

# Foreword

Despite my more than forty years at BBDO, one of the world's largest advertising agencies, this is not a “how-to” book on advertising. It's not about policies, procedures, or process. Rather, it's a collection of stories that happened *in* advertising. It's about people with whom I worked and all kinds of off-the-wall, or at least off-the-beaten-path, events in the business.

It's about clients, many of them anointed — and some self-appointed — moguls in the business world. It's about the occasional members of the underworld — mobsters whom we sometimes had to deal with in order to get our work done. It's about famous personalities from entertainment, sports, and politics — often megastars who endorsed and promoted our clients' products. It's about the wackiness of the advertising business and sometimes of the business world in general, which is the case far more often than you might imagine.

Some of my friends and colleagues have urged me to write something instructional or inspirational, or to advance a point of view about the future of the business, or to present a rationale supporting the importance of what we do. Frankly, I much more enjoy telling stories I think are funny, because at the end of the day, compared to most vocations, advertising

just doesn't rank as a serious business. It's not called "the ad *game*" for nothing.

I remember being a young nervous wreck moments before the top management of the agency would enter the BBDO boardroom to review the status of one of the accounts for which I wrote ads and commercials. I had just recently joined the agency and was not exactly feeling as though the advertising world was my oyster. The account executive, noticing my neurotic state, shook his head, smiling.

"Calm down, Allen," he said. "It's just a game."

In time, I came to realize that no matter how many hundreds of billions of dollars are spent on advertising every year, and regardless of how seriously some people who run agencies may take themselves, there is at least as much lunacy as logic where Madison Avenue crosses the streets of the corporate world.

These stories are living proof.

But in no way do they deny the incredibly hard work, the mind-opening creativity, the dedication and commitment to insight and innovation, and the significant contributions to commerce that I have seen in the advertising world.

Many others have chronicled how advertising works, what it takes to do it well, who are its best practitioners, why it is critical to entrepreneurial competition and the healthy growth of free market economies, and so on. Among them is my colleague at BBDO for nearly three decades, Phil Dusenberry, in his recent book, *Then We Set His Hair on Fire*. As earnest as Phil's book is, his title nonetheless headlines a world quite different, to say the least, from most other businesses.

When they meet, it is often a face-off between the largely left-brain world of business and the predominantly right-brain practice of advertising.

Left-brain thinking is ostensibly (I suppose I should do this alphabetically) coherent, consistent, logical, methodical,

objective, orderly, rational, reasonable, sequential, and systematic. Theoretically, the right side of the brain governs (this time in appropriately random order) our creative, intuitive, subjective, emotional, artistic, indiscriminate, aesthetic, and spontaneous inclinations. According to these widely accepted beliefs, most of us behave more under the influence of one side of our brains than the other.

So when you hear someone described as a businessman or businesswoman, you might expect that the left side of the brain dominates his or her thinking. The world of manufacturing and more recently, the newer world of information — both affected by the developing phenomenon of globalization — are typified by their growing need for organization, finance, technology, and a host of complicated relationships between many more specific and relatively objective disciplines. In business school, you study economics, accounting, marketing, corporate strategy, management, labor relations, and the like, along with the logistics of producing, distributing, and ultimately selling goods or services at a profit throughout more and more of the world. You won't find too many courses in art, music, drama, literature, poetry, or philosophy in the MBA curriculum.

And while you will encounter people with business degrees in advertising, a far greater force in agencies comes from the right brains of the writers, art directors, and designers of traditional as well as new technology communications — in short, the creative people and the consumer psychologists who guide their efforts. Advertising defies the norms of business by arguably leaning well to the right side of the brain. Thus, one of the most perceptive and often quoted comments about advertising from John Wanamaker, the department store developer, who said he knew half his advertising was a waste of money, but he didn't know *which* half.

You can see recent dramatic proof of the disarray and devastation that can occur when these two diametrically differ-

ent dimensions of the human mind come into conflict. Consider the period in the mid-to-late 1990s when dotcom companies driven by the Internet were started and run mostly by right-brain thinkers. The dotcom bubble is what ultimately happened in business when the right brains — aided and abetted by advisors and advocates with *no* brains — took over from the left brains. When the bubble inevitably burst, it blew up in the faces of practically everyone, even people who should have known better. Lou Dobbs, then the CNN guru of business, told me in 1999, when the Dow Jones Industrial Average had climbed past 10,000, that he saw no reason why it would not continue its surge beyond 12,000 within that very year. A few months later, he left CNN to start his own dotcom, no doubt with some intention of cashing in on the craze. Six *years* later, after its precipitous plunge, the Dow was finally back where it had been. And so was Lou. But while he may have suffered mostly from embarrassment, millions of others were left in financial ruins.

Admittedly, there was nothing funny about this right-brain collision with the left-brain world of business. But that destructive episode aside, funny things very often do happen, none more than from the mix of advertising and big business. That's what these stories are about — the laughable or ironic or just curious things that have happened to me and people I've known over the past four decades.

The capriciousness of the advertising business makes it a breeding ground for unusual if not unstable characters. It's an almost daily exhibition of madcap behavior. It's a haven for people trained for other kinds of work, but who failed at, or became bored with, whatever they had studied to do. It's populated by the highly educated as well as the questionably literate. In any meeting, you might hear wonderfully creative ideas from people who are bright, intuitive, witty, and clever, alternating with incoherent blather from others with little or no idea what they're talking about. It's replete with personalities hob-

bled by their continuous conflict between sometimes justified egomania and ever-present insecurity, riding an emotional rollercoaster where success or failure is determined by people and events beyond their control.

If it sounds something like Hollywood, that's because the entertainment business is another major enterprise in which right-brain thinking dominates. It's surely debatable as to which business is crazier. But unlike Hollywood, advertising is far less driven by money, power, or fame. Of course, you can make good money in advertising, but top executives and stars in Hollywood earn considerably more. You have very little power in advertising, since in almost all cases, the clients call the shots and they can replace an agency at the drop of a sales curve. As for fame, how many people outside advertising have ever heard of anyone in it? If you're neither in the business nor a client, my name will no doubt come as news to you, unless we're related or one of us owes the other money.

In any event, I'd argue that advertising people are considerably more humane and surely more real, at least physically, than the folks in Tinseltown. Most of the hair, noses, eyes, chins, breasts, stomachs, buttocks, thighs, and other body parts in advertising have not been surgically altered. And mentally, we probably don't become as detached from reality by living in a fishbowl, constantly exposed to and judged by a frenzied press and fickle public.

At the end of the day, when you work in advertising, you get to live quite a few right-brain moments in business. These stories are some of them. They're about actual events I either took part in or were told to me. I couldn't make up stuff like this, although admittedly I've taken the liberty of recreating dialogue and adding some embellishment here and there for emphasis. As in the advertising I've written, the speeches I've given, or the presentations I've made to clients over the years, I'm not above using a little exaggeration once in a while to make a point.

As for the people involved, in almost all cases I'm using their real names. Infrequently, there's an admitted pseudonym if the situation might hurt or embarrass someone. It's not that I'm trying to show how considerate I am. It's just that I don't have enough years left to make new friends or waste time with lawyers. The only other exceptions are a few stories in which it's *my* well-being I'm worried about. Using the actual names of certain people in these cases wouldn't particularly harm *them*. It would, however, likely cause severe damage to my health, starting with my kneecaps.

So these stories are not really about advertising per se. They're not about the rules or strategies or scoring of the game, but more about the people who play it, and their unconventional dealings with the world of business. From logic run amuck, to the corporate equivalent of a vaudeville pratfall, many experiences over the years have left me scratching my head or laughing out loud.

Advertising can be nerve wracking, ego wrenching, personality warping, family breaking, and in many other ways, life altering. It's not the easiest business. But it is a *funny* business.

That's the part I'd like to share with you.