

Getting a Grip on AT&T

The first television commercial I ever worked on was for New York Telephone, which ultimately was consolidated within AT&T as part of a restructuring of the industry. The assignment was simple, straightforward, and not very exciting — the perfect training ground for a novice copywriter.

The objective was to alert people who were moving that they needed to arrange for their new phone service a few months in advance, if they wanted to be connected on the day they actually moved. I am fairly certain that this rather excessive requirement was a result of the fact that at the time, the phone company enjoyed the power and prerogatives of a monopoly, not required to compete for customers by offering anything approximating accommodating service. Being the only game in town, they set the rules, and consumers had little choice but to live by them.

It was not surprising, therefore, that the attitude of the phone company management was typified by the arrogance of the unchallenged. They ruled their company, their suppliers, and the public with an iron hand and the mindlessness of an automaton governed by processes and procedures that would not permit any deviation regardless of its potential merit. They had somewhere between little and no tolerance for any new

idea that might require adaptation or adjustment of their etched-in-stone methodologies. They didn't much care what their customers thought and they cared even less about the opinions of their advertising agency.

Our people lived in constant fear of their displeasure, not only because that is the inherent nature of the relationship between agencies and their clients, but also for the more practical reason that if we lost their business, there was no other local phone company to replace them.

This was the mission and the milieu in which I would bring to bear all the powers of sight, sound, language, motion, drama, and creativity to craft a memorable and persuasive message delivered in thirty seconds. But given the nature of the client, the fear and trembling they engendered among our agency account executives, and my own inexperience with the genre, I reckoned that this was no time for me to break new ground in television advertising.

I devised a script of such obvious simplicity, such uncontroversial sincerity, such unabashed unpretentiousness, a scene so extraordinarily insipid as to delight my agency colleagues and earn a grim nod of approval from our client. The commercial would open on a couple — young, white, and without even the slightest hint of New York's melting-pot ethnicity — entering their new apartment filled with unopened boxes and unarranged furniture, clearly at the moment of moving in. But amid this chaos, one object of normalcy, one beacon of contact with the best of all possible worlds of order and stability sat prominently on the floor — their newly installed telephone. It was there, as the announcer knowingly intoned, because they had the foresight and vision to have ordered it in the timely manner dictated by New York Telephone. Had they failed to do so, the voice of the company gravely observed, they would have been unable to reach whomever the young man was now happily dialing.

It was at this climactic moment during the filming of the

commercial that everything suddenly began to unravel. As the camera rolled to capture the moment the actor dialed his first number on his new phone, the client leaped from his chair.

“Stop! Stop the camera! Stop everything!” he shouted.

Even the urgency of his order didn’t completely convey the seriousness of the moment. Since this was my first commercial production, I didn’t immediately realize the enormous breach of etiquette, along with the violation of various union rules, that had just occurred. No one could give orders to the film crew except the director. Everyone on the set was stunned, no one more so than our account executive, who was responsible for guaranteeing that the client’s comfort, wishes, and concerns were totally attended to.

“What?” he gasped. “What happened? What’s the problem?”

“The problem,” replied the client, imitating our account man and fixing his furious stare on the actor, “is him.”

“I don’t understand,” our account man answered. “He’s dialing a number just like the script says. What is he doing wrong?” he asked, his tone somewhere between a whimper and a whine.

The client turned from the actor and looked at our account executive with an expression of utter disbelief mixed with clear contempt.

“What he is doing wrong,” he mimicked, “is that he is out of compliance with the established procedures of the New York Telephone Company, which you and your company,” he added threateningly, “ought to be well aware of.”

Having been the creator of this moment of apparent disaster and being only a writer who would not necessarily be expected to know, much less understand, the intricacies of the client’s operations, I thought I might take advantage of my assumed ignorance to clarify the issue. And seeing the sweat that had broken out on my colleague’s beaten brow, I wasn’t sure he was capable of even the obvious next question.

“If you can tell me what you don’t want the actor to do,” I said, “I’m sure we can revise the script.”

“What I don’t want the actor to do,” he replied, this time mocking me, “is to hold the phone receiver in a blatantly unauthorized manner.”

I looked at the actor, who hadn’t moved an inch during these exchanges, still with the receiver at his ear.

“How should he hold it?” I asked, in a tone as measured as I could muster to avoid conveying the incredulity I actually felt.

“The receiver of a telephone is held with the thumb and all four fingers of the hand wrapped around the center of the stem, equidistant between the earpiece and the speaker. It is never, ever, held *that way*,” he said, tossing a glance at the petrified actor, “with the finger extended along the length of the receiver.”

At this moment, our account man emerged from his cata-tonic state.

“Of course! Yes, now I see it!” he exclaimed. And with that, he pointed at the actor, exclaiming, “You heard the client. Hold the phone *properly!*”

The client returned to his seat with a look of triumph. Our account executive collapsed, more than sat down, in his chair. The actor continued to stand frozen in place.

The director, who all the while had stood by just looking back and forth between the client, our account man, and me without uttering a word despite his mouth hanging open in disbelief, finally reestablished command of the session.

“Okay,” he said, now with the bored detachment of a cinematic artiste who would only lower himself to doing commercials as a way to pursue his dream of directing a Hollywood film, “let’s get those fucking fingers around the fucking phone and get this fucking thing over with.”