

## THE ONLY THING HARDER THAN CREATING A GREAT AD IS SELLING IT

THE GREATEST FAILING OF AN AD is that it doesn't get seen. And ads don't get seen for a variety of reasons, including that they are boring and run-of-the-mill and don't attract attention. Or they are irrelevant and do not motivate the intended audience. Or they are placed in obscure media that have a small or inattentive or uninterested or disinterested audience. Or the client hasn't got the balls to run something that is bold and provocative and pushes the edge of the envelope. By far it's the last situation that is the nemesis of so many of the great ads and breakthrough concepts. Those that don't get to run, and even some of those that do.

There is a metaphysical tension that exists between a client's search for advertising that will drive their business forward and the level of willingness to take chances with the creative. Ying and yang. Generally these are inversely correlated, and even the most entrepreneurial and daring client sometimes suffers cold feet. I experienced this with Worlds of Wonder, California Cooler, Apple Computer, Jell-O Gelatin, and even Dell Computer, the last of which was among my most daring clients, at least in their early formative years.

It's an issue that plagues all advertising agencies, creative or not. The more conservative monolithic ones are bothered less because they are happy to just run advertising that the client approves and bank their fees or commissions.

But those agencies that honestly strive to do great or even good creative work suffer far more. The better creative people regularly feel this pain. It requires a special resiliency to withstand this kind of rejection. It also requires a fiscal philosophy that does not put just making a profit ahead of producing good work. At the end of the day it costs a lot more in emotion and time to generate outstanding ads.

Of course an agency needs exceptional creative talent in order to manufacture great ads. It also needs a focus on greatness since good ads are clearly the enemy of great ones. When you settle for less, it shows.

Most of all, getting the exceptional kind of creative requires an extraordinary level of salesmanship and of trust. The agency has to have people who are willing to fight in an uncommon manner for the great ideas that they produce no matter who they are or what their position is at the agency.



It's a matter not of being obstinate but rather of garnering the trust of the client, putting forth well-thought-out arguments in defending the work, and being passionate and believable in one's convictions. Unfortunately all too often this gets interpreted as "creative arrogance." And all too often it is, particularly from the least creative agencies and individuals, which is odd.

People who are not to be trusted have long sullied the advertising business and made it considerably harder to sell good work. I have a cartoon that portrayed the situation so well that I kept it hanging in my office over the years. It had a little tiny bird sitting on the inside of the lower jaw of a huge alligator whose mouth was wide open, ready to snap shut. The caption over the alligator read, "Trust me." The only thing missing from the cartoon was the words "advertising executives" across the alligator's tail.

At one point, according to Gallup, advertising was ranked as the least trusted profession. Another, different survey was maybe more kind, placing ad execs just above the lowest category, that being used car salesmen, but behind lawyers and politicians. There is a reason.

The situation makes getting clients to buy into the work much more difficult than it might otherwise have to be. But the truth is it's a lot easier for someone at an advertising agency to say an ad is exactly what a client should be doing since it's not their business at risk or their money being spent. I believe you'll find similar phenomena with stockbrokers and money managers.

One of my first experiences with defending a good creative idea came early in my career back in 1975 while working on the Bristol-Myers Excedrin PM account. Excedrin PM was a nighttime pain reliever that also acted as a mild sleeping aid.

We had worked for 12 months producing a commercial, which used what was then a new and complicated imaging technique. It had a nude man lying on his back photographed in a dark gray-blue X-ray-like image. As the announcer talked about nighttime pain, various parts of the man's body would begin to light up and glow in red and pulsate to suggest pain points.

The spot wasn't even close to a great commercial, but it used a novel and arresting technique to demonstrate the pain problem that people suffered and how it could interfere with sleeping. Given the television network and FDA restrictions placed on analgesic commercials, it was a considerable creative step forward compared with the Anacin hammer hammering and the Bufferin buffer buffering. The spot turned out to be effective and sophisticated, and it used this innovative animation process called rotoscoping in a dramatic and attention-getting manner.

We were quite pleased and proud of the effort we had made and what we had produced. The two creative people on the business, copywriter John Ferrell and art director Don Ross, and I marched the few blocks from Y&R at 285 Madison Avenue to Bristol-Myers headquarters at 345 Park Avenue to

share the result. We were all psyched up in a positive way.

Our meeting was with one of the product management executives, and upon entering his office, before we even sat down, it was clear he was preparing us for his rejection in the event he would “need” to do that. He was such an arrogant little shit. Actually he was over six feet tall, but still.

He was sitting in his office behind his desk when we arrived. He looked up at us, not even saying hello, and began tapping the tips of his fat fingers together. All this body language was being emanated while John Ferrell was getting ready to run the rough cut of the spot on the videotape machine that had been rolled into the office. (This is actually one of the techniques that clients unsure of their creative evaluative skills frequently use to put an agency on the defensive.)

We didn’t say much more. John just pushed the button and let it play. The commercial ended 30 seconds later and there were a few moments of silence, but then the client just shook his head slowly from left to right and then again from left to right. He had this affected smile, that is, “shit-eating grin,” and then he said, “I don’t think we got it.”

And then he repeated it. “I don’t think we got it.”

I was sitting in a chair directly in front of his desk across from him, and without missing a beat I reached across the desk, grabbed him by his tie, pulled on it, looked directly into his face, nose to nose, and said, “I don’t give a shit what you think. We worked a goddamn year on this thing and think it’s great. We’re showing it to Sheedy.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” he said.

And then he repeated himself. “I wouldn’t do that.”

I shouted, “Watch me!”

John Sheedy was the VP advertising director and final authority on all advertising matters. I grabbed the tape out of the machine and told John and Don to follow me, and we marched down the hall to Sheedy’s office. The product manager traipsed along a few feet behind us.

I knocked on the open door and said, “John, we’ve got the rough cut of the Excedrin PM spot we’ve been working on and we’d like you to take a look at it.”

He said, “Sure. Great. Come on in.”

I shoved the tape in his video machine and, without any preamble or qualifications, pushed the button and ran the spot. He watched the commercial and then said, “Great! That’s great. Let’s see it again.”

I rewound the tape and played it again.

“That’s just great. Congratulations. Good job. A really good job.”

He turned to the product guy and said, “What do you think?”

“Yeah. It’s good. It’s good.”

It was hardly a brilliant commercial and maybe didn’t deserve my over-the-top reaction, but what happened is illustrative of what so often happened

during the advertising process. It's about people not really knowing the difference between good and bad advertising in the first place. And it's too often about authority, power, politics, and manipulation.

For me it was an important lesson learned. I admit I may have acted a bit irrationally and somewhat irresponsibly. I risked my relationship on the account. But it demonstrated that if you want to get unique and better ads through the system, you've got to be tough and stand up for what you believe. That means you often need to risk giving up "relationship currency" in exchange for integrity. It's extremely important in a business that suffers from anemia in this territory.

The Excedrin PM commercial story took on near-epic proportions and was of huge benefit to my career and to me henceforth. The story went around the agency in New York like wildfire, allowing me to garner a great deal of the creative people's admiration and respect. As these things often do, it took on a life of its own and became larger with each subsequent telling. There were some who believed that I grabbed the client around the neck with both hands and shook his head back and forth until he cried uncle.

The incident preceded me to the West Coast before I was transferred to the Y&R Los Angeles office. And when I walked into the office for the very first time, I was a rock star.

"We definitely need account people who know what good advertising is."

"Hey, it's great to have someone here that will finally stick up for the ads."

"Did you really strangle that Excedrin client?"

"Did he actually pass out?"

"Is it true he spent several days in the intensive care ward at New York Presbyterian Hospital?"

I had become bigger than life, and maybe I was.



While at Y&R Los Angeles I won the Twentieth Century Fox TV advertising account. They had a range of popular shows for which we did TV and radio commercials in promoting them.

The thing about Hollywood and its studios is that absolutely everyone believes they know more about how to do the advertising than anyone at the advertising agencies. They also believe that they have the authority to make the decision on what is done and what isn't. Usually what goes on is that the lower level folks exercise their "no" vote but rarely their "yes" vote.

And the truth of the matter is that there is always a man or woman at the top that is the final decision maker, and everyone at the studio lives in mortal fear of upsetting that person. As a result, a huge amount of energy is expended by people trying to second-guess what that person might want, will want, does want. Yes sir! Yes ma'am! Yes-siree-Bob-sir-ma'am!

We had done some really terrific and edgy radio commercials for one of

the Fox shows and were previewing them for the brand manager on the show.

“Gosh, I don’t know.”

“Gee, it’s a bit controversial.”

“Not sure about these.”

“Don’t know if Harris will go for this.”

So he called in a few secretaries to see what they thought.

“Gosh, I don’t know.”

“Gee, it’s a bit controversial.”

“Not sure about these.”

“Don’t know if Harris will go for this.”

So I suggested that we let Jerry have a listen to them. Jerry Greenberg was the ad manager and we called him in.

“Gosh, I don’t know.”

“Gee, it’s a bit controversial.”

“Not sure about these. Don’t know if Harris will go for this.”

So I said, “Well, let’s see what Harris has to say.” Harris being the head at the top of the Twentieth Century TV totem.

“No, no, we don’t want to do that. We don’t want to do that.”

The reason “we don’t want to do that” is that when you are in the second-guessing business, it requires that you are always correct, and since advertising is a pretty arbitrary and judgmental thing, open to many interpretations and personal biases, it makes the advertising decision-making process incredibly sensitive particularly to guessing.

“Let’s just forget about these and do some others.”

I said, “Huh?”

“Yeah, let’s just do some new ones and we won’t have to deal with these questions.”

“No, let’s let Harris hear them and decide for himself.”

Harris was Harris Katleman, who was the tip-top banana at the Fox studio overseeing all the television programming and whom everyone lived in fear of. I insisted that we let Harris hear the spots before deciding whether to do new ones. After all, they cost a fair amount of time and money to produce and were ready to go on the air. And the fact of the matter was that they were very good.

In the middle of what became a heated discussion, it so happened that Harris walked in to ask an unrelated question and queried what was going on.

Before anyone could say “nothing,” I said “something.”

“We’ve got some new radio commercials that we’re presenting and we’d like your opinion.”

Without a hesitation Harris said, “Let’s hear them.”

I proceeded to run the cassette. There were three spots, and after he heard them, Harris, still laughing, said, “Those are just fantastic. Congratulations. They are terrific. When do they go on the air?”

And then everyone else in the room chimed in, “Yeah. Fantastic. Terrific. Good job.”

“They’ll be on the air next week. For sure!”

And so more good advertising was saved from the jaws of ego, hubris, politics, and fear.



One of the strangest ironies of the ad business is that there are those clients who are very much attracted to a truly creative advertising agency. One that has done breakthrough work for clients with demonstrable results in the marketplace. Some clients don’t even have to have the results part.

They hire this kind of agency, but when the time comes to belly up and say “yes” to a creative concept that may be a bit more daring, their product becomes different from all those other clients’ products whose ads they had so admired. Indeed it is a scary thing and requires considerable courage to embark on groundbreaking turf for your own brands and business.

There was a time when Reebok decided that the Chiat/Day office in New York couldn’t deliver the creative they sought any longer. The client wanted to put the business in review but was persuaded by Jay Chiat to let each of the Chiat/Day offices, in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, compete and pitch the account against one another. It was a smart move to stave off a competitive review involving other agencies.

All three offices made separate presentations to Paul Fireman, CEO, and other senior Reebok executives. Chiat/Day San Francisco emerged with the only winning concept that Reebok embraced. My partner, Mike Moser, and copywriter Jeff Billig created it.

It was a brilliant but very daring commercial. In order to demonstrate how the new Reebok Pump shoe worked, how it fit better, a product comparison was set up between the Pump and Nike. Two men were selected; one wore the Reebok Pumps and the other wore the Nikes. Both men were then shown bungee jumping off a bridge over Puget Sound up in Washington.

The commercial was shot with incredible drama in slow motion and followed the men ever so slowly and quietly floating down, down, down. And then whap! With a loud sound of the rubber rope snapping, the man wearing the Reebok Pumps was shown bouncing upside down, up and down at the end of the rope. Then the camera slowly panned over to one side to see only the rope left slowly swinging and a pair of empty Nikes. It was fantastic. It was powerful. It made the point about fit in an incredible way.

The client loved it. It went on the air. There was a firestorm of related publicity on all the networks and news programs as well as other shows across the country. Arsenio Hall showed it to his audience for a five-minute segment where he interviewed the two guys that actually did the bungee jump. His audience stood up and wildly cheered and applauded.

Just about every soul in the country knew immediately about the Reebok Pump after the commercial ran. Every Reebok Pump in the country was sold quickly. The commercial appeared on the *Wall Street Journal* list of “Most Popular Commercials” in the number 11 slot up against others like Pepsi-Cola, Nike, Miller Life, and Budweiser who were spending millions and millions on their advertising. The “bungee” commercial never had more than \$500,000 in paid media behind it.

Alas, the commercial only ran for a few days and was taken off the air. People complained to Reebok and to the networks that it was encouraging people to commit suicide. Oh my God! What a warped interpretation. No sense of humor at all.

Reebok had none either. They couldn’t stand the pressure of the critics despite their original love for the commercial. And despite that they benefited mightily from the enormous amount of free publicity that it had caused and the widespread exposure of the new product.

Sometime later I had occasion to screen the Reebok spot for my Celestial Seasonings tea client. They had asked me to speak about advertising to a gathering of all of their employees. Immediately after I showed the spot, the auditorium erupted into a frenzy of laughing, clapping, and shouting with great appreciation. This was a younger group of people who “got it” and they responded to it. Suicide never crossed their minds.

The Reebok Pump commercial was one of the very best commercials ever produced, in my opinion. It stands up today as an incredible piece of creative work. It attracted attention, it announced a new product, it featured the product’s benefit, and it was a joke and fun. It worked even with only a few days’ exposure, but there was no way we could get it back on air. And Chiat/Day ended up getting fired.



At 3M we first went to work for their data diskette products division. They were attracted to us because of our good work at Chiat/Day San Francisco for several other technology companies, including Intel, Shugart, Apple Computer, and Businessland.



For 3M we were able to develop and get approved some really great advertising for what arguably is one of the duller and most uninteresting and mundane categories that ever existed: data storage diskettes. It didn't help either that diskettes were commodities virtually identical for all manufacturers. But the 3M clients hired us to differentiate their brand from all the others. And we didn't disappoint.

Someone once said, "A brand is like a shining beacon in the sea of ambiguity and complexity." Truly we delivered that beacon for 3M.

We developed TV and print. One ad was better than the next. These ads helped drive awareness and brand quality and differentiate 3M diskettes. The business went up and we won many creative awards for the work.



The ads were unusual in that they were all black-and-white with a very distinctive treatment of the 3M diskette logo jutting up as a triangle from the bottom of each page, with headlines like "3M introduces one less thing to worry about," "You should live so long," and "The cure for worry warts."

We were asked to present our credentials to several others at 3M. One of the other divisions we went to work for was the personal products division. They were attracted to what we had done and to our creative work in general. Or so they said when they hired us.

We were assigned a product called Buf-Puf, a facial cleaning product. We presented numerous campaigns, one after the other, all clever and relevant to what we were trying to say about the product. The product manager and the division president had come down with a sudden impairment resulting in consternation, trepidation, misgiving, and a general inability to make a decision to approve anything. Their angst level grew greater with each new campaign that was presented. And our patience diminished with each subsequent one.

This was a big and important company, and having 3M as a client was an important and prestigious asset. But the clients in this division were so constipated and afraid that I finally made a decision to tell them to go away. This was extremely difficult, as I did not like to give up business and because we had relationships with several other divisions.

But we had spent an enormous amount of time and creative energy trying to please them over many months with nothing to show for it. I was angry because we had presented much good work and they couldn't find a way to approve anything. It was also one of those situations where regardless of the number of valid arguments that may be put forth, including positive



ad research results, you just can't budge a client.

So I wrote a letter to the division president resigning the account. I was frustrated and it showed up in my letter. It was a classic example of clients who just couldn't bring themselves to approve innovative and clever advertising no matter how relevant it may have been. This was also one of those times where I wished I had not committed my feelings to the written word and put a postage stamp on it.

The craziest thing was that 3M had a reputation for being true innovators in everything they did. In order to do that, they had to inculcate the entire organization with the desire and need to seek out innovative solutions. Turns out in the case of Buf-Pufs that innovation did not extend beyond product development.

While I didn't regret resigning the account over these creative issues, my letter came back to haunt me. Alice Cuneo of *Ad Age* wrote an article entitled "Chiat's Goldberg Makes His Move." It had to do with my breakaway from Chiat/Day/Mojo and the purchase of the San Francisco operation and the founding of Goldberg Moser O'Neill.

In keeping with the media's need to generate sensationalism, Alice, who was West Coast editor, dredged up some things to make the article more controversial. Or, as she always used to say, "more balanced."

Somehow she had gotten her hands on the letter that I had sent to the president of the Consumer Specialties Division at 3M. She decided to include and quote parts of it in her article.

*I have worked with some of the most demanding and visionary entrepreneurial people. And I have worked with the most sophisticated of the packaged goods companies. At neither end of the spectrum have I seen such constipation and inability to apply sound judgment. As such we do not wish to be associated with a client that has such little regard for marketing innovation and is unwilling to accept any risks. We will find another who does!*

I wasn't really happy that the letter had found its way to *Ad Age* and that they had published parts of it. Turns out, however, it became a tremendous morale booster and motivator for the entire agency and publicly reinforced our commitment to the creative product and to our culture. It also may have contributed to my image, which you can read about in the next chapter, entitled "Sandpaper."

I am certain it added to our credentials as a creative agency and resulted in attracting more of those clients who desired inventive ads. It definitely reinforced my reputation as a tough and committed advertising executive. Which I was.



We had the Sutter Home Winery business for many years and did exceptional creative work for them during that time. The clients were pretty savvy when it came to the need to break through and make sure their advertising stood out and was seen or heard as its first priority.

They believed that if an ad wasn't seen or heard, it wasn't going to do any good. Seems like such a simple thought but it's amazing how few clients actually embrace it. It seems even more so when a client has untold amounts of money to spend on media. But most clients don't, and particularly smaller clients who like to try to maximize their efforts.

Our work for Sutter Home was always edgy. It stood out and it made an impact. One year we were running a radio campaign that in one ad made a bit of fun of the purple birthmark on Russian president Gorbachev's head. Another went after used car salesmen. And so on.

The campaign was very humorous and made excellent points about Sutter Home in terms of what we were trying to communicate. But our clients, all of them, suddenly got frozen feet. They had a difficult time approving the ads. By being strong and argumentative, we prevailed largely on the basis that they didn't have a lot of money and they needed to generate awareness and cut through and stand out from all the other wines that were advertising at the time. It was that argument that hit closest to home for them.

The campaign ran. It drove Sutter Home awareness up significantly along with its sales. Used car salesmen from all over the country called to complain, as did the Russian consulate. All proof that the advertising was being heard and working well. It also generated much added positive publicity for Sutter Home and their wines along the way.

On a similar note we produced a radio ad for Round Table Pizza, which featured a situation that everyone who ever went to the dentist can relate to. In the commercial the dentist told his patient, "Sit back, relax, you won't feel a thing." But in the background you heard the sound of a drill whirring away diabolically. Then the announcer delivered the line, "Get real. Get Round Table."

So the Round Table clients got a call from the American Dental Association demanding a cease and desist of the commercial. I mean lighten up. Isn't that what actually happens when you're in that dental chair? And moreover it was a joke. People nodded their heads and laughed.

You never know where "ad killers" can come from, or when, but you have to be strong and fight them off. This ad kept running over the ADA protestations because of a strong and creatively committed client. Maybe also because they received a lot of positive feedback. Having an agency that fought for the work to stay on the air helped too.



Maybe the perfect environment for creating great advertising without any hiccups or roadblocks happened when we went to work for Al Davis, owner of the Oakland Raiders. We were on an incredible timetable where we had to create and get ads on air in five days. Time is the great enemy of great work unless there is little of it. But obviously with less time, the ads had to be simple from a production standpoint.

The creative team, Brian O'Neill, Paul Carek, and Terry Rietta, came up with a cool and compelling TV campaign in 24 hours. Brian flew down to LA the next day with some rough tissues and met with Davis in his all-white house, with his all-white furniture, in his all-white jumpsuit. Davis approved everything with enthusiasm. We produced the work over the next three days and it aired the next week on time.

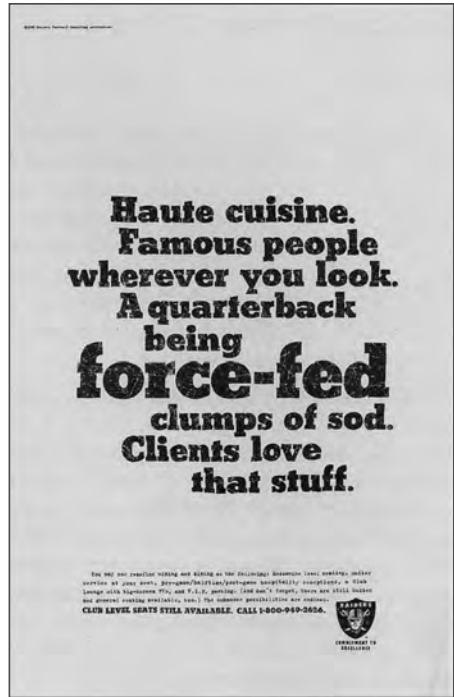
That's often how good advertising makes it through. An entrepreneurial mentality; a client who can say yes; a creative team that's creative; an agency that's committed to doing good work. And no time to dick around with the work. Al Davis was all "white" with me.

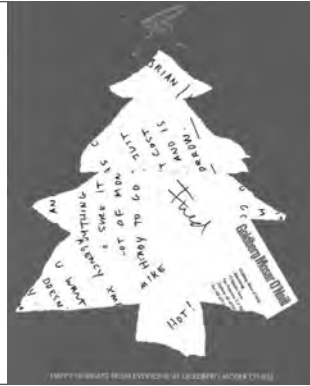


One day after I had a one-on-one meeting with Steve Jobs, he asked me to visit John Lassiter over at Pixar, where Jobs had begun to get involved. He wanted me to talk with Lassiter about advertising. So I set up a meeting and drove across the bay to see him. I spent an hour with him, after which he said he had no interest whatsoever, confirming my beliefs that selling advertising is hard. Of course, his lack of interest might have been fully justified since he ultimately wound up producing the highest grossing animated film ever, *Finding Nemo*. The film generated its own publicity and advertising and went on to win an Oscar.



There is another situation where you don't have to worry about getting client approval for a great concept. That is when the agency does self-promotion advertising.





I did this pretty regularly and it included the preparation of a holiday card every year. This was a project that I took very seriously and had the creative people start working on January 2 of the year of the card. Why? Because I was the client, and most of the creative people that worked on our holiday card will tell you that “clients” don’t come any tougher. I insisted that the card be absolutely great. Every year. Year after year.

I felt it was an extremely important affirmation of our creativity as an agency and I had a long list of recipients to whom I sent the card each year, including current clients, past clients, prospects, friends, enemies, recruiters, venture capitalists, competitive agencies, the press, and members of my family. It always generated positive responses and goodwill for Goldberg Moser O’Neill.

My last year-end card effort was in 1999 and the creative folks did not let me down. This was an almost impossible challenge since we had done incredibly great cards almost every year before.

For this final card we tried to exploit the fact that just about everyone in Corporate America was crazed over the problems with what was called Y2K,



the change in the calendar to the new millennium and the potential it had for creating chaos with computers and network systems around the world.

Sparing no expense (literally), the creative group designed a card that said on the front, "To help ease your fears about the millennium bug, this card contains a small computer chip which will play for you the familiar and comforting New Year's Eve song 'Auld Lang Syne.'"

When the card was opened, a tiny computer chip started playing the song "Take Me Out to the Ball Game."

At the bottom of the card was the message, "See, nothing to worry about. Happy Holidays from your friends at Goldberg Moser O'Neill."

It was without doubt one of our most clever endeavors in the holiday card arena. Actually in any arena. The timing was so perfect, coming at year-end just before the year 2000 was upon us. I thought it was so brilliant that I approved it and its production on first seeing it, despite what was a very expensive production cost.

After all, it was my last holiday card. It did such a great job reinforcing our creativity and inventiveness. I was always screeching for the more creative solutions to our clients' problems and felt obliged to put my money where my mouth was. But it was brilliant.

We received tons of positive response and feedback. The one that stood out the most was from Mickey Mouse himself, Michael Eisner, at the time the head of Disney.

He personally called and said, "Out of the probably 10,000 cards I've gotten, yours was by far the most creative I've seen. I just felt compelled to pick up the phone and tell you that."

We never did get any Disney business.

There are many situations in other chapters in this book that revolve around the issue of just how difficult the advertising business is because of how hard it is to sell innovation. And even when you get it sold, making sure it sticks is a challenge. I experienced this knotty problem repeatedly in somewhat different ways with Apple Computer, California Cooler, Dell Computer, Worlds of Wonder, Jell-O Gelatin, and many other clients.

One lesson emerges from it all, and clients would do well to think about it when they ask an advertising agency to develop their advertising.

You can't make history by looking over your shoulder.