster that read: "Now hiring beautiful people." They've also helped launch the wireless reading device the Amazon Kindle and recently landed the *BusinessWeek* magazine account. Bologna also mentioned a top secret project with YouTube (which I found intriguing, if only because I was curious what the future of advertising needed an agency for*) and a recent meeting about an online-content project with Ashton Kutcher.

Rather than expending so much energy saying that they aren't an ad agency, I thought, they just needed to say, "We created the Elf, we did branding for the world's largest viral-video network, and we broke bread with Demi Moore's boy toy," and people would fill in the blanks.

The primary reason I came to Toy was to find out how Merkin and Bologna were going to follow up the radical success of Elf Yourself. The first year the assignment was very much under the radar, and there had been minimal expectations. But this year there were colossal expectations, from the CEO of OfficeMax, who had now decided to become more intimately involved in the process; from the OfficeMax employees who had proudly claimed ownership of and promoted the first round of work; and from the trade press. Plus,

*It turns out that YouTube wanted help helping advertisers make the most of their channel. Toy produced a "Tubetorial" for ad folks on its brand channel that's, in essence, a really smart YouTube video.

one year earlier, that type of online campaign was fairly novel. By the time the holiday season of 2007 rolled around, everyone was playing in the viral realm, many doing shamelessly derivative knockoffs of the Elf Yourself site.

Toy's answer to the pressure wasn't to do more, bigger, and/or better. First, it decided to do not twenty sites but one. And that one, again cocreated with EVB, was a slightly modified version of Elf Yourself. To some that may seem like the definition of playing it safe, but I thought it was ballsy, a rare demonstration of restraint in the excess-driven, egomaniacal world of advertising. The most significant change to the site seemed to be the introduction of additional elves.

In March 2008, I went back to Toy for an early-morning update, and to discuss the results of Elf Yourself year two. When I got off the elevator, there still wasn't a lobby, or a receptionist. Window washers were climbing over desks on the Twenty-third Street side of the space, to gain better position to squeegee more light into the idea factory. Dabill was joking with one of the squeegee men, and nearby Merkin had his head down and was writing feverishly.

Toy, an agency founded on the premise that a great toy is one that inspires you and compels you to share it with others, and that brands need to engage your imagination and be as exciting as a new toy, was now two years old. Bologna came out of the kitchen area and waved for me to join her at the conference table. I asked how business was, and she said the phone doesn't stop ringing. Then I thought about our first conversation and her thoughts about large agencies bound to selling TV and answering to shareholders and having beasts to feed.

"What if you get so popular you start to become the type of place that you used to work at, you know, numbers to meet, people to keep busy?"

She looked around, shook her head, and said, “That’s not gonna happen.”

Then we got down to talking Elf stats.

According to Nielsen Online Strategic Services, nearly one in ten Americans visited the OfficeMax Elf Yourself site, up nearly ten-fold from its first year in existence. Blog pass-along posts, according to Nielsen, were also huge, and of the twenty most common search terms in the four weeks of December, six included the word “OfficeMax.”

According to OfficeMax, 193 million people visited elfyourself.com in year two, creating more than 122 million elves while spending more than a total of twenty-six hundred years on the site. For those still wondering what holiday elves have to do with office supplies, OfficeMax also reported that more than 47 percent of customers surveyed linked the “Elf Yourself” campaign to the store.

In addition to having to top those numbers every holiday season until the entire world has repeatedly elfed itself, Toy may find that its biggest challenge is to leverage the success of the elves while not becoming beholden to them. In other words, it needs to do something equally amazing for someone else.

On my way out I shook hands with Bologna and waved good-bye to Merkin, who still may or may not have noticed me, and to Dabill, who was still talking to the squeegee guy. Back on the street, in front of the Grand Lodge of the Royal Order of Masons (where, incidentally, I was about to take an interesting tour), I decided while scribbling notes that Bologna, Merkin, and Dabill were right: Toy absolutely was not an advertising agency.

Because at a real agency, a founding partner would never have spoken with the squeegee guy.

Bankable

BBDO

Judging from the companies profiled on the preceding pages, one would think only small, quirky shops that renounce the word “advertising” can qualify as idea factories. Of course, this is hardly the case. Just about every working agency today qualifies, and some of the best—including the well-chronicled, paradigm-busting large agencies Wieden+Kennedy, the Martin Agency, and Crispin Porter + Bogusky—continue to create and innovate as well as or better than the smartest, nimblest idea factories. Google them or check out their Web sites and you’ll see.

But for tangible, debauchery-free proof that rumors of the death of the mega-agency are greatly exaggerated, consider the role that BBDO Worldwide, one of America’s largest and oldest agencies, enjoyed at Cannes. Long celebrated and eventually denigrated for its lavish, celebrity-dependent, Super Bowl-or-bust TV extravaganzas for A-list clients like Pepsi (Britney, Madonna, Michael Jackson), Visa (Derek Jeter, Michael Phelps), GE, and FedEx, BBDO has undergone a transformation under its chief creative officer of three years, David Lubars.

On the afternoon that we met at an outside table at the Hotel Majestic, Lubars was feeling particularly satisfied. His home office in New York had just won the Agency of the Year Lion as the most-awarded single agency at the festival, and BBDO Worldwide, the most-awarded network of agencies, was named Network of the Year. Winning awards was nothing new for BBDO. But winning them on the coattails of one dominant campaign that didn’t involve a single thirty-second television commercial was significant for the onetime TV factory.

The campaign, for BBDO's longtime HBO client, was an integrated effort called "Voyeur." The mission of "Voyeur," which won ten Lions at Cannes (and was created with a significant yet not entirely substantiated assist from the digital production company Big Spaceship), was to position the cable network as the home of the greatest storytellers in the world.

Brands like to "own" things, and marketers are more than happy to accommodate. A case can be made that Target owns a certain Pantone of red. A coffee maker wants to "own" morning's first pleasure. Once I worked for a fast-food client who wanted to "own" happiness. BBDO helped HBO lay claim to storytelling with a series of compelling, brilliantly synchronized short films directed by Jake Scott and set in eight apartments in a fictional Manhattan building. Each apartment has its own plot that builds to a common finale involving, within four minutes, tales of love, hate, birth, and murder. In 2A, for example, a couple discovers that their upstairs neighbor in 3A has a deadly secret. In 4A a strip-poker party takes an unexpected turn. For the premiere, the films were simultaneously projected on the side of an actual Manhattan apartment building before more than three thousand voyeurs on the corner of Ludlow and Broome, giving the illusion that its exterior wall had been stripped away.

But that was only one aspect of the campaign. More than 1.2 million viewers visited the HBO Voyeur micro-site, seeking additional background clues and story lines about the tenants, and hundreds of thousands more downloaded the stories from the Web and Video On Demand. Without a celebrity endorsement in sight.

"We used to fill boxes with creative," said Lubars, whose 2003 short films for BMW, directed by Guy Ritchie, John Woo, and others, are still looked upon as the pioneers and standard-bearers for nontraditional, product-focused, branded entertainment. "TV used to be the sun, and all other mediums were merely satellites around

it. It's still the only place where you can get seventy million eyeballs on an ad, but now if your message is engaging enough, you can get people to voluntarily spend ten, twenty, thirty minutes totally engaged with a brand."

Soon Lubars's co-chief creative officer, Bill Bruce, the chief architect of the Mountain Dew brand's extreme persona, joined us and chose a non-extreme seat in the shade. Because the success of an interactive campaign depends so much, if not completely, on the confluence of creative excellence and the public's embracing of the idea, I asked them how they could guarantee this to a major client like HBO.

"Trust," said Lubars. "We've been working with HBO for a long time. And track record, which is predicated on the level of talent at a particular company. And more and more, rather than have a client commit all of its money to network upfronts [typically in May, when the major television networks showcase their new schedules to prospective advertisers], we encourage them to put money aside in a skunk-works fund, for when we hit upon something extraordinary like 'Voyeur.'"

Later I asked Courteney Monroe, HBO's executive vice president of consumer marketing, if, beyond the advertising bling and the online numbers, she considered the campaign a success. "Absolutely," she said. "Everybody's chasing after buzz. The pressure on marketers to break through is enormous. Our brief to BBDO was to create an experience for consumers to engage in a unique way across multiple platforms."

Of course, HBO is a content provider, and the "Voyeur" campaign was essentially content itself. Monroe would not provide specific campaign or media costs, but because there was no paid network media involved, she said it was "far more cost-effective than a traditional campaign effort." She also agreed that it helps to have your very own network (part of Time Warner, no less) as a media

platform, and that selling entertaining content is easier than selling the benefits of a deodorant stick. But, she said, all marketers will eventually have to find a way to make their brand story more entertaining. “You can’t just put up an 800 number and a call to action anymore. Experiential branding is critical for everyone.”

Storytelling and engagement were clearly the most prevalent themes at the festival. I told Lubars and Bruce that earlier in the day I had heard the legendary commercial director Joe Pytka (who has won a Hank Aaron–esque 110 Cannes Lions as the shooter of everything from Pepsi’s Ray Charles “Uh-Huh!” spot, to “This Is Your Brain on Drugs,” to the Larry Bird and Michael Jordan “Nothing but Net” McDonald’s classic, and whose sailboat was docked within walking distance of the Palais), say, “No focus group in the history of advertising has ever written a good story.”

When asked if they felt as if they were creating a new kind of experiential branding that transcends advertising, if the future of advertising is all about creating moments that shape the collective culture, Lubars shrugged. Bruce sat back and folded his arms across his white T-shirt. “Oh, I don’t know,” he said. “We just try to come up with great ideas.”

Lubars looked at me as if I should know better. “Shape the culture? I don’t know and I don’t care. Let the academics figure that one out.”

Return on Attention

Time Warner’s Global Media Group

For many of the large pitches and meetings I’d been a part of, when it came time for the media portion of the presentation—when client and agency discussed where, how frequently, and in which media they would run their ads—people had a gift for suddenly finding

more important things to do. Agency presidents would briefly “step out” to take a call. Senior clients would have to catch a limo, or a flight. And creatives, they would simply get up and walk away from the table. To mathematically challenged writers and art directors, watching the endless parade of charts and graphs of a media presentation was akin to watching, um, an endless parade of charts and graphs.

Back then, media got no respect.

After all, the choices were limited (TV, out of home, radio), and it didn’t seem as if it took a genius to target a TV spot to a demographically appropriate program, with a measurable audience. As Bill Bruce, the co-creative chairman of BBDO, told me, “Until recently, we were using a model and measurements that had been around since the days of Milton Berle.” But of course all that has changed, and continues to change.

Today an argument could be made that there is no more important aspect of the advertising process than media strategy. Today, any creative person worth her salt is keenly aware of the myriad possibilities of the new media landscape, and the most successful agency media people proactively share with the creative folks fresh, brand-relevant ideas and insights about the very same, ever-changing landscape. Today, it’s more likely that a creative person helped put together the media presentation than it is that she will get up and leave it.

At the advertising festival in Cannes, I ran into Mark D’Arcy and John Partilla of Time Warner’s Global Media Group at a midnight lawn party at Le Grand Hotel. Former agency veterans and for a short while colleagues of mine, D’Arcy (chief creative officer) and Partilla (president) clearly think that media is, if not the future of advertising, at the very least where the money is.

To my understanding, Time Warner was simply a media conglomerate, the owner of a large and ubiquitous “family of brands,” in-

cluding Time Inc. (*Sports Illustrated*, *People*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and more than a hundred others), AOL, TBS, HBO, and Warner Bros. To me, it was simply a repository of well-known content providers where agencies placed ads. Through the sheer economy of numbers, advertisers could realize savings by purchasing media bundles. I asked D'Arcy what the hell a creative guy was doing in a corporate media empire. And even if media was where the money is, wasn't it, you know, boring?

D'Arcy said if he had to pick a moment, the genesis of the idea for their group came several years earlier when he and Partilla were working on the agency side for a major electronics client. "We came up with a spectacular and original media idea," he said. "The client loved it. Then we presented it to the cable network that would partner on the project, and they loved it. The only thing is, when the meeting was over, as the agency of record, the only way in which we stood to benefit is that our client was pleased and we got to keep the account for a little bit longer. The cable network not only took over control of the project; it made millions of dollars off our idea. In our eyes, it was clearly a flawed model."

Partilla agreed that taking control of a project whose creation it had in effect financed was the network's prerogative. It also prompted him to strongly consider the evolving and growing importance of media. "We'd spent our careers at ad agencies. And looking forward, every job in that world seemed like a variation on the same theme. With 90 percent of most ad budgets dedicated to the media spend, we saw an opportunity for a new, idea-led model where we'd come up with additional creative ways to amplify the effectiveness of the creative spend."

D'Arcy agreed. "Before, the focus at Time Warner and most media companies was on sales. But now we're in an era where media has become everything and the relationship between media and

consumers has changed from intrusion to engagement, ads have to be more relevant and entertaining than ever.”

“How do you bill for your creative services?”

“We don’t,” D’Arcy said. “We work exclusively with top-thirty brands, several of whom have entered into long-term agreements with us. If we succeed, it’s reflected in a larger media purchase for Time Warner. Sometimes we’ll make more on a single project than we’d make in a year on an entire account at an agency.”

D’Arcy took me to a screening room to show me some examples. For a project for Johnson & Johnson his group created a series of additional creative venues to complement an existing ad campaign geared toward mothers. This included a short film that complemented a campaign initiated by J&J’s agency Lowe & Partners, as well as customized print executions with *Sports Illustrated*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *People*. For the prime-time comedy period on the Time Warner–owned TBS network, they came up with a novel way of framing how ads would run. To appear during the selected “Very Funny” sitcoms, the commercial had to be deemed (and branded) “Very Funny Advertising.” The TBS Web site even includes a link for the “Department of Humor Analysis.”

TBS’s goal was to keep viewers watching during breaks by attempting to make the commercials as entertaining as the program. The consumer benefits by not having to watch as many ads that suck. In this instance, it worked. According to D’Arcy, commercials that ran during those periods had 81 percent higher recall and likability than those that randomly ran. “It’s getting to the point where viewers have such an expectation of excellence that every moment has got to be quality or they will tune out. We call it ROA: Return on Attention.”

But still, I said, most ads do truly suck. “Maybe, but a day won’t be far off where a media company can have the ability to tell a

brand, 'I have data that says your ad lost us a million viewers during such and such a program, so why should I run it?' "

I asked if mainstream ad agencies should consider their creative enterprise a threat. "Not at all," said D'Arcy.

"No one is going to replace AORs [agencies of record]," added Partilla. "But to succeed moving forward, media companies are going to have to act more like ad agencies, and ad agencies are going to have to act more like media companies."

"And," D'Arcy continued, "they're going to have to accept that to a certain degree, they're going to have to be polygamous. Agencies historically have been monogamous, but now that so much is open source, there is no way a single advertising entity can or should do everything for a brand."

But who controls the DNA profile of what a brand stands for if there are so many players creating messages on its behalf? The chief marketing officer (CMO)?

"Exactly," D'Arcy said. "The most important brand shepherd used to be the chief creative officer at an agency, but now it's the CMO who has to maintain consistency and integrity among the many voices working against the brand."

I told them about a panel I'd watched in Cannes in which the moderator, Sir Martin Sorrell, head of the WPP holding company, asked marketing leaders from Yahoo!, AOL, Microsoft, and Google if they intended to make creative inroads on the traditional agency model. While the online panelists all said no, Partilla was skeptical. "They'd be crazy not to," he said.

D'Arcy walked me to the elevator. I asked, "So, you like this?"

"Absolutely. At an agency we gave our ideas away. Here we're compensated for them as long as they're relevant and successful."

A tone rang, and the door opened on a full elevator. As I squeezed on, D'Arcy was still talking. "Imagine the money Leo Bur-

nett would have made if, instead of giving his ideas away, he would have told his client, ‘I’m going to *lease* you the monthly rights to the likeness of the Jolly Green Giant.’”

When the door closed, someone standing behind me said, “A shitload.”

The Boiling Point of Wow

Fahrenheit 212

From the outside, the epicenter of what’s next doesn’t look particularly futuristic or innovative. Especially on a humid Tuesday morning in Lower Manhattan when the skies were far from visionary blue and the Broadway traffic crept past its nondescript, street-level entrance at an unenlightened, sub-medieval pace.

It doesn’t help that the epicenter of what’s next, the home of Fahrenheit 212—part ad agency, part consulting firm, part product design laboratory—is above a discount sneaker shop in a hundred-year-old office building.

But once I’m on the inside of Fahrenheit 212, a company barely two years removed from gaining its independence from the global ad giant Saatchi & Saatchi, a strange phenomenon occurred. I forgot about the foul weather, the god-awful traffic, and the world’s slowest elevator, and I began to grasp why companies like Samsung, Warner Music, Hershey’s, NBC, and Gucci had been tapping the eclectic band of entrepreneurial mercenaries of F-212 to generate disruptive ideas and invent products and services that can impact their brands with the force of defibrillator paddles.

And the reason wasn’t F-212’s all-white decor, state-of-the-art AV toys, or Amy Winehouse’s unconvincing take on rehab seemingly looped on the sound system. It’s because—and this became appar-

ent even before I met the designer, who had a proclivity for tattooing samples of his favorite projects onto his body—there’s something Wonka-ish about the place.

As a result, the more time I spent there, the more I found myself getting excited about some of the weirdest shit, from the grandiose to the seemingly quotidian. The bottled water in my hand? Geoff Vuleta, the CEO, wasted no time in describing some of the killer innovations they have in the works for a client in that category. The cup of coffee I just declined? Get ready for an impassioned narrative about the worldwide coffee market, the preferences of the Japanese and female demographics, and how F-212 is sitting on a line of products that will forever change our relationship with a cup of joe.

Even the piece I’m thinking of writing about them, they had some thoughts about this, too. From basic art direction and sidebar suggestions to a radical new take on nothing less than the entire eye-to-paper reading experience. Some might call this type of visionary pathos bold, or obnoxious, but what it really is, is inspired. And bold. And obnoxious. Because when it comes to ideas, the eighteen-person staff at F-212 can’t help themselves.

At F-212 everything is an idea. Or at least one waiting to happen.

Vuleta’s tales are peppered with prefab pearls of bizdom like “identification of transformational vectors” or the observation, pronounced with less than convincing spontaneity, that 212 degrees Fahrenheit (water’s boiling point, for those not in science class that day) is also “the point at which one degree of change can make a profound difference.” But as he walked me through one top secret project after another (an unfortunate thing about capitalism is that everything’s confidential until it’s in your shopping cart), I saw that there is substance behind the stratspeak, and they have identified some pretty damned impressive vectors.

This is why Craig Kallman, CEO of Atlantic Records, had no reservations about enlisting F-212 to help solve Atlantic's—and by association the entire music industry's—seemingly insurmountable strategic problems, most notably how an industry that for generations made its money on records, tapes, and CDs can thrive in a download world. “They had such an obvious grasp of strategy, the proven ability to execute an idea and at the same time be wildly creative and innovative,” Kallman told me. “We’re fighting wars on so many fronts it made sense to step outside and get the perspective of someone who can force us to look at things differently and see what’s possible. So we basically said, ‘Here’s how we do things. Get under our hood, look inside, and go get creative.’”

Vuleta wasn't particularly keen on discussing F-212's ad agency roots or biting at my numerous suggestions that a lot of what they are doing for clients now is what agencies used to do for clients in the 1950s and 1960s. Back then, clients and agencies were marketing partners in every sense. It wasn't uncommon then for agencies to suggest the introduction of a line extension for a product, or a new revenue opportunity, or an entirely new category to play in. But somewhere along the way, that all changed, and the average client-agency relationship became shorter, more tenuous, and, as a result, more distrustful.

Today agencies primarily focus on advertising the hand (products) they are dealt, while extensions and innovations are left to the overburdened brand stewards. This is where Vuleta and company saw an opportunity.

“Some consulting companies do strategy well,” Vuleta explained. “Some don't do strategy but do consumer experience well. We do both.”

F-212 is typically brought in to radically rethink a brand or category and create a completely new set of what its president, Mark Payne, calls “big, fast, and doable” consumer experiences. And while

the concept of innovation outsourcing is not entirely new, just about every aspect of the high-velocity, unconventional way F-212 goes about it is.

For instance, they don't pitch clients. They wait for clients to come to them, which is pretty brave in an industry where dog and pony shows are the norm. Then there's the five-month turnaround schedule (billable hours be damned) from initial contact to final presentation. And finally, they employ a virtually unheard-of (and some might say insane) compensation model in which up to two-thirds of the total is based on the realization of success.

In other words, for F-212 to make serious money, its ideas have to be market ready and damned successful once they get there.

Like any company trying to differentiate itself from the pack, F-212 is big on process, if only because having a trademarked, proprietary methodology is mandatory these days for entrée into the C-suites of the world. But its greatest asset is clearly the assortment of big and nimble minds it brings to a brainstorming session. Here's how "big, fast, and doable" works. When a client enlists them, all eighteen employees, each with his or her own unique superhero powers, get on board with the project: creative directors (including one who worked in robotics for NASA and designed rides for Disney), financial experts, designers, business directors (including one with a psychology and philosophy master's from Oxford), a strategic analyst with degrees in sociology and international affairs, and an office manager who was an off-Broadway actor.

There are also plenty of people with ad agency experience at F-212, but as is the case at many of the anti-agencies, it is the unconventional career trajectories that are emphasized the most and, perhaps, the most important.

After an initial new-business chat around, the employees spend

about five months spinning ideas, trying to turn the status quo on its head. When they settle on a core of about five big ideas, they don't stop with a nifty PowerPoint presentation. They actually make the new products they dream up, presenting them to the client in ready-to-sell form. Often what's presented is the last thing a client expects but precisely what it needs.

For example, Diageo hired Fahrenheit 212 to jump-start its moribund Smirnoff Ice brand. The firm's response, in essence, was to recommend abandoning the brand it was hired to fix. Instead, F-212 wheeled out a selection of all-new, fully designed, and ready-to-drink Smirnoff flavors, including raw tea and a product that simply combined spring water and alcohol. Versions of both are already in market, a fact that makes F-212's compensation model seem slightly less insane.

Besides being immersed in solving the future of music and beverages, F-212 is usually engaged in no fewer than five other live projects, ranging from the development of disruptive applications for flat-screen video monitors to rethinking the taste profile of chocolate.

When asked if his people ever had reservations about having to master and quickly develop a portfolio of ideas in such a broad range of categories, Vuleta replied that speed was actually on their side. "We work at such velocity that we never really have time to doubt or question ourselves, or get scared. Sometimes fear, as well as knowing too much, can make things worse.

"Sometimes we'll show a client ideas on Tuesday, expose it to consumers on Wednesday, and by Thursday we'll have a strong sense of where the heat is."

In addition to the tattoo guy (still no word if the client, Gucci, bought the work) and the NASA guy and the rest of the in-house staff, F-212 is hyperlinked to an equally eclectic stable of outside experts. Like the prolific George in Bulgaria, a 3-D-rendering artist

who furiously churns out beautifully realized, broadcast-quality presentation designs for a price that does not portend good things for the future of American 3-D-rendering shops. And Dr. Abdul-Munem Mohammed Daoud Al-Shakarchi, an Iraqi expat scientist with no fewer than five degrees, including a PhD in microbial chemistry, who has some revolutionary thoughts about, of all things, deodorant.

Here's how that went down: a phone call from Al-Shakarchi's agent, who claimed that his client had invented what he called the world's first truly all-natural deodorant. Vuleta took a meeting, then took home a sample of the unscented prototype, which used base carrier oils instead of aluminum for astringent, antibacterial purposes. Vuleta was digging the fact that it was all natural, but after three or four days of using the product, he became acutely aware of the sensation he felt after applying it. Which got him thinking about the relationship between sweat and emotion. Which led to the sort of eureka moment that he generally does not believe in: a tipping point in the history of sweat.

"In the middle of the night I rang up a friend who was a scientist at Procter & Gamble and asked if she thought that, because we sweat for an emotional reason, it would be possible to marry essential, mood-enhancing oils to our base natural product to interact with the sweat, and she said yes." This led to an aromatherapy study, to the development of a patent for the world's first all-natural, mood-enhancing *pro-perspirant*—meaning it treats sweat as an active ingredient—that can give you energy, make you horny, or help you relax.

Sure, it's not exactly a miracle cure, or the discovery of a new species. It's just freakin' deodorant. But it's unlike any that's ever been used, a significant improvement on a mundane, un-improvable product. And they dreamed it up in what, a few months?

Which made me wonder what F-212 might do with something larger, like the music industry. Or with all the “off-line” toys Vuleta showed me that, because of confidentiality agreements, I’m not allowed to talk about. And then I can’t help but wonder what they might be able to do with challenges where the bottom line reflects less on profit and more on humanity. For instance, would it hurt to ask F-212 to spend a few days lifting the hood on something like the oil industry? Or Darfur? Or to do a big, fast, and doable brainstorm about the Sunnis and the Shiites, surges and diplomacy? Who knows, maybe they already are.

When I asked Vuleta if they also did an advertising program for the Diageo and deodorant projects, he waved me off. Advertising isn’t the point. It’s the power (read: monetary value) of the idea that he’s interested in.

For instance, Starbucks. Vuleta has a whole spiel about how Starbucks has lost its core focus, overproduced in-store adjacencies (non-coffee items), and under-delivered on its promise as a mystical coffee mecca. He wrote a three-page manifesto on the subject. In fact, F-212 has also done some unique and still-proprietary product development in the coffee category, replete with some pieces of print art and videos that, to the naked eye, look just like ads.

Turning Good Karma into Brand

Droga5

If there is a special wing in hell reserved for ad people, and I am almost convinced of its existence, David Droga, the creative chairman of the Publicis-owned advertising boutique Droga5, will not spend a millisecond there. Indeed, the Australian-born, New York-based Droga could spend the next fifty years making cigarette ads, ped-

dling booze and handguns to toddlers, and doing recruitment ads for a polygamous West Texas cult, and he'd still be on the karmic plus side.

Which is understandable since one of his ideas will potentially save millions of lives and another is attempting to reinvent public education.

This isn't to say that Droga, the former worldwide chief creative officer wunderkind for the Publicis holding company, is averse to engaging with real, profit-hungry conglomerates. Indeed, his agency's current client roster includes the names Coca-Cola, Microsoft, MTV, and Adidas. It's just that his sexiest, most renowned branding feats to date have been in the name of—gasp—good.

I first read about Tap Project in the pages of *Esquire* magazine in 2006. *Esquire* had profiled Droga5 for its annual “Best and Brightest” issue, presumably (initially) because it had been impressed by the online video phenomenon the agency had created with “Still Free,” a seemingly amateur film that showed Air Force One being tagged with graffiti on the tarmac at Andrews Air Force Base. Several million views and countless news features later, it was revealed that the video was a fake, made by Droga5 for the clothing entrepreneur Marc Ecko. *Esquire's* editor in chief, David Granger, then challenged Droga to come up with something entirely new that demonstrated what some might call his delusional mission of leveraging brands to create moments that can shape our culture.

Droga didn't come back with a piece of film or an ad. He came back with a vision: create a brand out of something that everyone needs but is free. Tap water. Then, for one day a year, get every restaurant and bar in the world to sell it for \$1 and give 100 percent of the profits to UNICEF. Why UNICEF? Because more than a billion people around the world do not have access to clean water. Because thousands of children die each day from diseases generated by

tainted drinking water. And because UNICEF has been fighting this problem for decades.

According to Stevan Miller, director of corporate partnerships for UNICEF, whom I saw in Cannes, “In thirty seconds he [Droga] presented an idea that was brilliant. Within an hour I pitched it to our chief marketing officer, saying UNICEF had to do it.”

Within months, two ads announcing the project ran for free in *Esquire*. In March 2007, hundreds of New York City restaurants participated in Tap Project, raising more than \$5 million for UNICEF. Others helped raise money and awareness. Celebrities including Sarah Jessica Parker and Rachael Ray came on board. Donna Karan designed clothing and glass for sale in her stores.

For World Water Day in 2008, Droga took Tap Project national, doing a most un-advertising-like thing: sharing the opportunity with many of the best agencies in the country. More celebrities donated time. Major corporations donated money and media space. More than a thousand restaurants in forty-nine states participated. According to UNICEF, because of Tap Project, within eighteen months more than ten million children would have access to one more day of clean water.

In Cannes in June 2008, I watched Miller and Droga launch plans to a packed audience at the Palais des Festivals for Tap Project 2009, which will roll out in more than a hundred first-world cities around the planet. Their goal: reduce the number of people without access to water by half (one billion) by 2015.

“This single idea,” Miller said, “will literally save millions of lives.”

I met with Droga at Droga5’s Lower Manhattan loft space several months before his presentation in Cannes. Droga’s assistant, Mindy

Liu, who has a gorgeous tattoo on one clavicle that reads, “There is a dark and troubled side of life,” and, on the other, “There is a bright and sunny side of life,” led me into his corner office, which was decidedly sunny. It’s a typical downtown ad-guy office in a typical downtown ad-guy space. Exposed white brick. Spare and comfy. Littered with ads living and dead. Droga was friendly and energetic, especially for someone who had just gotten back from delivering a speech in Dubai titled, interestingly, “Growth at the Expense of Creativity.” I had one last question about the genesis of Tap, whether he’d been sitting on the idea or if he had simply risen up to meet *Esquire’s* challenge. “The idea for Tap only came about after the challenge by Granger,” he said. “I would be too embarrassed to share the other ideas I had. Although, when we launched the agency in ’06, we were very public about wanting to devote some of our time and thinking toward social and environmental issues.”

The *Esquire* connection led to another opportunity for Droga. In the spring of 2007, a fellow “Best and Brightest” alum, the Harvard economist Dr. Roland Fryer, and the New York City Department of Education chancellor, Joel Klein, were seeking ideas from advertising agencies to help reinvent public education. *Esquire* recommended Droga, and after an extensive review Droga’s idea rose to the top.

Droga’s idea, still very much a work in progress, is called the Million, and its goal is nothing less than to reinvent public education.

Motioning for me to join him at his desk, Droga spun his monitor around and showed me, click by click, case-history-style, the latest on the Million.

The mission: turn academic achievement into a brand; make it desirable, tangible, and rewarding.

The insight: the most powerful way to reach students is to connect with them the same way as they connect with one another.

The solution: the world's first communication device (with an assist from Verizon and Samsung) designed specifically for students.

While other programs around the country have experimented with cash as a student incentive, Droga's recommendation was to use what many people above the age of seventeen consider the bane of humanity—the cell phone. The goal of the Million is to give a cell phone to every one of New York City's million public school students. Why? Droga's answer was to click play and allow a short film that was still being tweaked to demonstrate the ideal version of the process. Kids would use the phone, which would be disabled during class hours, to access learning applications and information regarding assignments, research, and school calendars. Kids who scored well on tests, met attendance requirements, and demonstrated improvement in classroom participation would be rewarded with additional free airtime and a number of incentives provided by commercial partners (an aspect of the plan that has many raising a concerned eyebrow).

To date, technically, the Million is more like the Twenty-five Hundred. It was launched in 2008 at three schools in Brooklyn, with more to come in 2009. But already, according to the Department of Education, there have been improved results in many key categories. According to Fryer, "We've started to get calls from Mexico, Chicago, and Houston inquiring about how they can have the Million in their schools."

I asked Droga about the topic of his speech in Dubai and his plans for growing Droga5, which recently opened an office in Australia. "I don't want to simply be the clever boutique. I want it to grow on a large scale, but of course not at the expense of creativity."

The agency has done a lot of great work for paying clients. But still. As industry critics are quick to point out, its most celebrated campaigns are for not-for-profits, and the third (the aforementioned Ecko "Still Free" video), while a critical success, is still a one-hit

YouTube wonder. In addition, its highly publicized and much criticized online youth-shopping/entertainment experiment, Honeyshed, hasn't exactly set the retail world on fire. And despite Droga5's doing projects for large companies, a blue-chip, agency-of-record anchor brand is still lacking on its roster. Plus, downtown office space (not to mention the salaries of some forty eclectic disciples) doesn't come cheap, either. As we spoke, I wondered how long of a leash Publicis might give its well-publicized yet modestly successful experiment.

Yet as Droga reiterated his beliefs that brand ideas "can have massive influence and impact and create things that aren't disposable, that will be around in fifty to a hundred years," and as he shared piece after piece of outstanding and risky work for clients like TracFone, the New Museum, and Steinlager beer, I couldn't help but think that with time, the big, enlightened brands will come.

Besides, I'm sure some muckety-muck at Publicis is aware of the value of having an innovative, globally celebrated, socially responsible creative star to shine upon a cynical industry.

Got (Insert Annoying Parody Word Here)?

Goodby, Silverstein & Partners

No matter what agency I worked at during my time in advertising, there was always another, better agency where my co-creatives and I would rather be. The It Agency. The shop that was producing the work we most admired, for the clients we most coveted, in an environment that appeared to be downright desirable.

Fallon, Mullen, Riney, Wieden, Cliff Freeman, Chiat, Ammirati (at the beginning), and Crispin (at the end) are just a few of the places I lusted after, agencies whose names began and ended so many of my whiny, frustrated, pathetic sentences over the years.

“But if this were Wieden . . .”

“Fallon would have been able to sell that idea.”

“Ammirati would have resigned the business before subjecting itself to a review.”

As if I knew.

But of all the agencies I admired, my favorite and longest-running crush was on Goodby, Silverstein & Partners in San Francisco. Not taking anything away from any of the above or any of the dozens of great shops not mentioned, it's just that to me, Goodby was different. Beginning with its brilliant “Got Milk?” campaign (now in its sixteenth year for the California Milk Processor Board), to its work for everyone from Polaroid, *The New Yorker*, Chevys Restaurants, and Norwegian Cruise Line to Hewlett-Packard and Rolling Rock, Goodby never seemed to rely on the wacky, flashy, forced creative vibe that so many agencies went out of their way to project. To me, Goodby was always smart and cool, funny and somehow humble.

For twenty-five years they have been like the Coen brothers of advertising, producing smart, award-winning work that you wish you had done yourself. Goodby projected integrity, intelligence, and confidence rather than arrogance, bullshit, and insecurity.

To me, Goodby was the ultimate idea factory.

More than twenty years after my man-crush on Goodby began, on the first day of the summer of 2007, I finally landed a date. It had been an uncharacteristically tumultuous few months at Goodby, which is now owned by the Omnicom Group. After losing its showcase Saturn car business and faced with the prospects of substantial layoffs in January, it had gone on a stunning new-business tear, winning more than \$2 billion in less than a month. This included Sprint (\$400 million in billings), Hyundai (\$600 million), and the National Basketball Association (\$40 million), as well as a number of additional assignments from existing clients.

I visited Goodby's offices on California Street on a Friday morn-

ing, and even though this was a summer Friday and this was advertising, the halls were buzzing. At one point after the new-business wins, the agency cofounder Rich Silverstein said they were hiring two people a day, and since then the agency had grown from four hundred to more than six hundred employees.

After finishing up with a creative team, executive creative director Jamie Barrett explained how Goodby had managed to refresh and reinvent itself. From regional boutique to TV-driven powerhouse to global super-agency. And now digital impresarios. Somehow, seemingly overnight, Goodby had figured out interactive without buying a digital shop or opening up a sub-brand called, say, Goodby 2.0. How had the perennial Agency of the Year finalist/winner become *Advertising Age* magazine's Digital Agency of the Year?

"It's very ironic to us that we're being held up as this progressive agency that has figured out digital," Barrett said, "when two years ago we were kicking ourselves, saying, 'We're fucking dinosaurs, we're always gonna be these thirty-second TV guys.'"

Rather than farm out its digital work, or gobble up an interactive shop, the agency looked inward.

"The only thing we did is we refused to accept that fate and tried to do it well, even though we never did it before, and we tried different combinations," said Barrett. "We felt that agencies weren't formed to concentrate on one medium. We believe that digital is just another platform. In fact, anyone who considers themselves a traditional or a digital agency are just being marginalized. I mean, why would a client with substantial resources and needs want to work with an agency that has limited capabilities? To arbitrarily say we can't do digital seemed self-defeating. At one point we were considering sub-branding, but then we just got busy, and before we knew it, 50 percent of our work was interactive."

Because I had spent a lot of time working at places that couldn't detect a paradigm shift if its epicenter was directly under the er-

gonomically perfect wheels of their Herman Miller office chairs, I asked him to elaborate on the process that led to the interactive transformation.

“We [Barrett, the cofounders, Rich Silverstein and Jeff Goodby, and the partner and creative director, Steve Simpson] thought, why can’t we play? We’re relatively smart people who know how to solve problems—why can’t we do this stuff? Partly that is stubbornness, and partly it’s not wanting to go to the trouble of sub-branding ourselves. If you start doing that, they’re ultimately going to have to work together. So rather than create some clusterfuck, logistical nightmare later, why not figure it out now?”

“What we did, and we’re still in it, is, if you’ve done terrific interactive work, we’ll hire you, but as a *creative* person. If you’ve done terrific television, we’ll hire you as a *creative* person. We made the assumption that a good creative person can get any creative challenge done.”

That’s not a particularly sexy creation story, I told him. No “aha!” moment, no proprietary process?

“People ask Jeff and Rich and Steve and myself, ‘How did you do it?’ and we usually answer we just came in every day and wanted to do better. None of us would be so pompous as to say we had a vision for it. Recently I was part of a workshop about the future of advertising. Everyone seemed to want to be anointed a visionary. But 99 percent of us aren’t visionaries. We get where we’re going because we dive in and enjoy it and stumble forward as we go. Just stay curious and let the business stimulate us to go forward, and if we have more success than failure, we get to be the *Ad Age* and *Adweek* and *Creativity Agency of the Year*.”

Because interactive seemed to transform the industry overnight, I asked if he gave much thought to what the next big shift might be.

“None of us have the answer to what it will be like five years from now. What’s important is that we be good at it.”

Maybe this is how a small great agency becomes a big great agency, I thought. It's led by people smart enough to admit that they don't know when the rest of the industry seems to be drowning in its own visionspeak.

Before I left, I asked Barrett if there might be a piece of work or a campaign in progress that I could observe as a fly on the wall. "Well," he said, "we've got this awesome campaign for a new-business pitch that we're presenting in New York next week, but I can't discuss it." As he spoke, my eyes wandered to the tissue drawing that covered the wall behind him for the new-business pitch that they would ultimately win and that I'm still not allowed to discuss. Every few weeks Barrett will give me an update, and according to the client my fly-on-the-wall status is still pending.

A year after my first visit, I spoke with Barrett as he prepared to go to Cannes. In the interim, Goodby was again named *Adweek's* Agency of the Year, and its work for Hewlett-Packard's PC division was named *Advertising Age's* Campaign of the Year.

The last thing I asked Barrett (besides for a status report on the mystery client) was, what is the most interesting trend in the industry right now?

"Don't know that I know," he said. "If there is one, I know I'd want to stay away from it. By definition a trend means 'been done' to me. So I'm not sure the value in keeping up with them, unless it's to determine what *not* to do."