Figure 2.1 This early ad for my friend Alex Bogusky's agency in Miami makes a good point. A smart strategy can take the same message and make it work better.

2

A Sharp Pencil Works Best

Some thoughts on getting started

IS THIS A GREAT JOB OR WHAT?

As an employee in an agency creative department, you will spend most of your time with your feet up on a desk working on an idea. Across the desk, also with his feet up, will be your partner—in my case, an art director. And he will want to talk about movies.

In fact, if the truth be known, you will spend a large part of your career with your feet up talking about movies.

The brief is approved, the work is due in two days, the pressure's building, and your muse is sleeping off a drunk behind a Dumpster or twitching in a ditch somewhere. Your pen lies useless. So you talk movies.

That's when the project manager comes by. Project managers stay on top of a job as it moves through the agency. This means they also stay on top of *you.* They'll come by to remind you of the horrid things that happen to snail-assed creative people who don't come through with the goods on time.

So you try to get your pen moving. And you begin to work. And working, in this business, means staring at your partner's shoes.

That's what I've been doing from 9:00 to 5:00 for more than 20 years—staring at the bottom of the disgusting tennis shoes on the feet of my partner, parked on the desk across from *my* disgusting tennis shoes. This is the sum and substance of life at an agency.

In movies, they almost never capture this simple, dull, workday reality of life as a creative person. Don't get me wrong; it's not an easy job. In fact, some days it's almost painful coming up with good ideas. As author Red Smith said, "There's nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein."[1] But the way it looks on *Mad Men,* creative people solve complicated marketing problems between wisecracks, cocktails, and office affairs.

Since the 1970s, the movie and TV agencies have always been kooky sorts of places where odd things are nailed to the walls, where weirdly dressed creative people lurch through the hallways metabolizing last night's chemicals, and the occasional goat wanders through in the background.

But that isn't what agencies are like—at least not the four or five agencies where I've worked. Again, don't get me wrong. An ad agency is not a bank. It's not an insurance company. There is a certain amount of joie de vivre in an agency's atmosphere.

This isn't surprising. Here you have a tight-knit group of young people, many of them making significant salaries just for sitting around with their feet up, solving marketing problems. And talking about movies.

It's a great job because you'll never get bored. One week you'll be knee-deep in the complexities of the financial business, selling market-indexed annuities. The next, you're touring a dog food factory asking about the difference between a "kibble" and a "bit." You'll learn about the business *of* business by studying the operations of hundreds of different kinds of enterprises.

The movies and television also portray advertising as a schlocky business—a parasitic lamprey that dangles from the belly of the business beast. A sort of side business that doesn't really manufacture anything in its own right, where it's all flash over substance, and where silver-tongued salespeople pitch snake oil to a bovine public, sandblast their wallets, and make the 5:20 for Long Island.

Ten minutes of work at a real agency should be enough to convince even the most cynical that an agency's involvement in a client's business is anything but superficial. Every cubicle on every floor at an agency is occupied by someone intensely involved in improving the client's day-to-day business, in shepherding its assets more wisely, sharpening its business focus, widening its market, improving the product, and creating new products.

Ten minutes of work at a real agency should be enough to convince a cynic that you can't sell a product to someone who has no need for it. That you can't sell a product to someone who can't afford it. And that good advertising is about the worst thing that can happen to a bad product.

In 10 minutes the cynic will also see there's no back room where snickering airbrush artists paint images of breasts into ice cubes, no slush fund to buy hookers for the clients' conventions, and no big table in the conference room where employees have sex during the office Christmas party. (Um, scratch that last one.)

Advertising isn't just some mutant offspring of capitalism. It isn't a bunch of caffeine junkies dreaming up clever ways to talk about existing products.

Advertising is one of the main gears in the machinery of a huge economy, responsible in great part for creating and selling products that contribute to one of the highest standards of living the world's ever seen. That three-mile run you just clocked on your Nike+ GPS watch was created in large part by an agency: R/GA. The Diet Coke you had when you cooled down at home was co-created with an agency: SSCB. These are just two of tens of thousands of stories out there where marketer and agency worked together to bring a product—and with it, jobs and industry—to life.

Like it or not, advertising's a key ingredient in a competitive economy and has created a stable place for itself in America's business landscape. It's now a mature industry, and for most companies, a business necessity.

Why most of it totally *blows chunks,* well, that remains a mystery.

Carl Ally, founder of one of the great agencies of the 1970s, had a theory about why most advertising stinks: "There's a tiny percentage of all the work that's great and a tiny percentage that's lousy. But most of the work—well, it's just there. That's no knock on advertising. How many great restaurants are there? Most aren't good or bad, they're just adequate. The fact is, excellence is tough to achieve in any field."[2]

WHY NOBODY EVER CHOOSES BRAND X.

There comes a point when you can't talk about movies anymore and you actually have to get some work done.

You are faced with a blank slate, and you must, in a fixed amount of time, fill it with something interesting enough to be remembered by a customer who, in the course of a day, will see thousands of other ad messages.

You are not writing a novel somebody pays money for. You are not writing a sitcom somebody enjoys watching. You're writing something most people try to avoid. This is the sad, indisputable truth at the bottom of our business. Nobody wants to see what you are about to put down on paper. People not only dislike advertising, they're becoming immune to most of it—like insects building up resistance to DDT.

The way Eric Silver put it was this: "Advertising is what happens on TV when people go to the bathroom."

When people aren't indifferent to advertising, they're angry at it. If you don't believe me, go to the opening night of a big Hollywood movie. When the third commercial comes up on the screen and it's not the movie, those moans you hear won't be audience ecstasy. People don't *want* to see your stinkin' commercial. Your spot is the comedian who comes on stage before a Rolling Stones concert. The audience is drunk and they're angry, and they came to see the Stones. And now a *comedian* has the microphone? You had better be great.

So you try to come up with some advertising concepts that can defeat these barriers of indifference and anger. Maybe it's an ad. Maybe it's an online experience. Or even street theater. *Whatever* the ideas may be, they aren't conjured in a vacuum. Because you're working off a strategy—a sentence or two describing the key competitive message your ad must communicate.

In addition to a strategy, you are working with a brand. Unless it's a new one, that brand brings with it all kinds of baggage, some good and some bad. Ad people call it a brand's *equity.*

A brand isn't just the name on the box. It isn't the thing in the box, either. A brand is the sum total of all the emotions, thoughts, images, history, possibilities, and gossip that exist in the marketplace about a certain company.

What's remarkable about brands is that in categories where products are essentially all alike, the best-known and most well-liked brand has the winning card. In *The Want Makers,* Mike Destiny, former group director for England's Allied Breweries, was quoted: "The many competitive brands [of beer] are virtually identical in terms of taste, color and alcohol delivery, and after two or three pints even an expert couldn't tell them apart. So the consumer is literally drinking the advertising, and the advertising is the brand."[3]

A brand isn't just a semantic construct, either. The relationship between the brand and its customers has monetary value; it can amount to literally billions of dollars. Brands are assets, and companies rightfully include them on their financial balance sheets. In Barry's *The Advertising Concept Book,* he quotes a smart fellow named Nick Shore on the power of brands: "If you systematically dismantled the entire operation of the Coca-Cola Company and left them with only their brand name, management could rebuild the company within five years. Remove the brand *name* and the enterprise would die within five years."[4]

When you're writing for a brand, you're working with a fragile, extraordinarily valuable thing. Not a lightweight job. Its implications are marvelous. The work you're about to do may not make the next million for the brand's marketer or bring them to Chapter 11. Maybe it's just an online banner that runs for a week. Yet it's an opportunity to sharpen that brand's image, even if just a little bit. It's a little like being handed the Olympic torch. You won't bear this important symbol all the way from Athens. Your job is just to move it a few miles down the road—without dropping it in the dirt along the way.

STARING AT YOUR PARTNER'S SHOES.

For me, writing any piece of advertising is unnerving.

You sit down with your partner and put your feet up. You read the strategist's brief, draw a square on a pad of paper, and you both stare at the damned thing. You stare at each other's shoes. You look at the square. You give up and go to lunch.

You come back. The empty square is still there. Is the square gonna be a poster? Will it be a branded sitcom, a radio spot, a website? You don't know. All you know is the square's still empty.

So you both go through the stories you find online, on the client's website and other places. You go through the reams of material the account team left in your office. You read that the bourbon you're working on is manufactured in a little town with a funny name. You point this out to your partner.

Your partner keeps staring out the window at some speck in the distance. (Or is that a speck on the glass? Can't be sure.) He says, "Oh." Down the hallway, a phone rings.

Paging through an industry magazine, your partner points out that distillers sometimes rotate the aging barrels a quarter turn every few months. You go, "Hmm."

On some site, you read how moss on trees happens to grow faster on the sides that face a distillery's aging house.

Now *that's* interesting.

You feel the shapeless form of an idea begin to bubble up from the depths. You poise your pencil over the page . . . and it all comes out in a flash of creativity. *(Whoa. Someone call 9-1-1. Report a fire on my drawing pad 'cause I am SMOKIN' hot.)* You put your pencil down, smile, and read what you've written. It's complete rubbish. You call it a day and slink out to see a movie.

This process continues for several days, even weeks, and then one day without warning, an idea just shows up at your door, all nattied up like a Jehovah's Witness. You don't know where it comes from. It just shows up.

That's how you come up with ideas. Sorry, there's no big secret. That's basically the drill.

A guy named James Webb Young, a copywriter from the 1940s, laid out a five-step process of idea generation that holds water today.

1. You gather as much information on the problem as you can. You read, you underline stuff, you ask questions, you visit the factory.
2. You sit down and actively attack the problem.
3. You drop the whole thing and go do something else while your subconscious mind works on the problem.
4. "Eureka!"
5. You figure out how to implement your idea.[5]

Step two is what this book is about: attacking the problem.

This process of creativity isn't just an aimless sort of blue-skying—a mental version of bad modern dance. Rather, it's what author Joseph Heller (a former copywriter) called "a controlled daydream, a directed reverie." It's imagination disciplined by a single-minded business purpose. It is this clash of free-flowing imagination and focused business purpose that makes the creative process such a big mess.

WHY THE CREATIVE PROCESS IS EXACTLY LIKE WASHING A PIG.

I'm serious. Creativity is exactly like washing a pig. It's messy. It has no rules. No clear beginning, middle, or end. It's kind of a pain in the ass, and when you're done, you're not sure if the pig is really clean or why you were washing a pig in the first place.

The creative process is chaotic to its core and, for me at least, the washing-a-pig metaphor works on several levels.

The account person walks in and says, "Dude, the client's coming here at 3:00 PM, and I need you to wash that pig over there."

So you go online to see if there's any advice or inspiration, kinda hoping you'll find titles like "So You Want to Wash a Pig" or "Pig Washing: The McGuire 4-Step Method."

But you don't. So you find your partner, grab a hose, maybe a bucket, and some soap. And you just sorta start. You've never done anything like this before, so you feel kind of stupid at first. All your first attempts fail messily. The pig keeps getting away from you and for awhile you think you won't be able to do this.

Around 2:00 your partner tries distracting the pig with some vanilla wafers he found, and suddenly between the two of you, you think maybe the pig is starting to get clean. As the client pulls into the parking lot, you're both drying off the pig and second-guessing your work: "Is the pig really clean?"

Usually what happens here is that the client walks in and says, "Hey, I was thinkin'. Could you guys maybe wash a *warthog* instead?"

You go home wondering many things, mostly why you spent the day washing a pig.

I'm not the only one who thinks washing a pig is a decent metaphor for the creative process. A professor in the Advertising Department at Florida State University, a fellow named Tom Laughon, agreed that washing a pig might make for a good "lab experience" in chaos and creativity. You can see his class in the middle of the creative process in Figure 2.2 and the entire series of photos is online.

In the videos you can sorta see where they figured out the part about vanilla wafers, which is basically their moment of inspiration that moved the creative job into the completion phase.

Without that little moment of inspiration, your pig's gonna stay dirty. The problem with inspiration is it visits whenever the hell it wants. It's random. With a handful of creative jobs, inspiration may come quickly but most days it feels like our muse is sleeping off a crack binge somewhere in the stairwell of an abandoned federal building. It's because inspiration is random that it's so hard for a creative person to say exactly when a job will be done.

In his book *Hegarty on Advertising,* Hegarty puts it this way: "Creativity isn't a process. *Advertising* is a process. Creativity is a manic construction of absurd,

Figure 2.2 I'm serious. The entire creative process is exactly *like washing a pig.*

unlikely irreverent thoughts and feelings that somehow, when put together, change the way we see things. That's why it's magic. If you want to be ordinary, then, yes, use a process."[6]

It is from this uncertainty that all the pressure and insanity of the agency business is born. In fact, any enterprise where someone pays someone else to perform a creative act has this tension built into it, whether it's a client paying an agency or a studio paying a screenwriter.

This simple observation about the role of inspiration in the creative process, although obvious to most creative people, is lost on many. The fact is, most normal people have jobs where they can survey the amount of work needed, make an estimate, and then complete the work in the allotted time. We, on the other hand, have to wash a pig. It's really hard to say when the pig's gonna be clean. By three o'clock? Maybe. Maybe not.

My old friend Mike Lescarbeau wrote this about the creative process: "Coming up with ideas is not so much a step-by-step process as it is a lonely vigil interrupted infrequently by great thoughts, whose origins are almost always a mystery."

So you start to write. Or doodle. (It doesn't matter which. Good copywriters can think visually; good art directors can write; good technical people can

concept.) You just pick up a pencil and begin. All beginnings are humble, but after several days, you begin to translate that flat-footed strategy into something interesting.

The final idea may be a visual. It may be a headline. It may be both. It may arrive whole, like Athena arising out of Zeus's head. Or in pieces—a scribble made by the art director last Friday fits beautifully with a headline the writer comes up with over the weekend. Eventually you get to an idea that dramatizes the benefit of your client's product or service. *Dramatizes* is the key word. You must dramatize it in a unique, provocative, compelling, and memorable way.

And at the center of this thing you come up with must be a promise. The reader must get something out of the deal. Steve Hayden, most famous for penning Apple Computer's "1984" commercial, said, "If you want to be a well-paid copywriter, please your client. If you want to be an award-winning copywriter, please yourself. If you want to be a great copywriter, please your reader."[7]

Here's the hard part. You have to please your reader, and you have to do it in a few seconds.

Paul Keye, a well-known West Coast creative, had a good way of putting this: "How to write an interesting ad? Try this: 'Hello. I want to tell you something important or interesting or useful or funny. It's about you. I won't take very long and there's a prize if you stay till the very end.'"[8]

The way I picture it is this: It's as if you're riding down an elevator with your customer. You're going down only 15 floors. So you have only a few seconds to tell him one thing about your product. One thing. And you have to tell it to him in such an interesting way that he thinks about the promise you've made as he leaves the building, waits for the light, and crosses the street. You have to come up with some little *thing* that sticks in the customer's mind.

By "thing," I don't mean gimmick. Anybody can come up with an unrelated gimmick. Used car dealers are the national experts with their contrived sales events. *("The boss went on vacation, and our accountant went crazy!")* You might capture somebody's attention for a few seconds with a gimmick. But once the ruse is over and the salesman comes out of the closet in his plaid coat, the customer will only resent you.

Bill Bernbach: "I've got a great gimmick. Let's tell the truth."

The best answers always arise out of the problem itself. Out of the product. Out of the realities of the buying situation. Those are the only paints you have to make your picture, but they are all you need. Any shtick you drag into the situation that is not organically part of the product or customer reality will not be authentic and will ring false.

You have more than enough to work with, even in the simplest advertising problem. You have your client's product with its brand equities and its benefits. You have the competition's product and its weaknesses. You have the price-quality-value math of the two products. And then you have what the customer brings to the situation—pride, greed, vanity, envy, insecurity, and a hundred other human emotions, wants, and needs, one of which your product satisfies.

THE SUDDEN CESSATION OF STUPIDITY.

"You've got to play this game with fear and arrogance."

That's one of Kevin Costner's better lines from the baseball movie *Bull Durham.* I've always thought it had an analog in the advertising business.

There has never been a time in my career I have faced the empty page and not been scared. I was scared as a junior-coassistant-copy-cub-intern. And I'm scared today. Who am I to think I can write something that will interest millions of people?

Then, a day after winning a medal in the One Show (just about the toughest national advertising awards show there is), I feel bulletproof. For one measly afternoon, I'm an Ad God. The next day I'm back with my feet up on the table, sweating bullets again.

Somewhere between these two places, however, is where you want to be—a balance between a healthy skepticism of your reason for living and a solar confidence in your ability to come up with a fantastic idea every time you sit down to work. Living at either end of the spectrum will debilitate you. In fact, it's probably best to err on the side of fear.

A small, steady pilot light of fear burning in your stomach is part and parcel of the creative process. If you're doing something that's truly new, you're in an area where there are no signposts yet—no up and down, no good or bad. It seems to me, then, that fear is the constant traveling companion of advertising people who fancy themselves on the cutting edge.

You have to believe that you'll finally get a great idea. You will. You'll probably fail a few times along the way, but like director Woody Allen says, "If you're not failing every now and again, it's a sign you're not doing anything very innovative."

And there is nothing quite like the feeling of cracking a difficult advertising problem. What seemed impossible when you sat down to face the empty white square now seems so obvious. It is this very *obviousness* of a great idea that prompted Polaroid camera inventor, E. H. Land, to define creativity as "the sudden cessation of stupidity." You look at the idea you've just come up with, slap your forehead, and go, "Of course, it has to be this."

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE BENJAMINS.

Solving a difficult advertising problem is a great feeling. Even better is the day, weeks, or months later when an account executive pops his head in your door and says sales are up. It never ceases to amaze me when that happens. Not that I doubt the power of advertising, but sometimes it's just hard to follow the thread from the scratchings on my pad all the way to a ringing cash register in, say, Akron, Ohio. Yet it works.

Figure 2.3 Two screen shots of the Nike+ app.

People generally deny advertising has any effect on them. They'll insist they're immune to it. And perhaps, taken on a person-by-person basis, the effect of your ad is indeed modest. But over time, the results are undeniable. It's like wind on desert sands. The changes occurring at any given hour on any particular dune are small: a grain here, a handful there. But over time, the whole landscape changes. At other times, an idea can change a brand's fortune very quickly.

The Nike+ campaign from R/GA is an incredible example of creative and monetary success. In 2006, Nike collaborated with Apple to create a device that recorded the distance and speed of a runner's workout. What made it a monstrous idea is that these statistics could then be instantly uploaded to the runner's app (Figure 2.3) or personal page on the Nike+ website, where it's shared with runners all over the world. That the device did other cool stuff like play particular songs at specific parts of a run, that was just icing on the cake. Cooler was the international online community the site created. And as for sales, it helped move Nike's share of the running category from 48 percent to 61 percent in just three years.[9]

More anecdotal, but equally impressive, were the results of the trade campaign created to attract advertisers to the pages of *Rolling Stone* magazine. After Fallon McElligott's Hall of Fame print campaign, "Perception/Reality," was up and running, publisher Jann Wenner was reported as saying, "It was like someone came in with a wheelbarrow of money and dumped it on the floor."

This is a great business; make no mistake. I see what copywriter Tom Monahan meant when he said, "Advertising is the rock 'n' roll of the business world."

BRAND = ADJECTIVE.

Each brand has its own core value. Dan Wieden says it another way: brands are verbs. "Nike exhorts, IBM solves, and Sony dreams." Even Mr. Whipple, as bad as he was, helped Charmin equal soft.

This is an important point, and before we talk about strategy, it bears some discussion.

People don't have time to figure out what your brand stands for. It is up to you to make your brand stand for something. The way to do it is to make your brand stand for one thing. Brand = adjective. Everything you do with regard to advertising and design—whether it's creating the product or designing the website—should adhere to absolutely draconian standards of simplicity.

I was on the phone with a client who works for a nationwide chain of grocery stores. This director of marketing mentioned in passing that the number of brands on the shelves in his stores had just passed 50,000.

That's 50,000 brands competing for a customer's attention—50,000.

And that was five years ago. There has to be many more by now.

This number alone should take the spring from the step of any advertising person whose job it is to make the silhouette of a brand show up on a customer's radar. Until recently, it's been reasonable to assume that the way to make customers remember a brand is to differentiate it from its competitors: "The model of car we're selling has incredible styling, and the other guy's brand doesn't."

But your competition isn't just the other guy's car.

When you sit down to create something for a client, you are competing with *every* brand out there. You're competing with every marketing message that's running on every platform on every device on the face of the planet. You're competing with the 50,000+ packaged-good brands on the shelves at the grocery store, as well as every other product and service and logo in the country. You're competing for attention with every TV commercial that has ever aired, with every text message ever sent, with each billboard on every mile of highway, with the entire bandwidth across the radio, and with every 1 of the 100 trillion pixels on the Web. *All those other advertisers want a piece of your customer's attention.* And they're going to get it at your client's expense.

Seen from this perspective, through the teeming forest of brands vying for customers' attention, cutting through the clutter may require more than giving a sharp knife-edge to your brand. It calls for a big, noisy, smoking chain saw. But a kick-ass Super Bowl commercial isn't what I mean by a chain saw.

The chain saw you need is simplicity.

SIMPLE = GOOD.

When you think about it, what other antidote to clutter can there possibly be *except* simplicity?

Perhaps we should try cutting through the clutter with clutter that's extremely entertaining? Should we air clutter that tests well? Or clutter that wins awards, or clutter with a big 800 number?

I propose that the only possible antidote to clutter is draconian simplicity.

Draconian simplicity involves stripping your brand's value proposition down to the bone and then again to the marrow, carving away until you get down to brand = adjective. Make your brand stand for one thing. Pair it with one adjective.

But which adjective?

If you ask consumers in focus groups to talk about buying a car, with sufficient amounts of Dr. Pepper and M&M's, they will amaze you with their complex analysis of the auto-buying process. I'm not kidding. These groups go on for hours, days. But if you ask a guy in a bar, "Hey, talk to me about cars," he'll break it down to a word—usually an adjective.

"Yeah, gonna get me a Jeep. They're rugged."

Porsches, they're fast. BMWs perform. And Volvos, they're . . . what?

If you said "safe," you've given the same answer I've received from literally every person I've ever asked. *Ever.*

In every speech I've ever given, anywhere around the world, when I ask audiences, "What does Volvo stand for?" I hear the same answer every time: "Safety." Audiences in Berlin, Los Angeles, Helsinki, Copenhagen, and New York City all give the same answer. The money Volvo has spent on branding has paid off handsomely. Volvo has successfully spot welded that one adjective to their marque. And here's the interesting bit: in the past couple of years, Volvo hasn't even made it onto the top 10 list of safest cars on the market. So here's a brand that, having successfully paired its logo to one adjective, rides the benefit of this simple position in customers' minds long after its products no longer even *merit* the distinction. Such is the power of simplicity.

The adjective you choose is key. Once it's married to a brand, divorce can be ugly. On the good side, once it's paired with the brand, that one square foot of category space is taken and nobody else can claim it.

If you find yourself in a position where all the good adjectives are taken, don't settle for the second best. *("Refreshing" is taken? Oh well . . . can we have "quenching?")* Second best won't be different enough. Try a polar opposite. Or consider a flanking move. In ketchup, the adjective everyone fought over for a long time was to be the "tomato-iest." Then one day Heinz came along claiming it was the "slowest," and sales went up—and stayed up. You can also try creating a whole new adjective that alters the playing field in your favor. (Axe cologne's "Bom Chicka Wah Wah" comes to mind.) The right adjective, the answer, will come out of the product—or from your customers. Ask them. They know the answer.

Find an adjective and stick to it. But it's the sticking to it that so many brands seem to have trouble with. The problem may be that, from a client's perspective, there are so many things to admire about its product.

"How can we narrow down our brand's value proposition to a word? Our product lasts longer, it's less expensive, it works better. All that stuff's important." Yes, those secondary benefits are important, and, yes, they have a place: in the brochures, on the packaging, or two clicks into the website. All those other benefits will serve to shore up the aggregate value proposition of a brand once customers try it. But what they're going to remember a brand for, the way they're going to label it in their mental filing system, is with a word.

Find that word.

As you think, don't let the word *adjective* get you thinking too small. A company's position could also be its purpose, its reason for existing, its social mission. The authors of *The Cluetrain Manifesto* remind us that "companies attempting to 'position' themselves [should instead] *take* a position. Optimally, it should relate to something their market actually cares about."[10]

You may argue that I have oversimplified here. And I have; I'll accept the criticism. Because I'm arguing for purism in an area where it's often impossible to think that way. Many brands do not lend themselves to such clean theoretical distinctions. All I'm saying is that you should at least try; try to find that one word. You're trying to own some real estate for your brand in a very crowded neighborhood. I like how John Hegarty defines it: "A brand is the most valuable piece of real estate in the world: a corner of someone's mind."[11]

Find that word. You're going to thank me when it comes time to sit down and come up with a big idea.

BEFORE YOU PUT PEN TO PAPER.

Before you do any new thinking, there's some background work to do. You won't be doing it alone, though. You'll have help from the people in account service.

The account folks are the people in charge of an account at an agency. They work with the clients to define opportunities, they set budgets and timelines, and they do a whole bunch of other stuff, some of it boring. They also help you present the work (they *sell* it, too, if you're working with good ones) to the client. Overall, they're the liaison between the client and the agency, explaining one to the other, running interference, and acting as the marriage counselor when the times call for it.

Some account people are great, some so-so, and some bad. It will pay to hitch up with the smart ones as soon as you can. The good ones have the soul of a creative person and will share your excitement over a great idea. They're articulate, honest, and inspiring, and like I said, the good ones have a better batting average at selling your work.

Here are some things I've learned from the great account people I've worked with.

Start by examining the current positioning of your product.

There's a book called *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind,* one I recommend with many caveats. (Although the strategic thinking of the authors is sound, I have many differences with them on the subject of creativity, which they declare irrelevant.)

The authors, Ries and Trout, maintain that the customer's head has a finite amount of space in which to remember products. In each category, there's room for perhaps three brand names. If your product isn't in one of those slots, you must "de-position" a competitor to take its place.

Before you start, look at the current positioning of your product. What positions do the competitors occupy? What niches are undefended? Should you concentrate on defining your client's position, or do some de-positioning of the competition? Do they have an adjective? What's your adjective?

Get to know your client's business as well as you can.

Bill Bernbach said, "The magic is in the product. . . . You've got to live with your product. You've got to get steeped in it. You've got to get saturated with it."[12]

The moral for writers and art directors is: do the factory tour. I'm serious. Go if you get the chance. Ask a million questions. How is the product made? What ingredients does it have? What are their quality control criteria? Read every brochure. Read every memo you can get your hands on. You may find ideas waiting in the middle of a spec sheet ready to be transplanted kit-and-caboodle into an ad. Learn the company's business.

Your clients are going to trust you more if you can talk to them about their industry in *their* terms. They'll quickly find you boring or irrelevant if all you can speak about with authority is Century Italic. Your grasp of the client's marketing situation has to be as well versed as any account executive's. There are no shortcuts. Know the client. Know the product. Know the market. It will pay off.

Louis Pasteur said, "Chance favors the prepared mind."

On the other hand, there's value in staying stupid.

This dissenting opinion was brought to my attention by a great copywriter, Mark Fenske. Mark says, "Don't give into the temptation to take the factory tour. Resist. It makes you think like the client. You'll start to come up with the same answers the client does."

Mark believes, as many do, that keeping your tabula extremely rasa makes your thinking fresher. He may be right. There's also this to consider: When you're on the factory floor watching the caps get put on the beer bottles, you're a long way from the customer's backyard reality. All the customer cares about is, "What's in it for *me*?"

Get to know the client's customers as well as you can.

Once you get into the agency business, you'll meet another team member, called a *strategist.* Consider the strategist both a cultural anthropologist and a stand-in for the consumer of the brand. Strategists analyze the market, study the competition, and basically tell you what your brand's consumer audience is doing, how they're doing it, and what devices they're doing it on.

Read everything your strategists give you before putting pen to paper. Remember, most of the work you do will be targeted to people outside your small social circle, people with whom you have no more in common than being a carbon-based organism.

Take farming. I've written whole campaigns selling herbicides to soybean farmers, but what do I know about farming? As a kid, I couldn't even keep an *ant* farm alive for a week once it arrived in the mail. Getting into the mind-set of a soybean farmer took plenty of work—watching lots of recorded interviews and doing plenty of reading. Your strategists can give you piles of material to study.

But don't just read it. Feel it. Take a deep breath and sink slowly into the world of the person you're writing to. Go beyond the stinkin' demographics. Maybe you're selling a retirement community. You're talking to an older person. Someone living on a fixed income. Maybe that person is worried about becoming dependent on his kids. It hurts when he gets out of a chair. The idea of shoveling snow has dark-red cardiac overtones. How does it *feel* to be this person? Find the emotion.

Once you find the right emotion, you are miles ahead of someone who's just thinking about the brand.

Ask to see the entire file of the client's previous work.

The client or the account executives will have it somewhere. Study it. Maybe they tried something that was pretty cool, but they didn't do it right. How could you do it better? It will get your wheels turning. It'll also keep you from presenting ideas the client has already tried.

Make sure what you have to say matters.

It must be relevant. It must matter to somebody, somewhere. It has to offer something customers want or solve a problem they have, whether it's a car that won't start or a drip that won't stop.

If you don't have something relevant to say, tell your clients to put their wallets away. Because no matter how well you execute it, an unimportant message has no receiver. The tree falls in the forest. Crickets chirp.

Insist on a tight strategy.

Creative director Norman Berry wrote: "English strategies are very tight, very precise. Satisfy the strategy and the idea cannot be faulted even though it may appear outrageous. Many . . . strategies are often too vague, too open to interpretation. 'The strategy for this product is taste,' they'll say. But that is not a strategy. Vague strategies inhibit. Precise strategies liberate."[13]

Poet T. S. Eliot never worked at an ad agency, but his advice about strategy is right on the money: "When forced to work within a strict framework, the imagination is taxed to its utmost and will produce its richest ideas. Given total freedom, the work is likely to sprawl."

Dude nailed it. You need a tight strategy.

On the other hand, a strategy can become too tight. When there's no play in the wheel, an overly specific strategy demands a very narrow range of executions and becomes by proxy an execution itself. Good account people and strategists can fine-tune a strategy by moving it up and down a continuum that ranges between broad, meaningless statements and little purse-lipped creative dictums masquerading as strategies.

When you have it just right, the strategy should be evident in the campaign but the campaign should not be evident in the strategy. Jean-Marie Dru put it elegantly in his book *Disruption:*

> There are two questions that need to be asked. The first is: Could the campaign I'm watching have been created without the brief? If the answer is yes, the odds are that the campaign is lacking in content. You have to be able to see the brief in the campaign. The second question is a mirror image of the first. . . . Is the campaign merely a transcription of the brief? If the answer is yes, then there has been no creative leap, and the campaign lacks executional force.[14]

Ultimately, a good strategy is inspiring. You can pull a hundred rabbits out of the same hat, creating wildly different executions all on strategy. Goodby, Silverstein & Partners' magnificent "milk deprivation" strategy called forth a long string of wonderful "Got milk?" executions.*

Insist on a tight strategy. Will you always get one? No. In fact, in this business tight strategies seem to be the exception, not the rule. But you must push for one as hard as you can.

"Small rooms discipline the mind; large rooms distract it."

—*Leonardo da Vinci*

*Go online to one of the ad archive sites and study the campaign. Or see *Communication Arts,* December 1995, for examples.

The final strategy should be simple.

Advertising isn't "rocket surgery."

People live and think in broad strokes. Like we said earlier, ask some guy in a mall about cars and he'll tell you Volvos are safe, Porsches are fast, and Jeeps are rugged. Boom. Where's the genius here? There isn't any.

You want people who feel X about your product to feel Y. That's about it. We're talking one adjective here. Most of the time, we're talking about going into a customer's brain and spot welding one adjective onto a client's brand. That's all. DeWalt tools = tough. Coke = happiness.

I'm reminded of how Steven Spielberg said he preferred movie ideas that could be summed up in a sentence. "Lost alien befriends lonely boy to get home."

The moral is: Keep it simple. Don't let the account executives or the client make you overthink it. Try not to slice too thin. Think in bright colors.

Question the brief.

The most important word a creative person can use is *why,* as noted by John Hegarty in his book. Not only does the word *why* demand that we constantly challenge everything, but it also helps the creative process. It's like that wonderful thing children do; they constantly ask, "Why? Why is it like that? Why do we do that? Why can't I go there? Why? Why? Why?"[15]

Obviously, asking questions of the client, account person, or strategist can help clarify your assignment. But often the questioning itself helps you begin to come up with ideas.

Testing strategy is better than testing executions.

This is the best of all possible worlds, and the day hell freezes over all clients will be testing this way. A few do this now. Here's how it works.

You sit down with the client, the strategists, and the account team. You explore all the possible strategies available to your brand. You settle on 5 or 6 to 10, if you want.

Then you make what are some places called "strategy boards." These are simple, flat-footed layout things that look and feel like ads but aren't, usually consisting of a picture with a headline that spells out with little fanfare exactly the strategy you'd like to test.

For example, say the client manufactures aspirin. The pictures could be anything really—a shot of a person nursing a headache or a close-up of two aspirins on a tabletop. Next to the picture on each board is a headline pitching a different angle on the product: "Faster-acting Throbinex." "Throbinex is easy on the stomach." "Smaller, easier-to-swallow pills." Just crank them out. These aren't ads. They're benefits.

Show 10 different boards like these to a focus group, and you'll come away with a good idea of which messages resonate with customers. It's a great place to start.

Listen to customers talk.

Every chance you get to hear what customers are saying, take it. If there's a website or chat room about a product or brand, go there. Eavesdropping is the best way to learn what customers think, and with all the tools now available on the Internet, monitoring public opinion has become too easy *not* to do it.

Less useful (and usually more infuriating) is to hear what customers are saying about your work in focus groups. God, I hate focus groups. There are probably just two things in the world I hate *more* than listening to focus groups complain about an agency's ideas. (For the record, the two things are [1] sawing off my legs and walking into town on the stumps and [2] kissing the side of a passing train that's covered in sandpaper and then bobbing for cherry bombs in a vat of boiling ammonia.) Focus groups suck, and I'm not the only person who believes that showing rough ideas to people being paid $50 and a Diet Dr. Pepper is a bane on the industry. Not only does it hurt creativity, the horrible work that survives doesn't make the client nearly as much money as it might have and may actually lose the company money.

Fortunately, as advertising becomes less television- and print-based, it's gonna get harder and harder for any research company to tell a client with a straight face that they're adding any value. (More on this later, in Chapter 11.)

Scan the places where your work will appear.

Go online to the sites your work will likely appear. Check out what customers are responding to; see what videos they're watching. Go to the bookstore and look at the magazines you might appear in. Case the joint. Get a feel for the place your idea will be living.

Read the awards books; study the sites.

Take a little inspiration from the excellence you see there and then get ready to do something just as great. The best awards shows are the One Show and *Communication Arts,* as well as the British D&AD annuals. You should also study some of the newer sites and awards venues, such as thefwa.com, the Webby's, and the SxSW interactive awards.

Look at the competitors' advertising.

Each category quickly manages to establish its own brand of boring. Learn the visual clichés everybody else is using. Visit their websites and watch their

commercials. Listen to them on Twitter and on Facebook. Creep through the woods, part the branches, and study the ground your competitors occupy. What seems to be their strategy? What's their look? Those schmucks. They don't know what's coming.

Now comes the fun part. Sharpening your pencil and sitting down to come up with some cool ideas.

Figure 3.1 A short, five-word course in advertising.

3

A Clean Sheet of Paper

Coming up with an idea—the broad strokes

BEFORE WE BEGIN, A QUICK NOTE. The first edition of this book came out in 1998—last century, basically. At the time, the possibilities of advertising online were just starting to be realized, and since then the number of other media used to deliver advertising has gone kaleidoscopic.

That said, to begin our discussion of advertising ideas we still have to start somewhere. And for the purposes of this book, we'll make the humble print ad our starting point. No, it's not interactive, and it doesn't link to other print ads. You don't have to go to L.A. to make a print ad, and it usually ends life under a puppy or a bird. But in its simple two dimensions and blank white space, it contains all the challenges we need to discuss the creative process. In the little white square we draw on our pads, we'll learn design and art direction. We'll hone our writing. We'll learn how to be information architects—how to move a reader's attention from A to B to C—and these basic skills will stay with us and prove critical as we move from print ads to tweets. As Pete Barry says, "Print is to [all of] advertising what figure drawing is to fine art; it provides a creative foundation."[1]

We'll be talking mostly about the crafts of copywriting and art direction, two disciplines that are infinitely portable. Everything you learn about writing and art direction here applies to pretty much any surface you're working on, from

bus sides to computer screens. Yes, there are some nuances when it comes to online, writing for search optimization, for example. But overall, these are the disciplines *someone's* gonna need to have when it comes time to make an ad, shoot a Web video, or record a radio spot.

Let's begin this part of our discussion with a quotation from Helmut Krone, the man who did VW's "Think Small," my vote for the industry's first great ad: "I start with a blank piece of paper and try to fill it with something interesting."

So if I'm working on a print ad, I generally do the same thing. I get a clean sheet of paper and draw a small rectangle.

And then I start.

SAYING THE RIGHT THING THE RIGHT WAY.

Remember, you have two problems to solve: the client's and yours.

Imagine the circle in Figure 3.2 is the target's bull's-eye of what the brand stands for. Any ad you create that lands inside this area is perfect. The client will love it. If it's outside the circle, they won't. Nor should they.

Okay, now imagine you have two circles, overlapping (Figure 3.3).

The one on the left is the client's bull's-eye, and on the right is the bull's-eye for what you think is a great ad. The trick is to hit that sweet spot where the two circles overlap.

You solve the account team's and the client's problem by saying exactly the right thing. That's relatively easy; it's the strategy. But you aren't finished until both problems are solved—until you've nailed the sweet spot. Bernbach said, "Dullness won't sell your product, but neither will irrelevant brilliance." Here, dullness is represented on the far left side of the left circle, and irrelevant

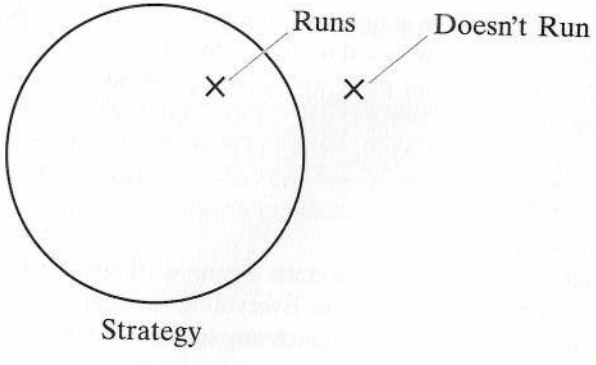

Figure 3.2 If your idea lands inside the client's brand space, the client will love it. If not, buh-bye.

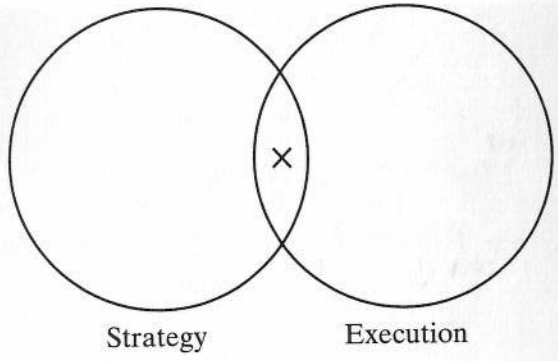

Figure 3.3 If your idea is only in the left circle, it might be boring. Only on the right, it might be stupid. Hit the sweet spot to win cash and prizes.

brilliance, on the far right side of the right. In his excellent book *Advertising: Concept and Copy,* George Felton describes the circles this way:

> As you'll discover when you work on advertising problems, you often lose the selling idea in the act of trying to express it creatively. There is a continual push-pull between being on-strategy and being clever. Each wants to wrestle you away from the other. Your job as a thinker and problem solver is to keep both in mind, to spin the strategy without losing hold of it. As though to indicate this truth, the two most common rejections of your ideas will be "I don't get it" and "I've seen that before." In other words, either it's too weird or too obvious. That's why the great ones don't come easy.[2]

The moral? Do both perfectly. Hit the overlap.

Find the central human truth about your product.

Veteran copywriter Mark Fenske says your first order of business working on a project is to *write down the truest thing you can say* about the brand or the product. You need to find the central truth about your brand or about the whole product category. The central human truth. Hair coloring isn't about looking younger. It's about self-esteem. Cameras aren't about pictures. They're about stopping time and holding on to life as the sands run out.

There are ads to be written all around the edges of any product. But get to the ones written right from the essence of the thing. In *Hoopla,* Alex Bogusky is talking about this essence when he says, "We try to find that long-neglected truth in a product and give it a hug."[3] Notice he says they "find" this truth, not invent it. The best ideas are old truths brought to light in fresh, new ways. As an example, check out this ad shown in Figure 3.4, created by my friend Dean

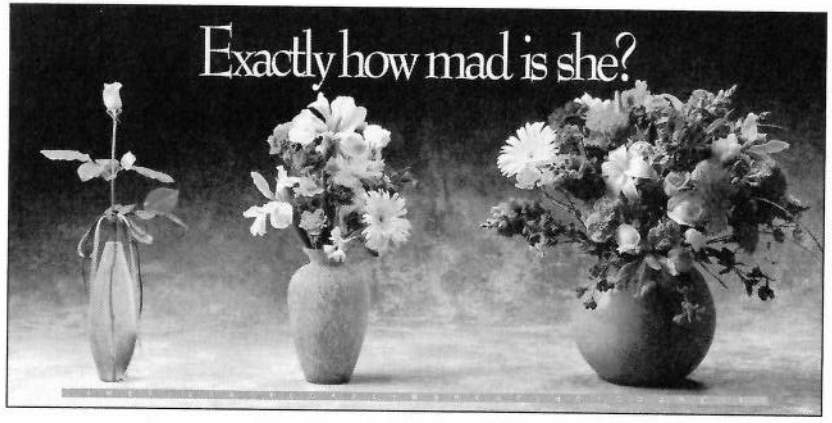

Figure 3.4 The headline could have been something boring like: "We're proud of our wide variety of beautiful flower arrangements. One's just right for your budget."

Buckhorn for the American Floral Marketing Council. He could have done something about how "purdy" flowers are. He didn't, and instead focused on one of the central human truths about this category—the use of flowers as a ticket out of the Casa di Canine.

"Tell the truth and run."

This old Yugoslavian proverb is a reminder of the power of truth. Even if you have an unpleasant truth, say it.

"We're Avis. We're only number two. So we try harder." Totally believable. More important, I like a company that would say this about themselves. America loves an underdog.

Perhaps the biggest underdog of all time was Volkswagen. VW was the king of self-deprecation. The honest voice Doyle Dane Bernbach created for this odd-looking little car turned its weaknesses into strengths. The ad shown in Figure 3.5 is a perfect example.

Identify and leverage the central conflicts within your client's company or category.

Typically you'll have plenty of help from your agency's strategists when it comes to getting a deep understanding of the company and category you're working for. As you help the team dig, what you should be looking for is energy and conflict.

In my experience, the best strategies and the best work usually come from a place of conflict. Sadly, many agencies create "strategies" that look more like their client's company mission statement. *"We believe fresh foods mean better health."* Better, I think strategies are built on top of—and *powered* by—either

thematic or cultural tensions. When a strategy can be built on top of one of these tensions—like a volcano along the edge of two tectonic plates—great work is built *into* the strategy and fairly bursts out of it. There's a natural energy at these points of cultural stress, a conflict of ideas or themes that can be a fertile place for ideas of force and substance.

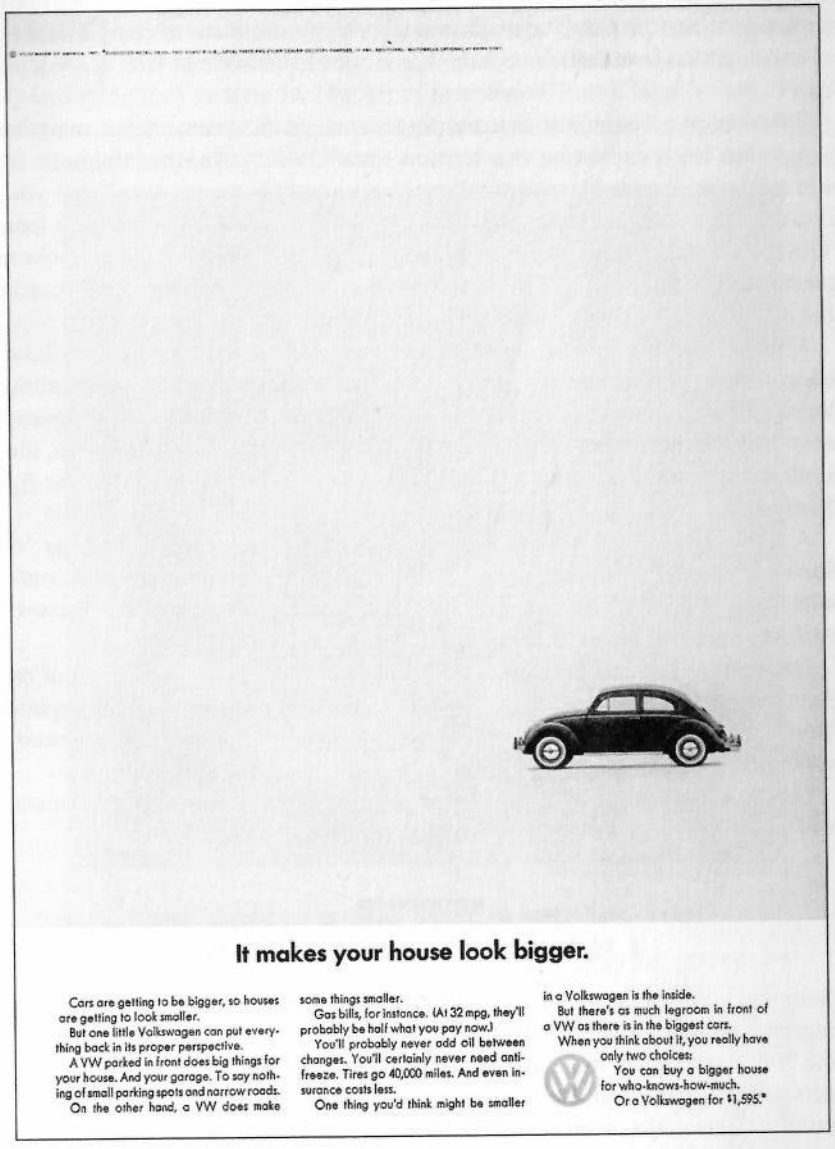

Figure 3.5 Many other clients would have urged the agency to avoid, hide, or deny the small size of their car. Not VW.

In *The On-Demand Brand,* the redoubtable Alex Bogusky discussed how his agency capitalized on these tensions:

> There are themes that are going through pop culture. And they're unsettling themes, questions. We find a little piece of that, and we try to hook our creative into that, so that when the work comes out, it's part of a larger conversation. And that it's going to stir a little bit of talk. . . . [W]ith something like "Subservient Chicken,"* a lot of that technology came out of [the] X-rated websites. That tension created, I think, a lot of what made that viral.[4]

For example, a thematic cultural tension might be "man versus machine." (Apple has been exploiting this tension since "1984.") Another thematic tension might be simply "depravation"; having something taken away from you is a platform leveraged for years by Goodby, Silverstein & Partners in their iconic "Got Milk?" campaign. Even the tagline has tension built into it; an unanswered question. Google "Got Milk?" and you'll find many entertaining commercials that *all* spring from that tense theme of deprivation.

Tension can also come from an actual conflict built into a category. Take a category such as banking. I happen to hate fat-cat bankers because they crashed the economy while tipping their golf caddies with my overdraft fees. My guess is other people feel the same way and that there's some emotion in this area, some conflict. With the right campaign these tensions could be leveraged in the right client's favor.

A great example of how tension sparks creativity is Fallon's famous "Cat Herders" Super Bowl spot for EDS. Their positioning statement had conflict built into it: "EDS thrives on defeating complexity"—a particularly powerful platform for a technical category.

Other category examples come to mind: there's tension in our love of cars, given they're how most of us get to work yet their exhaust hurts our planet. There's tension in simply being employed: we need the money, but we need to be ourselves, and we need time off.

Look for polarities. Where you find them you will also likely find tension. And where you find tension, you will find creative sparks.

A FEW WORDS ON AUTHENTICITY.

There was a time (the 1950s and early 1960s) when simply running an ad in a magazine made you an authority. *("See, honey, it's printed right here. In a magazine.")* A cigarette ad could actually claim there wasn't "a cough in a car load." Facts didn't count. Authority did. Pick up an old magazine sometime and see if you don't agree; almost every ad and every article feels like a pronouncement from an authority.

*The famous Subservient Chicken has been well reported on in many places. Google it.

Sometime in the mid-1950s, however, this omnipresent voice of authority started to lose its credibility. How this came to be is perhaps a story for another day, but it happened. Now, imagine if you were to run the 1950s Plymouth ad shown in Figure 3.6 in next week's *Time* magazine. I'll bet even if you updated the ad's look and feel, its presumptuous tone *("Big is glamorous, dammit!")* would still make today's readers snicker at its authoritarian cluelessness. You simply wouldn't get away with it today. Things are different now.

We've become a nation of eye-rollers and skeptics. We scarcely believe anything we hear in the media anymore, and marketers can't make things true simply by saying they're true. In *The Art of Immersion,* Frank Rose writes, "People today are experiencing an authenticity crisis, and with good reason. Value is a

Figure 3.6 This car is great because the manufacturer says *it's great, dammit.*

function of scarcity, and in a time of scripted reality TV and Photoshop everywhere, authenticity is a scarce commodity."[5] And although real authority certainly continues to exist in places, what people look for today, and what they believe in and are persuaded by, is authenticity.

Merriam-Webster says something is authentic when it actually *is* what it's claimed to be. This makes authenticity in advertising an especially tricky proposition, given that advertising is at its heart self-promotion and driven by an agenda. And yet although Americans today are suspicious of anyone with an agenda, being authentic doesn't always require the absence of an agenda, only transparency about it.

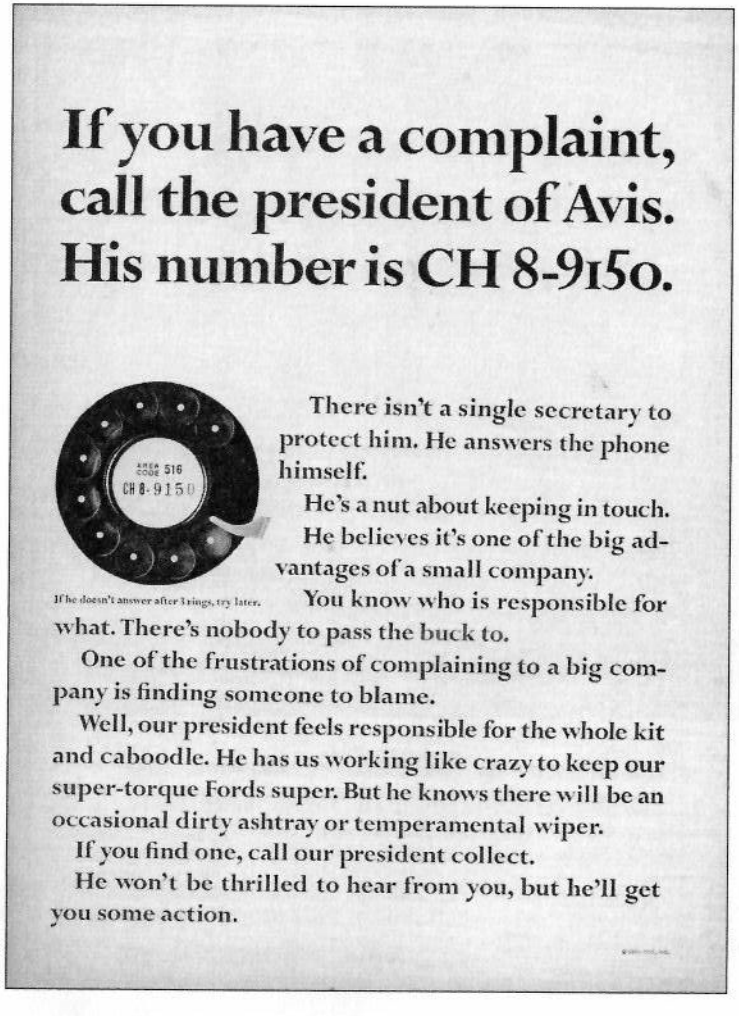

Figure 3.7 How can you argue with this Avis ad? Authenticity isn't something you "claim." It's something you are.

Admitting that your commercial is a paid message with an agenda is one way to disarm distrust. Alex Bogusky says, "This generation knows you're trying to sell them something and you know they know, so let's just drop the pretense and make the whole exercise as much fun as possible."[6] Underpromising and overdelivering is perhaps another way to disarm distrust. Even self-deprecation can help establish authenticity; VW's "It's ugly but it gets you there" is perhaps the most memorable example. DDB's early Avis work was similarly authentic, whether it was admitting to shortcomings ("We're only number two.") or giving any customer with a complaint the actual phone number of the chief executive officer (Figure 3.7).

Canadian Club's masterful print series (Figure 3.8) is an excellent modern example of an advertiser leveraging reality, warts and all, to sell its wares. An

Figure 3.8 Compare this campaign to pretty much every other liquor campaign ever done. I actually believe this one. It's authentic.

unapologetic statement of "Damn right your dad drank it" coupled with images of 1970s dads (somehow still cool in their bad haircuts and paneled basements) leveraged authenticity instead of authority.

So too does a marvelous TV campaign for Miller High Life. In this, the second famous High Life campaign from Wieden + Kennedy, the beer truck delivery guy takes *back* cases of his beer from snooty people who aren't truly appreciating the Miller High Life. Grumbling on his way out the door of some hoity-toity joint *("$11.95 for a hamburger? Y'all must be crazy.")*, he is himself a spokesman for authenticity.

In *Hoopla,* Warren Berger puts it like this: "To effectively 'hype' something today, you must find a way to cut through 'the hype.' . . . This necessitates telling the truth." Bogusky points out, "There are truths to almost every product, and yet most advertisers shy away from those truths." As consumers get savvier, Bogusky continues, "the brands that are unwilling to have a real and truthful conversation with consumers will become completely irrelevant and therefore invisible."[7]

Try the competitor's product.

What's wrong with it? More important, what do you like about it? What's good about the advertising? As Winsor and Bogusky warn in *Baked In,* "Don't rationalize away what you [like about their product]. Find the truth they are exploiting that you are not."

Then try this trick. In *Marketing Warfare,* Ries and Trout suggested, "Find a weakness in the leader's *strength* and attack at that point."[8] A good example comes to mind, again from the pens of Bernbach's crew. Avis Rent A Car was only number two. So Avis suggested you come to them instead of Hertz because "The line at our counter is shorter."

Pose the problem as a question.

Creativity in advertising is problem solving. When you state the problem as a bald question, sometimes the answers suggest themselves. Take care not to simply restate the problem in the terms in which it was brought to you; you're not likely to discover any new angles. Pose the question again and again, from entirely different perspectives.

In his book *The Do-It-Yourself Lobotomy,* Tom Monahan puts it this way: "Ask a better question." By that he means a question to which you don't know the answer. He likens it to "placing the solution just out of your reach," and in answering it, you stretch yourself.[9]

As philosopher John Dewey put it: "A problem well-stated is a problem half-solved." It can work. Eric Clark reminds us just how it works in his book *The Want Makers.*

In the 1960s, a team wrestled for weeks for an idea to illustrate the reliability of the Volkswagen in winter. Eventually they agreed that a snowplow driver would make an excellent spokesperson. The breakthrough came a week later when one of the team wondered aloud, "How does the snowplow driver get to his snowplow?"[10]

If you've never seen it, the VW "Snowplow" commercial is vintage Doyle Dane. A man gets in his Volkswagen and drives off through deep snow into a blizzard. At the end, we see where he's driving: the garage where the county snowplows are parked. The voice-over then asks, "Have you ever wondered how the man who drives a snowplow . . . drives *to* the snowplow? This one drives a Volkswagen. So you can stop wondering."

Don't be afraid to ask dumb questions.

That blank slate we sometimes bring to a problem-solving session can work in our favor. We ask the obvious questions that people too close to the problem often forget. In the question's very naïveté, we sometimes find simple answers that have been overlooked.

Ask yourself what would make you want to buy the product.

This is a simple enough piece of advice and one I often forget about while I'm busy trying to write an ad. Sit across from yourself at your desk. Quiet your mind. Then ask, "What would make me want to buy this product?"

Then try the flip side: "What would I do if I were the one bankrolling the campaign?"

There was a writer at my agency who was also an investor in a new product, some kind of running gear. He was both the writer and the client. When he sat down to do ads for a company whose failure would cost him a significant amount of money, he saw how some of the things he hated hearing from clients had merit.

Copywriter John Matthews wrote, "You learn a lot more about poker when you play for money and not for chips."

Dramatize the benefit.

I don't mean the features of the product, but the benefit those features provide the user, or what some call "the benefit of the benefit." There is an old advertising maxim that expresses this wisdom in a way that's hard to improve upon: "People don't buy quarter-inch drill bits. They buy quarter-inch holes."

Avoid style; focus on substance.

Remember, styles change; typefaces and design and art direction, they all change. Fads come and go. But people are always people.

They want to look better, to make more money; they want to feel better, to be healthy. They want security, attention, and achievement. These things about people aren't likely to change. So focus your efforts on speaking to these basic needs, rather than tinkering with the current visual affectations. Focus first on the substance of what you want to say. Then worry about how to say it.

Find a villain.

Find a bad guy you can beat up in the stairwell. Every client has an enemy, particularly in mature categories, where growth has to come out of somebody else's hide.

Your enemy can be the other guy's scummy, overpriced product. It can also be some pain or inconvenience the client's product spares you. If the product's a toothpaste, the villain can be tooth decay, the dentist, the drill, or that little pointy thing Laurence Olivier used on Dustin Hoffman in *Marathon Man.* ("Is it safe?") A villain can come from another product category altogether, in the form of what's called an *indirect competitor.* Parker Pens, for example, could be said to have an indirect competitor in e-mail.

A gracefully raised knee to a villain's groin isn't just fun; it's profitable—because competitive positioning is implicit in every villain paradigm.

It's also an easy and fun place from which to write. Mom was always telling us about "constructive criticism." Yeah, well highly underrated and much more fun is the concept of "destructive criticism."

Make the claim in your ad something that is incontestable.

Since an advertising idea is basically an argument on behalf of a brand, it makes sense to present a case good enough to end any further argument—with facts; facts that can't be refuted. This approach is often referred to as the "Hey Schmuck" approach and is ascribed to Hall of Fame copywriter Ed McCabe. McCabe's work was often so compellingly put, it was as if you could tack the words ". . . you schmuck" at the end of his headlines; for example, this one for Volvo: "A car you swear by, not at." (You schmuck.)

Form your strongest argument, advises Pete Barry in *The Advertising Concept Book,* and then think of a counterargument you might hear from some loud guy at a bar. Okay, now create a comeback that sinks this guy's boat. "If you [can think of a comeback] that would shut him up, you should consider working on a campaign based on this argument."[11]

Of course, there are products to which this advice won't apply: products that are all image or products with no real difference worth hanging your hat on like, I don't know, paper clips. But when you have a fact at your command, use it. When you can say, "This product lasts 20 years," what's to argue with?

The lesson? State fact, not manufactured nonsense about, oh, say, how "We Put the 'Qua' in 'Quality.'"

Try some of these "strategy starters" and see if ideas start to form.

- Do a straight on us vs. them approach.
- Show life before and after the product.
- Instead of trying to change how consumers think, change what they *do.*
- Is there a compelling story about the heritage behind your brand?
- Can your brand dispense some smart advice about the whole category?
- Is there a story in the founders of the brand? Or in their original vision?
- Can you turn a perceived negative attribute of your product into a positive?
- Can you demonstrate on-camera or online your product's superiority?
- Can you move your product out of its current category and reposition it in another?
- Can your brand be insanely honest about itself, admitting to some shortcomings while winning on the important thing?

GET SOMETHING, ANYTHING, ON PAPER.

The artist Nathan Oliveira wrote, "All art is a series of recoveries from the first line. The hardest thing to do is put down the first line. But you must." Here are some ideas to help you get started.

First, say it straight. Then say it great.

To get the words flowing, sometimes it helps to simply write out what you want to say. Make it memorable, different, or new later. First, just say it.

Try this. Begin your headline with: "This is an ad about . . . " And then keep writing. Who knows? You might find, by the time you get to the end of a sentence, you have something just by snipping off the "This is an ad about" part. Even if you don't, you've focused, a good first step.

Whatever you do, just start writing. Don't let the empty page (what Hemingway called "the white bull") intimidate you. Go for art later. Start with clarity.

Restate the strategy and put some spin on it.

Think of the strategy statement as a lump of clay. You've got to sculpt it into something interesting to look at. So begin by taking the strategy and saying it some other way, any way. Say it faster. Say it in English. Say it in slang. Shorten it. Punch it up. Try anything that will change the strategy statement from something you'd overhear in an elevator at a sales convention to a message you'd see spray painted on an alley wall.

Club Med's tagline could have been "A Great Way to Get Away." It could have been "More Than Just a Beach." Fortunately, Ammirati & Puris had the account, and it became: "Club Med. The Antidote for Civilization."

Be careful, too, not to let your strategy show. Many ads suffer from this transparency, and it happens when you fail to put enough creative spin on the strategy. Your ad remains flat and obvious; there's no magic to it, and reading it is a bit of a letdown. It's like Dorothy discovering that the Wizard of Oz is just some knucklehead behind a curtain.

In his book *Disruption,* Jean-Marie Dru described this kind of idea:

> You can tell when ads are trying too hard. Their intentions are too obvious. They impose themselves without speaking to you. By contrast, there are some that grab your attention with their executional brio, but their lack of relevance is such that after you've seen them they leave you kind of empty. Great advertising combines density of content with the elegance of form.[12]

Density of content and elegance of form. Great advice.

Put the pill inside the baloney, not next to it.

Don't let your concept get in the way of the product. Bernbach said, "Our job is to sell our clients' merchandise . . . not ourselves. To kill the cleverness that makes us shine instead of the product." This can happen, and when clients kill work for this reason, they may be right.

From more than one client, I've heard this dreaded phrase: "Your concept is a 'visual vampire.'" What they mean is the concept's execution is so busy it sucks the life out of their commercial message. Be ready for this one. Sometimes clients use the phrase as a bludgeon to kill something unusual they don't like. But sometimes, a few of them are right.*

This usually happens when the product bores you. Which means you haven't dug deep enough to find the thing about it that's exciting or interesting. Or maybe you need to reinvent the brief. Or perhaps you need to reinvent the product. But instead, you settle for doing some sort of conceptual gymnastics up front and tacking your boring old product on the backside, hoping the interest from the opening will somehow bleed over to your sales message. But the interesting part of an ad shouldn't be a device that points to the sales message; it should *be* the sales message.

To understand what it means to make your whole ad or commercial *be* the sales message, consider the analogy of giving your dog a pill. Dogs hate pills, right? So what do you do? You wrap the pill in a piece of baloney.

*I'm reminded of a garage sale sign I saw tacked to a neighborhood phone pole. To attract attention to the sign, they'd decorated it with balloons. But the wind blew the balloons across the sign and obscured the information.

Well, same thing with your commercial's message. Customers hate sales pitches. So you wrap your pitch in an interesting bit, and they're more likely to bite.

Unfortunately, most students take this to mean, "Oh, I see. All I have to do is show something interesting and funny for the first 25 seconds and then cut to the product." The answer is no—because the customer will eat up the 25 seconds of interesting baloney and then walk away, leaving the pill in the dog dish. You gotta wrap that baby right into the middle of the baloney. The two have to be one. Your interesting device cannot just point to the sales message; it must *be* the sales message.

Remember Bernbach's advice: "The product, the product, the product. Stay with the product." Don't get seduced by unrelated ideas, however cool and funny they are.

David Ogilvy used a classical reference to make this same point: "When Aeschines spoke, they said, 'How well he speaks.' But when Demosthenes spoke, they said, 'Let us march against Philip.'"

What's the mood you want your reader or viewer to feel?

Emotional purchase drivers connect with customers more deeply than rational ones. In fact, emotion usually trumps rational thought when it comes to buying something. So get to the emotion your brand or product evokes. Finding that emotion is often all you need in order to get the ideas flowing.

The *one* thing I remember about the series *Mad Men* was a pitch Don Draper made to Kodak selling the campaign for their new slide Carousel (a round container for slides, an improvement over the ordinary trays available at the time). The emotion of the character's words seemed perfect for the product and I remember it to this day.

> Draper: My first job, I was in-house at a fur company, and this old pro copywriter, a Greek named Teddy, and Teddy told me the most important idea in advertising is new. It creates an itch. You simply put your product in there as a kind of calamine lotion. But he also talked about a deeper bond with the product: nostalgia. It's delicate but potent. Teddy told me that in Greek, *nostalgia* literally means "the pain from an old wound." It's a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone. This device [gesturing to the Kodak Carousel] isn't a spaceship; it's a time machine. It goes backwards, forwards . . . takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It's not called the wheel. It's called the Carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels . . . around and around . . . and back home again . . . to a place where we know we are loved.[13]

Deciding which emotion to leverage is something you'll do early in the process. And the answer is always a combination of what your product is and whom you are talking to. If you're working on a website for a hospital, well, pie-in-the-face humor probably shouldn't be on the list of likely solutions. Pick a mood.

A feeling. You can change your mind later, but sometimes making this decision can give you focus. "Okay, this campaign is gonna be . . . thoughtful." Or it's gonna be angry, or stark, or . . . well, *you* decide. What's right for your client? What's right for the customer?

Stare at a picture that has the emotion of the ad you want to do.

Once you've decided what the right emotion is, it may help to put up some pictures that put you in the mood. Think about it: have you ever tried to write an angry letter when you weren't angry? Oh, you might get a few cuss words on paper, but there's no fire to it. The same can be said for copywriting. You need to be in the mood.

I once had to do some ads for a new magazine called *Family Life.* The editors said this wasn't going to be just another "baby magazine," which are very much like diapers—soft, fluffy, and full of . . . . My point is, they wanted ads that captured the righteous emotion of the editorial. Raising a child is the most moving, most important thing you'll ever do.

To get in the mood, I did two things. First, I reread a wonderful book by Anna Quindlen on the joys and insanities of parenting called *Living Out Loud.* I'd soak up a couple of pages before I sat down to write. Then, when I was ready to put pen to paper, I propped up a number of different stock photos of children, including the picture shown in Figure 3.9 of a cute little kid in a raincoat sitting in a puddle.

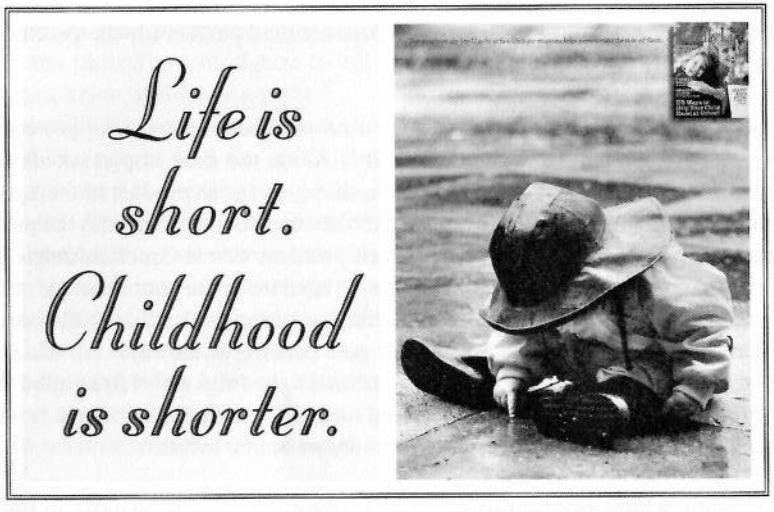

Figure 3.9 The headline was inspired by the photograph. The copy reads: "The years from age 3 to 12 go by so fast. Only one magazine makes the most of them."

As you can see in the ad reprinted here, the idea didn't come directly out of the photo, but in a way it did. It's worked for me. You may wanna try it.

Let your subconscious mind do it.

Where do ideas come from? I have no earthly idea. Around 1900, a writer named Charles Haanel said true creativity comes from "a benevolent stranger, working on our behalf." Novelist Isaac Singer said, "There are powers who take care of you, who send you patience and stories." And film director Joe Pytka said, "Good ideas come from God." I think they're probably all correct. It's not so much our coming up with great ideas as it is creating a canvas where a painting can appear.

So do what Marshall Cook suggests in his book *Freeing Your Creativity:* "Creativity means getting out of the way . . . If you can quiet the yammering of the conscious, controlling ego, you can begin to hear your deeper, truer voice in your writing, . . . [not the] noisy little you that sits out front at the receptionist's desk and tries to take credit for everything that happens in the building."[14]

Stop the chatter in your head. Go into Heller's "controlled daydream." Breathe from your stomach. If you're lucky, sometimes the ideas just begin to appear.

What does the *ad* want to say? Not you, the ad.

To hear what the ad wants to be, sometimes I picture the surface of my pad of paper as the bottom of one of those toy Magic 8 Balls. (You remember, the ones where the message slowly floated to the surface?) I try to coax the idea up from under the pad of paper, from under my conscious mind.

Try it. Just shut up. Listen.

In *The Creative Companion,* David Fowler says, "Maybe if you walked around the block you could hear it more clearly. Maybe if you went and fed the pigeons they'd whisper it to you. Maybe if you stopped telling it what it needed to be, it would tell you what it wanted to be. Maybe you should come in early, when it's quiet."[15]

Try writing down words from the product's category.

Most of the creative people I know have their own special system for scribbling down ideas. Figure out what works for you. For me—let's say we're selling outboard engines—I start a list on the side of the page: Fish. Water. Pelicans. Flotsam. Jetsam. Atlantic. Titanic. Ishmael.

What do these words make you think of? Pick up two of them and put them together like Legos. Sure, it sounds stupid. The whole creative *process* is stupid. Like I said, it's like washing a pig.

"Embrace the suck."

Once you get in the business, it's unlikely you receive assignments where the messaging is as simple, clear, and fun to tackle as, say, "It's the sourest candy you can buy" or "the biggest TV screen." Most of the time you'll be handed

jobs where you have to talk about something that's maybe a little boring, or you may inherit some kind of dopey device or visual or slogan. It could be a client's geeky spokesperson, a long-running sale with a goofy name, or just some bad footage.

My advice here comes from Jason Elm, a creative director from Deutsch: If your assignment involves some must-have from the client that's geeky or boring, tackle it directly. Embrace the suck. Don't try to avoid it by doing something *you* think is cool and then burying the must-have in the corner or in the last 10 seconds of the commercial. Tackle it directly. When you embrace the suck, good ideas often spill out of the very thing your instincts tell you to avoid. It'll also likely result in executions where the pill is right inside the baloney because you've tackled it directly and not in some roundabout way.

Allow yourself to come up with terrible ideas.

In *Bird by Bird,* her book on the art of writing fiction, Anne Lamott says:

> The only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really crappy first drafts. That first draft is the child's draft, where you let it pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later. You just let this childlike part of you channel whatever voices and visions come through and onto the page. If one of the characters wants to say, "Well, so what, Mr. Poopy Pants?," you let her.[16]

Same thing in advertising. Start with "Free to qualified customers" and go from there. If it sounds like I'm asking you to write down the bad ideas, well, I am; there's something liberating about writing them down. It's as if you have to get them out of your system.

Also, remember this: notebook paper is not made only for recording your gems of transcendent perfection. A sheet of paper costs about one squintillionth of a cent. It isn't a museum frame. It's a workbench. Write. Keep writing. Don't stop.

Allow your partner to come up with terrible ideas.

The quickest way to shut down your partner's contribution to the creative process is to roll your eyes at a bad idea. Don't. Even if the idea truly and most sincerely blows, just say, "That's interesting," scribble it down, and move on. Remember, this is not a race. (Well, if it is, it's one of those nerdy three-legged races at the company picnic where you and your partner win or lose together.) You are not in competition with your partner. You are competing with your client's rival brands.

No matter what your partner says, see if you can take it and shape it and mold it. Then throw it back to him or her with your idea tacked on. In *Creative Advertising,* author Mario Pricken likens this conceptual back-and-forth to a game: ". . . a kind of ping-pong ensues, in which you catapult each other into an emotional state resembling a creative trance."[17]

Share your ideas with your partner, even the kinda dumb half-formed ones.

Just because an idea doesn't work yet, doesn't mean it might not work eventually. I sometimes find I get something that looks like it might go somewhere, but I can't do anything with it. It just sits there. Some wall inside prevents me from taking it to the next level. That's when my partner scoops up my miserable little half-idea and runs with it over the goal line.

Remember, the point of teamwork isn't to impress your partner by sliding a fully finished idea across the conference room table. It's about how 1 + 1 = 3.

That said, I feel the need to remind you not to say aloud every stinking thing that comes into your head. It's counterproductive. I worked with someone like this once and—in addition to trying to concept in a state of irritation—I ended up with a bad case of "idea-rrhea" that lasted the whole weekend.

Spend some time away from your partner, thinking on your own.

I know many teams who actually prefer to start that way. It gives you both a chance to look at the problem from your own perspective before you bring your ideas to the table.

Come up with a lot of ideas. Cover the wall.

It's tempting to think that the best advertising people just peel off great campaigns 10 minutes before they're due. But that is perception, not reality. My friend Jay Russell told me he remembers looking at more than 2,000 ideas—fairly polished, worked-out ideas—for the Microsoft phone campaign when he was at Crispin Porter + Bogusky. He said the pile of ideas he had stacked in the corner of his office came up to his waist. And this is without foam core, people.

As a creative person, you will discover your brain has a built-in tendency to want to reach closure, even rush to it. Evolution has left us with circuitry that doesn't like ambiguity or unsolved problems. Its pattern-recognition wiring evolved for keeping us out of the jaws of lions, tigers, and bears—not for making lateral jumps to discover unexpected solutions. But in order to get to a great idea, which is usually about the 500th one to come along, you'll need to resist the temptation to give in to the anxiety and sign off on the first passable idea that shows up.

In his fascinating essay "How to Have More Insights," neurologist Dr. David Rocks agrees, writing: "When we have a creative project we tend to get anxious

and the uncertainty of not being able to find a logical solution creates anxiety in itself. The brain is primed to experience at least a mild threat from most forms of uncertainty. Learning to be okay with uncertainty is part of the process of having more insights, because the more anxious you are the less likely you are to notice any subtle insights."[18]

Learn to breathe through this anxiety and the ideas will start to come. Once they do, put as many of them up on the wall as possible. Linus Pauling says, "The best way to get a good idea is to get a *lot* of ideas. . . . At first, they'll seem as hard to find as crumbs on an oriental rug. Then they start coming in bunches. When they do, don't stop to analyze them; if you do you'll stop the flow, the rhythm, the magic. Write each idea down and go on to the next one."

Which leads to our next point.

Quick sketches of your ideas are all you need during the creative process.

Don't curb your creativity by stopping the car and getting out every time you have an idea you want to work out. Do details later. Just get the concept on paper and keep moving forward. You'll cover more ground this way.

Tack the best ideas on the wall.

Seeing them up there all in a bunch helps you determine whether there are campaigns forming and where there are holes that need to be filled. You keep working on the details on your pad. But up there on the wall the big picture begins to take shape.

Write. Don't talk. Write.

Don't talk about the concepts you're working on. Talking turns energy you could use to be creative into talking *about* being creative. It's also likely to send your poor listener looking for the nearest espresso machine because an idea talked about is never as exciting as the idea itself. If you don't believe me, call me up sometime and I'll describe the movie *Inception* to you.

There's an old saying: "A manuscript, like a fetus, is never improved by showing it to somebody before it is completed." Work. Just work. The time will come to unveil. For now, just work. The best ad people I know are the silent-but-deadly kind. You never hear them out in the hallways talking about their ideas. They're working.

Write hot. Edit cold.

Get it on paper, fast and furious. Be hot. Let it pour out. Don't edit anything when you're coming up with the ads. Then, later, be ruthless. Cut everything that is not A-plus work. Put all the A-minus and B-plus stuff off in another pile

you'll revisit later. Everything that's B-minus on down, put on the shelf for emergencies.

> "The wastepaper basket is the writer's best friend."
>
> —*Novelist Isaac Singer*

Once you get on a streak, ride it.

When the words finally start coming, stay on it. Don't break for lunch. Don't put it off till Monday. You'd be surprised how cold some trails get once you leave them for a few minutes.

Athletes call this place (where everything is working, where all the pistons are firing) "the zone." Some artists call it "the white moment." I call it "that brief moment each week when I don't suck." The moral: Never walk away from a hot drawing pad.

Feed a baby idea lots of milk and burp it regularly.

Nurture a newly hatched idea. Until it grows up, you don't know what it's going to be. So don't look for what's wrong with a new idea; look for what's right. And no playing the devil's advocate just yet. Instead, do what writer Sydney Shore suggests: play the "angel's advocate." Ask what is good about the idea? Ask what do we like about the idea? Coax the thing along.

Does a medium lend itself to your message?

Some great ideas play off of the shape and size of the buy or are inspired by the very place they appear. You can arrive at these concepts by starting from a given medium and forming the idea, or coming up with an idea that requires a particular medium. To promote the German horror TV channel *13th Street*, Hamburg's Jung von Matt/Elbe turned bowling balls into creepy heads (branded on the "back" with the logo and tag: "Scream Your Head Off"). And for North Carolina tourism, the small size of a magazine ad is used to make their point (Figure 3.10).

Does the technology lend itself to your message?

Having a media person in the room with you off and on during the creative process can really help. These people know so much more than most creatives about the kind of venues out there, about what the consumer is reading, watching, and doing. Along with the creative technologists, they're often the first people in the agency to hear about new technologies. And as the line between idea and execution grows ever blurrier, it's likely the technology or the sites *themselves* will be what leads you to a cool idea.

The launch of the 1 Series on the BMW Graffiti Wall is a great example and one that began in the media department. For the launch of the 1 Series, BMW and GSD&M teamed up with the founder of the Graffiti application (very

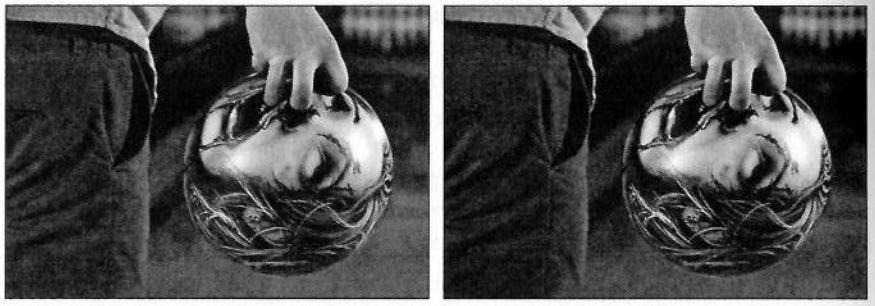

Figure 3.10 Ideas that play off the medium where they appear can be pretty cool.

new at the time) to create the "Build Your Own" functionality on Facebook. Knowing that the audience was young, interested in design, and highly aspirational when it came to owning a BMW, giving people the opportunity to design their own BMW with the application made perfect sense. Some customers spent more than 5 hours interacting with the application, and *Forbes* called it one of the best social media campaigns of the year.

If it makes you laugh out loud, make it work. Somehow.

You know those really funny ideas you get that make you laugh and say, "Wouldn't it be great if we could really do that?" Those are usually the very best ideas, and it's only your superego-parent-internalized client saying you can't do it. You've stumbled on a mischievous idea. Something you shouldn't do. That's a good sign you're on to something you should do. Revisit it. In fact, it often pays to try to be naughty on purpose.

Try something naughty. Or provocative.

Sometimes the best way to bring the message home is to gallop into town and splash mud all over decent citizens.

Naughty is good. It gets your client talked about, and with the capabilities of today's social media, talk value is at an all-time high. So go over the line once in a while and see what happens. And *please,* don't take this as permission to do a "pee-pee" joke. If I see even *one* more ad with a sly nudge-nudge-wink-wink reference to penises or to sex, I think I shall retire to my chambers, close the door, and gently weep until dusk.

Remember, being provocative just because you *can* isn't the point. Like Bernbach said, "Be sure your provocativeness stems from your product." The ad shown in Figure 3.11 for the truth® youth-smoking prevention campaign qualifies. Here's a client who wants to use the natural rebellious tendencies of

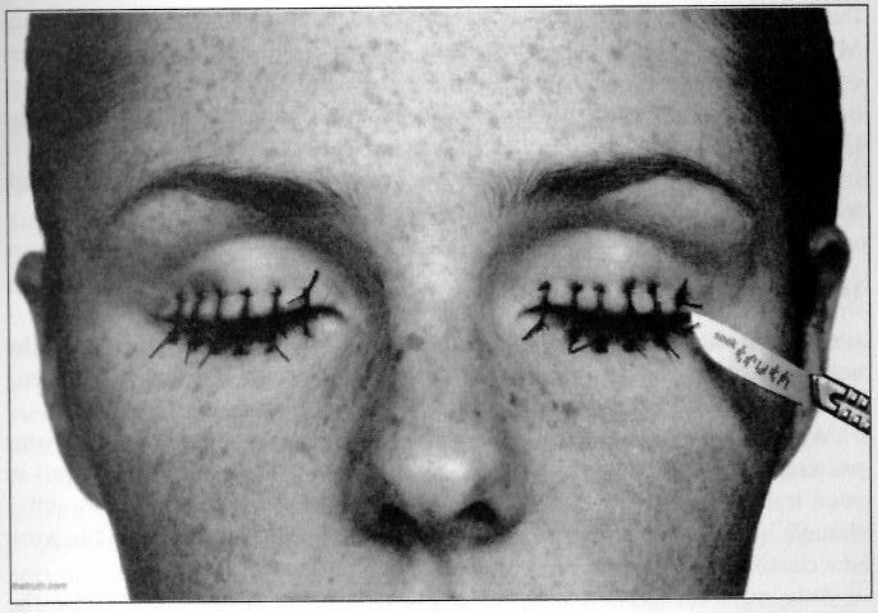

Figure 3.11 Being provocative is good. Particularly when you need to make people mad about something.

teenagers and turn them on the lies of tobacco companies. It's exactly the right time to pull out all the stops.

Maybe *naughty* isn't the right word. How about . . . *controversial? Provocative.* My thesaurus also suggests: *devilish, sneaky, disobedient, mischievous, willful, wayward, bad,* and *recalcitrant.* Do something you're not supposed to do. Break a rule of some kind. Come up with an idea that makes you say, "We can't do that, can we?" That's a sign it's a strong idea. The other question to ask is: "Will somebody talk about this idea if we do it?"

Running a small-space ad with a headline "Fur Coat Storage Services" is naughty. Well, it is when you know the rich ladies who called the number got a recorded message from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals about the cruelty of the fur business and how they should "donate" their fur for proper burial.

In Warren Berger's book *Hoopla,* Crispin Porter + Bogusky's Alex Bogusky observes, "If you're about to spend advertising dollars on a campaign and you can't imagine that anybody is going to write about it or talk about it, you might want to rethink it. It means you probably missed injecting a truth or social tension into it."[19]

A truth. A social tension. Again, we come back to these themes of truth and of tension. Think of truth, or social tension or naughtiness, as the bad guy in a movie. Ever notice how the bad guy is usually a movie's most interesting character? Kids wanna be Darth Vader, not Luke Skywalker. On Halloween,

I've never seen anybody wearing a Jamie Lee Curtis mask; it's always Michael Myers. Bad is good. The bad guy disrupts. He changes things, makes them interesting. Bad means gettin' some "Bom Chicka Wah Wah" from the Axe Effect or doing things in Vegas that have to stay there. Bad is why the "Subservient Chicken" was wearing a garter belt.

Do something devilish, disobedient, provocative, sneaky, mischievous, willful, wayward, bad, or recalcitrant. At every turn of the way, question authority.

Try doing something counterintuitive with a medium.

It's basically another form of naughtiness, using a medium "incorrectly." Why not write a 25-word outdoor board? Or put your poster in exactly the wrong place, like they did with this one for the *Economist* (Figure 3.12).

Why not use radio for something besides retail? What if you mailed your posters and posted your direct mail? What if you embedded a radio spot in your transit poster? What if you used the newspaper's classifieds to sell a thought instead of a car? What if you used a huge outdoor board to do the work of a classified ad?

Things get really interesting when you take this kind of thinking into the digital realm. Some folks call this *hacking.*

Burger King's Whopper Sacrifice was a form of hacking. BK asked Facebook members to delete 10 of their friends to get a free Whopper, which, if you think

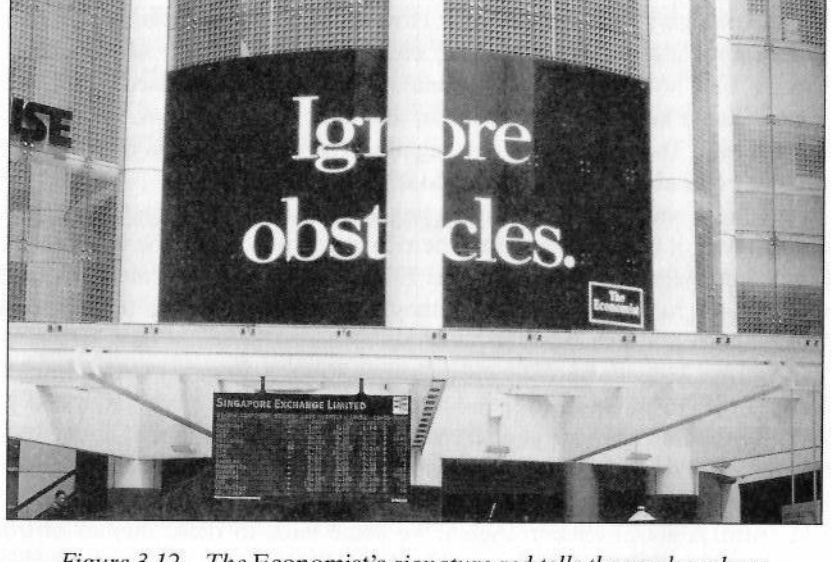

Figure 3.12 The Economist's *signature red tells the reader whose poster this is from 100 yards away. And the pillars don't get in the way. They hold the concept up.*

about it, is precisely the "wrong way" to use that platform. But Facebookers loved the idea and soon the defriending started showing up on all kinds of activity feeds. Burger King and Crispin essentially hacked the Facebook system, turned the platform on its head and made it about disconnecting people.

Mullen hacked Twitter data to make their Brand Bowl app for the 2011 Super Bowl. The application simply monitored Twitter conversation around the Super Bowl television spots and ranked them based on the amount of conversation and preference. It was real-time feedback on a national scale and displayed in a simple easy-to-follow format.

To promote the release of the horror movie *The Last Exorcism,* Lionsgate used Chat Roulette, a notoriously pervy website where horny college-age males hoped their video feed would be randomly paired up with a pretty girl's. What viewers didn't realize was the pretty girl they had stumbled upon would stop in mid-strip and turn into a demon. Talk about creating an experience for a brand. The user reactions that Lionsgate captured later attracted more than five million views on YouTube (Figure 3.13).

As agencies get more adept at hacking the different emerging media, this sort of cross-platform creativity will become more common. These stunts tend to create a lot more talk value than what's traditionally been called advertising.

If you have to do an ad, does it have to be a flat page?

Try a pop-up, a gatefold, a scratch and sniff, a computer chip, something, anything.

Typically, liquor companies trot out these print extravaganzas during the holiday season, spicing their inserts with talking microchips and pop-up devices. But why wait for the holidays when other advertisers might be doing it? Also, there are less expensive tricks you can try. Sequential ads. Scratch-off concepts. Die cuts. Different paper stocks. Acetate film. There's even a magnetized paper now. What can you do with the ad itself to make it more than just an ad?

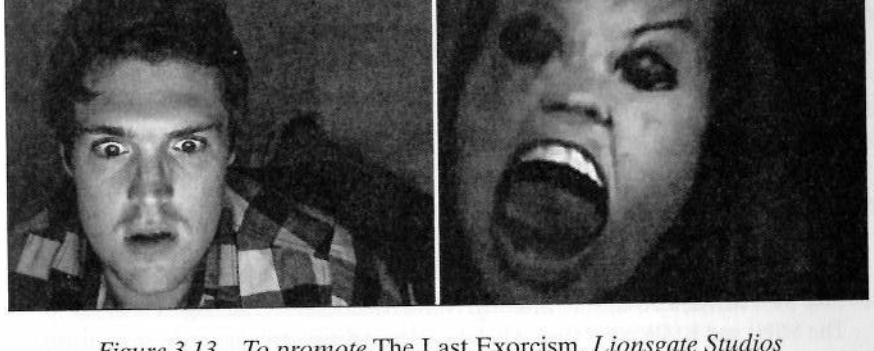

Figure 3.13 To promote The Last Exorcism, *Lionsgate Studios adds a demonic twist to the already-creepy Chat Roulette site.*

Crispin Porter + Bogusky's entire print buy for the MINI featured stunts like the one pictured in Figure 3.14. They had to; Detroit was outspending them in magazines 100 to 1. So their stunts weren't just a couple of one-offs for the holidays; almost every single MINI ad was a stunt, each one basically an event held into a magazine with staples. One ad had peel-off decals to put on your MINI. Another featured a car-deodorizing pine tree. My favorite was a flattened cardboard milk carton inserted into the magazine. The copy invited you to reassemble it to look like an empty milk carton, which was just the excuse you needed to get in your MINI and motor.

I've seen an ad for a beer that could be folded into a bottle opener. An ad for a green product that photo-reacted to sunlight. Another ad (for a suntan lotion and made of tinfoil) supplied its reader with one of those reflectors for under-the-neck beach tanning. Then there was the one where you put your iPhone on top of the face in the ad; when the mouth on screen moved it looked like the person in the ad was taking to you.

Remember, too, that a stunt doesn't always have to involve inserts. Check out the cool ad for the U.S. Air Force from GSD&M shown in Figure 3.15.

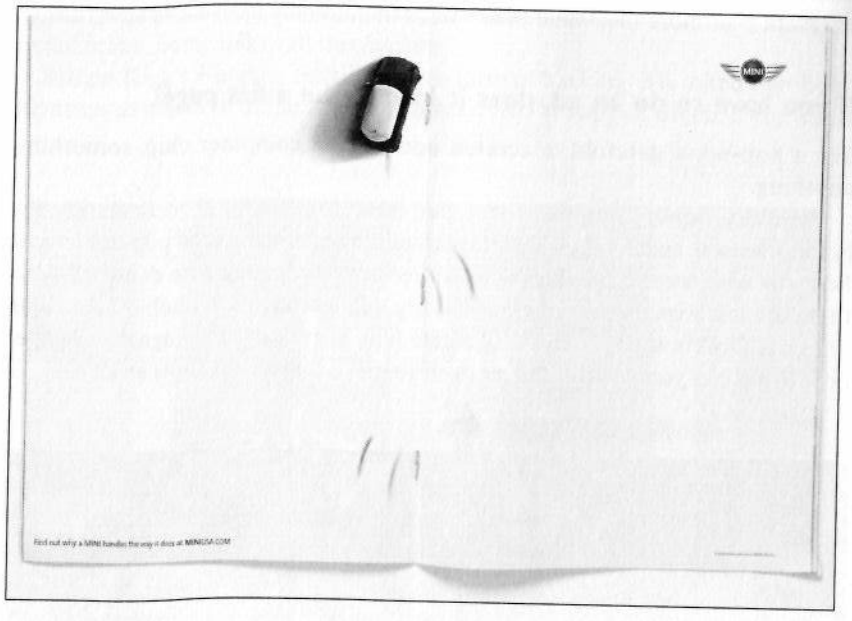

Figure 3.14 It's hard to see in this reprinting, but Crispin bought the center spread of Rolling Stone *magazine and had the MINI slaloming around orange-colored staples. The copy: "Find out why a MINI handles the way it does at MINIUSA.com."*

Dummy editorial copy on the left side is burnt to a crisp by the afterburners on the F-15.

Try not to look like, or act like, or sound like, or be like an ad.

People don't buy magazines to look at ads. They don't buy TV's to look at the stinkin' commercials. So why look like advertising? This doesn't mean you should make nonsense. But do we always have to look like an ad? An ad says, "Click to the next page" or "Turn off the TV" when it *should* say, "Pretty cool, huh? Where do you want to go next?"

Do you always need to stick a logo in the lower right-hand corner? Does it really need to be an ad? Can it be four 5-second TV spots? Can it be an interactive display in Times Square? In Red Square? Can you turn a building into a QR code? Can your TV campaign be a soap opera? Or an opera opera? Can you make it a video game? An alternate reality game (ARG)? Try to make your message be *anything* but an ad. (We'll talk more about this stuff in Chapters 5 and 6.)

Remember: Do something devilish, disobedient, provocative, sneaky, mischievous, willful, wayward, bad, or recalcitrant. At every turn of the way, question authority.

"DO I HAVE TO DRAW YOU A PICTURE?"

"Do I want to write a letter or send a postcard?"

In his book *Cutting Edge Advertising,*[20] Aitchison offers up this early fork in the road. Do you want to write a letter or just drop a postcard? On a sliding scale, with all visual on one side and all verbal on the other, what's the right mix for your product and your message?

A postcard, says Aitchison, is an idea that's visually led. A single visual and a small bit of copy are all that are needed to make the point. For example, to demonstrate the cool technology in the new Mercedes (Figure 3.16), the creatives used mostly type but there's some art direction at work here too. But it's still very simple and is just a quick postcard from Mercedes making one quick point.

Another example of a more digital nature is the Kraft Macaroni & Cheese smile banner from Kraft and Crispin Porter + Bogusky (Figure 3.17). The simple challenge: show us you love it. The answer: a noodle that mimics the smile on your face via motion detection and the camera on your computer. A simple, entertaining, involving little postcard to get the point across.

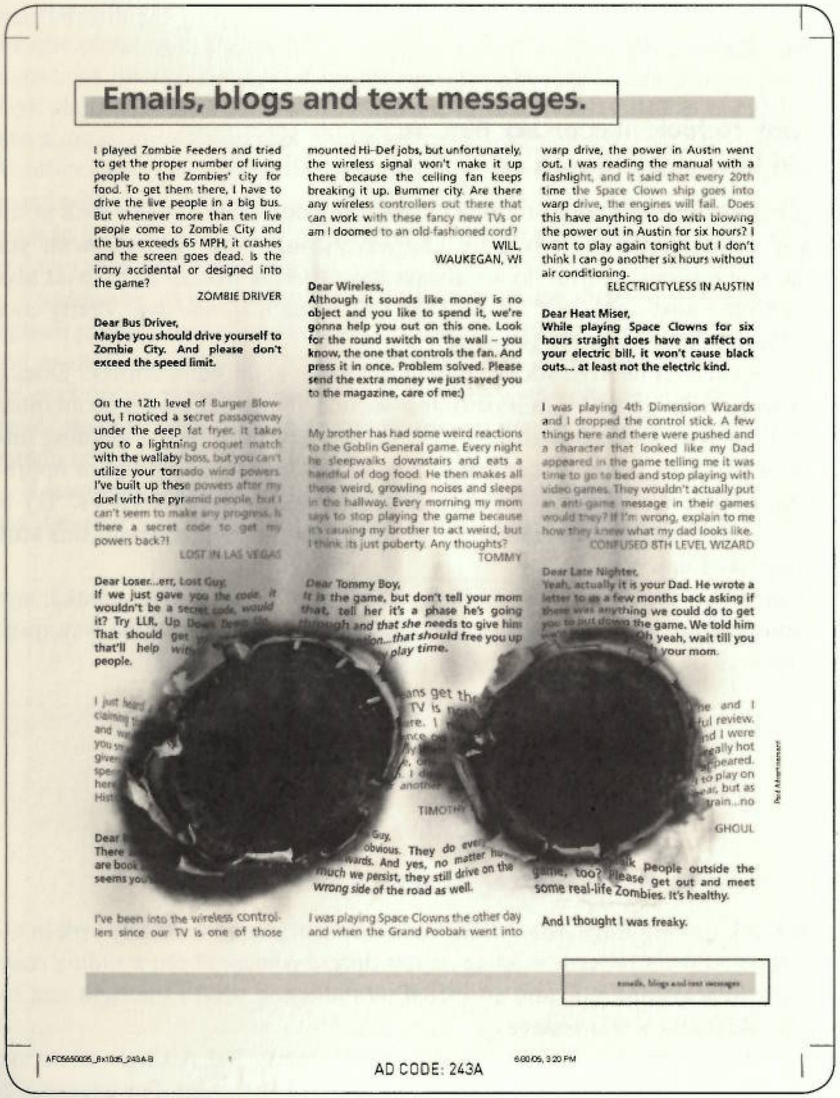
Emails, blogs and text messages.
I played Zombie Feeders and tried to get the proper number of living people to the Zombies' city for food. To get them there, I have to drive the live people in a big bus. But whenever more than ten live people come to Zombie City and the bus exceeds 65 MPH, it crashes and the screen goes dead. Is the irony accidental or designed into the game?
ZOMBIE DRIVER
Dear Bus Driver,
Maybe you should drive yourself to Zombie City. And please don't exceed the speed limit.
On the 12th level of Burger Blow-out, I noticed a secret passageway under the deep fat fryer. It takes you to a lightning croquet match with the wallaby boss, but you can't utilize your tornado wind powers. I've built up these powers after my duel with the pyramid people, but I can't seem to make any progress. Is there a secret code to get my powers back?!
LOST IN LAS VEGAS
Dear Loser...err, Lost Guy,
If we just gave you the code, it wouldn't be a secret code, would it? Try LLR, Up
That should
that'll help
people.
I've been into the wireless control-lers since our TV is one of those mounted Hi-Def jobs, but unfortunately, the wireless signal won't make it up there because the ceiling fan keeps breaking it up. Bummer city. Are there any wireless controllers out there that can work with these fancy new TVs or am I doomed to an old-fashioned cord?
WILL, WAUKEGAN, WI
Dear Wireless,
Although it sounds like money is no object and you like to spend it, we're gonna help you out on this one. Look for the round switch on the wall – you know, the one that controls the fan. And press it in once. Problem solved. Please send the extra money we just saved you to the magazine, care of me:)
My brother has had some weird reactions to the Goblin General game. Every night he sleepwalks downstairs and eats a handful of dog food. He then makes all these weird, growling noises and sleeps in the hallway. Every morning my mom says to stop playing the game because it's causing my brother to act weird, but I think its just puberty. Any thoughts?
TOMMY
Dear Tommy Boy,
It is the game, but don't tell your mom that, tell her it's a phase he's going through and that she needs to give him
...that should free you up
play time.
TIMOTHY
wrong side of the road as well.
I was playing Space Clowns the other day and when the Grand Poobah went into warp drive, the power in Austin went out. I was reading the manual with a flashlight, and it said that every 20th time the Space Clown ship goes into warp drive, the engines will fail. Does this have anything to do with blowing the power out in Austin for six hours? I want to play again tonight but I don't think I can go another six hours without air conditioning.
ELECTRICITYLESS IN AUSTIN
Dear Heat Miser,
While playing Space Clowns for six hours straight does have an affect on your electric bill, it won't cause black outs... at least not the electric kind.
I was playing 4th Dimension Wizards and I dropped the control stick. A few things here and there were pushed and a character that looked like my Dad appeared in the game telling me it was time to go to bed and stop playing with video games. They wouldn't actually put an anti-game message in their games would they? If I'm wrong, explain to me how they knew what my dad looks like.
CONFUSED 8TH LEVEL WIZARD
Dear Late Nighter,
Yeah, actually it is your Dad. He wrote a letter to us a few months back asking if there was anything we could do to get you to put down the game. We told him
yeah, wait till you
your mom.
GHOUL
People outside the game, too? Please get out and meet some real-life Zombies. It's healthy.
And I thought I was freaky.
emails, blogs and text messages
AD CODE: 243A

Figure 3.15a The F-15 on the next page is torching the editorial on this page.

On the other hand, a letter is an ad that's predominantly copy-driven. It's probably better for ads that have to deliver a more complex message. Just the sheer weight of the body copy adds a sense of gravitas to the product regardless of whether the consumer reads a word of the copy. Check out the beautiful ad for Land Rover done by my friends at GSD&M (Figure 3.18).

You'll see both letter ads and postcard ads throughout this book. Take a look at how each visual or verbal format serves the different messages the brands are trying to convey.

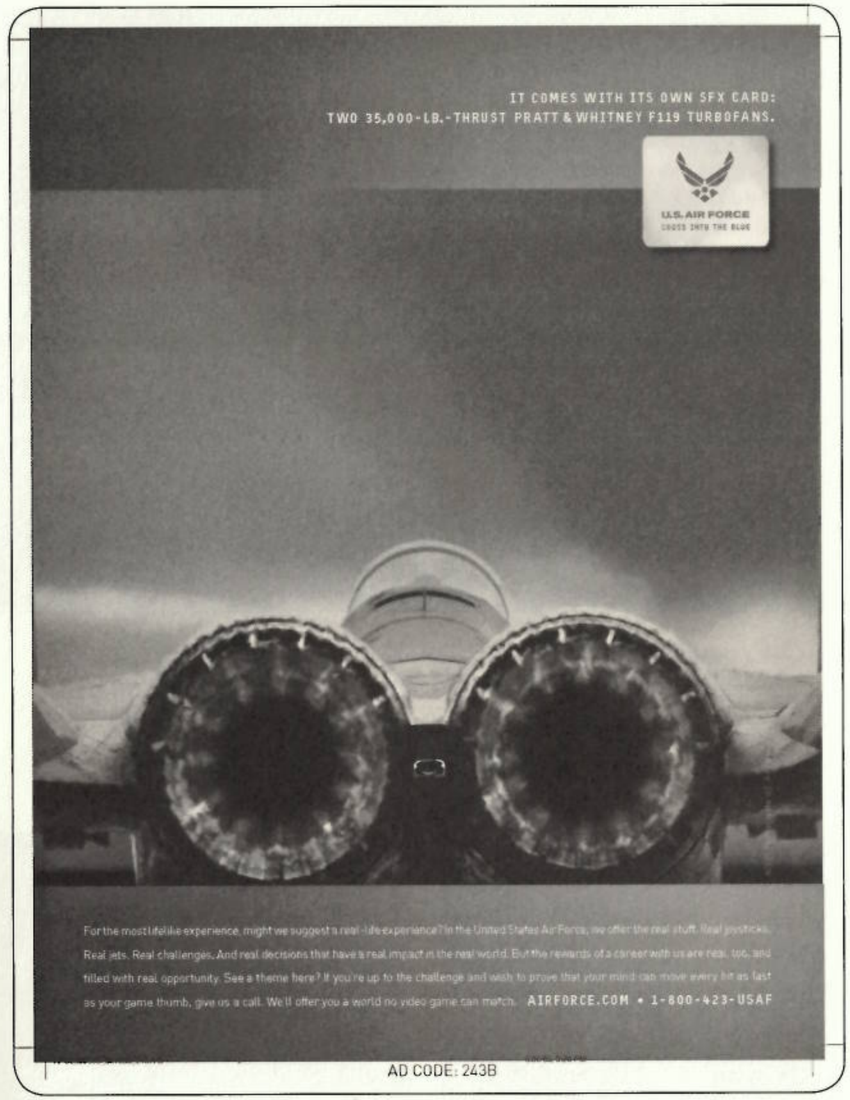
IT COMES WITH ITS OWN SFX CARD:
TWO 35,000-LB.-THRUST PRATT & WHITNEY F119 TURBOFANS.
U.S. AIR FORCE
For the most lifelike experience, might we suggest a real-life experience? In the United States Air Force, we offer the real stuff. Real joysticks. Real jets. Real challenges. And real decisions that have a real impact in the real world. But the rewards of a career with us are real, too, and filled with real opportunity. See a theme here? If you're up to the challenge and wish to prove that your mind can move every bit as fast as your game thumb, give us a call. We'll offer you a world no video game can match.
AIRFORCE.COM • 1-800-423-USAF
AD CODE: 243B

Figure 3.15b (continued)

See what it looks like to solve it entirely with the visual.

The screen saver on the computers at London's Bartle Bogle Hegarty reads, "Words are a barrier to communication." Creative director John Hegarty says, "I just don't think people read ads."

I don't think most people read ads, either—at least not the body copy. There's a reason they say a picture is worth a thousand words. When you first picked up this book, what did you look at? I'm betting it was the pictures.

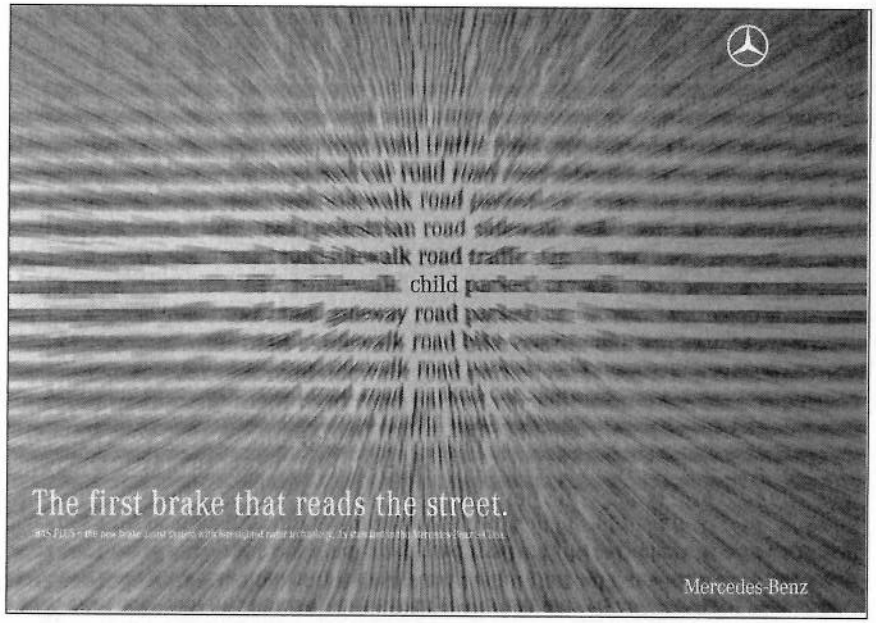

Figure 3.16 "The first brake that reads the street." An example of a postcard ad.

Figure 3.17 Postcards can be digital, too.
http://creativity-online.com/work/kraft-macaroni-cheese-show-your-love-banner/20363

Granted, if you interest readers with a good visual or headline, yes, they may go on to read your copy. But the point is, visuals work fast. As the larger brands become globally marketed, visual solutions will become even more important. They translate, not surprisingly, better than words.

IF WE'VE LEARNED ONE THING IN 30 YEARS OF BUILDING RANGE ROVERS, IT IS THIS:

AN OSTRICH EGG WILL FEED EIGHT MEN.

THE YEAR WAS 1970.

We were preparing to introduce our latest — and some say greatest — accomplishment to the world: the Range Rover. But first, like any well-regarded car company, we tested it extensively in the field. ¶ However, unlike any other well-regarded car company, when we say "tested," we mean "brutalized." And when we say "field," we mean "Sahara Desert." ¶ On that trek we learned quite a few things. First, the Range Rover is an eminently qualified 4x4. Second, washing your car in the desert is an exercise in futility. And third (we have the governor of a Saharan oasis to thank for this), when you're running low on provisions, an ostrich egg omelet truly gives new meaning to the phrase "hearty breakfast." Particularly in those parts of the world where refusing a second helping is considered an insult of the highest order.

A smooth ride is good for digestion.

As we mentioned, on its first expedition the permanent four-wheel-drive Range Rover was a smashing, unmitigated success. Now consider what 30 years of steady improvement have brought to bear.

Range Rover enthusiasts now have the benefit of four-wheel electronic traction control (4ETC). Four speed sensors independently monitor any changes in wheel speed. If they sense any slippage, they instantly apply the brakes to the offending wheel and transfer power to the ones that have more traction.

There's our advanced four-channel, all-terrain ABS braking system. It's smart enough to "see" the road (or lack thereof) and adjust its braking profile accordingly.

Most impressive, though, is our exclusive Electronic Air Suspension. Instead of utilizing traditional springs, the Range Rover uses air springs to dynamically raise or lower ride height a full five inches. You can manually lower the vehicle to ease access, raise it for fording rivers — EAS will even lower the vehicle automatically at highway speed for better aerodynamics and performance.

The very first luxury SUV.

From the beginning, Range Rover was designed to be luxurious. And as the knowledgeable driver's tastes in luxury have evolved over the years, so has our list of amenities.

The ergonomically designed leather front seats adjust 10 ways and, of course, are heated. Additional coachwork and burled walnut accents complete the interior.

For extreme climatic conditions CFC-free, dual-zone climate control with a sophisticated pollen filtration system isn't just a good idea. It's an absolute must.

You'll also find a 460-watt, 12-speaker Harman Kardon audio system with weather band, digital signal processor, six-disc CD changer and active subwoofer. For safety, remote controls are thoughtfully mounted on the steering wheel.

What option do you have?

None, really. The Range Rover 4.6 HSE is so lavishly appointed, it's even fitted with an in-dash GPS navigation system. But unlike many other systems, it's specifically designed to work even where there are no roads. Should you wander off the beaten path (an eventuality that's all but guaranteed, considering our pedigree), you'll still be able to get directions to, say, your favorite restaurant.

If only we had had that option 30 years ago.

RANGE ROVER

Figure 3.18 "If we've learned one thing in 20 years of building Range Rovers, it is this. An ostrich egg will feed eight men." Followed by 630 words of Gold One Show body copy.

Figure 3.19 Long copy ads can be great. This is not one of them.

The ad for Mitsubishi's Space Wagon (Figure 3.19) from Singapore's Ball Partnership is one of my all-time favorites. The message is delivered entirely with one picture and a thimbleful of words. What could you possibly add to or take away from this concept?

Relying on one simple visual means it assumes added responsibilities and a bigger job description. You can't bury your main selling idea down in the copy. If readers don't get what you're trying to say from the visual, they won't get it. The page is turned.

Don't take my word for it. Watch people in the airport read a magazine. They whip through, usually backward, at about two seconds per page. They glance at the clock on the wall. They check their iPhone. They turn a page. They think about the desperate, pimpled loneliness of their high school years. They look at a page. They see your ad.

If you can reduce your idea to one simple thing that gets a customer to *lean in,* your ad is a resounding success. Break out the Champale. Call your parents. You are a genius.

Coax an interesting visual out of your product.

One day when he was a little boy, my son, Reed, and I were playing and we stumbled upon a pretty good mental exercise using his toy car. I held the car in its traditional four-wheels-to-the-ground position and asked him, "What's this?" "A car," he said. I tipped it on its side. Two wheels on the ground made the image a "motorcycle." I tipped the car on its curved top. He saw a hull and declared it a "boat." When I set it tailpipe to ground, pointing straight up, he saw propulsion headed moonward and told me, "It's a rocket!"

Look at your product and do the same thing.

Visualize it on its side. Upside down. Make its image rubber. Stretch your product visually six ways to Sunday, marrying it with other visuals, other icons, and see what you get—always keeping in mind you're trying to coax out of the product a dramatic image with a selling benefit.

What if it were bigger? Smaller? On fire? What if you gave it legs? Or a brain? What if you put a door in it? What is the perfectly wrong way to use it? How else could you use it? What other thing does it look like? What could you substitute for it? Take your product, change it visually, and by doing so dramatize a customer benefit.

Get the visual clichés out of your system right away.

Certain visuals are just old. Somewhere out there is a Home for Tired Old Visuals. Sitting there in rocking chairs on the porch are visuals like Uncle Sam, a talking baby, and a proud lion, just rocking back and forth waiting for someone to use them in an ad once again. And grousing, "When we were young, we were in all kinds of ads. People used to *love* us."

Remember: Every category has its own version of Tired Old Visuals. In insurance, it's grandfathers flying kites with grandchildren. In the tech industries, it's earnest people looking at computer screens. And in beer, it's boobs. Learn what iconography is overused in your category, and avoid it.

Check out the ad for Polaris watercraft in Figure 3.20. It's just a wild guess, but I'm thinkin' this is probably the first use of a hippo in the Jet Ski category.

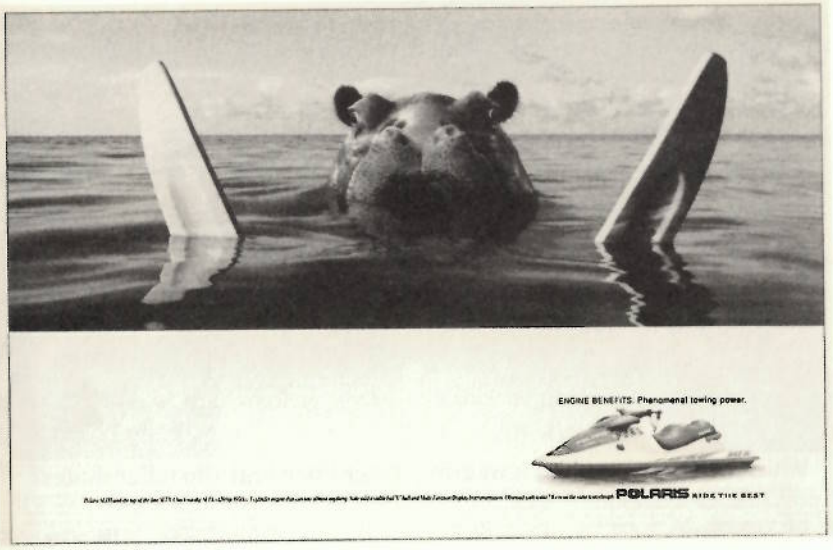

Figure 3.20 In the watercraft category, a Tired Old Visual might be a happy, wet family having a grand time waterskiing. That is why this marvelous ad stands out.

Show, don't tell.

Telling readers why your product has merit is never as powerful as showing them. Figure 3.21 shows the classic ad by BMP in London for Fisher-Price's antislip roller skates; it is a good example of the benefits of showing your story over telling it. It's one of my all-time favorites.

Historically, Volkswagen has been successful just telling people about their cars. But for the launch of their 2010 GTI, they let people experience it by announcing the car exclusively through an iPhone app. (That the car had a very tech-savvy audience made this media strategy less risky than it sounds.) Partnering with a gaming developer that already had a cool app on the market called *Real Racing,* they released a free version of this $6.99 app, *Real Racing GTI* (Figure 3.22). The rollout was a success, and it didn't hurt that they gave away six limited-edition cars to people who took the virtual test drive.

Saying isn't the same as being.

This is a corollary to the previous point. If a client says, "I want people to think our company is cool," the answer isn't an ad saying, "We're cool." The answer is to *be* cool. Nike never once said, "Hey, we're cool." They just were cool. C'mon, think about it. The Beatles didn't meet in the third-floor conference room and go over a presentation about how they were going to become known as cool. They just were cool.

The folks at Crispin Porter + Bogusky think the same way, focusing often on what they call proof points. As an example, for the MINI Cooper they could

Figure 3.21 The mental image this ad paints of two kids landing on their duffs is more powerful than actually showing them that way.

Figure 3.22 This app for VW's GTI gave users a small but real experience of the brand.

have run a TV commercial that said, "Hey, America, this is one unconventional car that puts the fun back in driving!" Instead, they mounted a MINI on *top* of an SUV (typically the space where you strap down the fun stuff like bikes and surfboards) and drove the hulking gas-guzzler around town with a message that said, "What are you doing this weekend?" The damn car *fit* up there. And when you saw this thing drive by you on the street, it was more than just a claim of unconventionality and fun. It was proof.

As Miss Manners politely points out, "It is far more impressive when others discover your good qualities without your help."

"THE REVERSE SIDE ALSO HAS A REVERSE SIDE."

When everybody else is zigging, you should zag.

There was this really dumb supervillain in the old Superman comics, Bizzaro-Man. He did everything . . . opposite. It was really stupid (and cool). Try being Bizzaro-Man.

If your product is white sheets, write the headlines in mud. If your product is beautiful, show something ugly. If your product is an insurance ad, design it like a poster for a rock concert. Try writing your copy backward. Encircle the logo for your bank client with hot dogs. I'm not saying all this Bizzaro crap makes your idea great. But you should at least search as far outside the boundaries of

convention as you can. It's likely you'll end up pulling back a bit, but you won't know what's out there until you go.

Steve Dunn, a fabulous art director from London, put it this way: "One thing I recommend is at some point you should turn everything on its head. Logos usually go lower right, so put them top left. Product shots are usually small, make them big. Instead of headlines being more prominent than the body copy, do the opposite. It's perverse, but I'm constantly surprised how many times it works."[21]

Winsor and Bogusky hit on this same topic in *Baked In.* They encourage people to figure out how to do something "perfectly wrong."

The key here is the word *perfectly.* To design something wrong is easy. A little wrong is no good, and a lot wrong is even worse—whereas perfectly wrong can be perfect. The key? The wrongness must be in direct opposition to prevailing wisdom. The world is filled with perfectly wrong successes. A shoe with the toe higher than the heel? Earth shoes. A car shaped like a box? Scion.[22]

Don't be different just to be different.

You must have a reason to zag, one beyond just the desire to be different. Bill Bernbach said it best:

> Be provocative. But be sure your provocativeness stems from your product. You are not right if in your ad you stand a man on his head just to get attention. You are right if [it's done to] show how your product keeps things from falling out of his pockets. Merely to let your imagination run riot, to dream unrelated dreams, to indulge in graphic acrobatics is not being creative. The creative person has harnessed his imagination. He has disciplined it so that every thought, every idea, every word he puts down, every line he draws . . . makes more vivid, more believable, more persuasive the . . . product advantage.[23]

Consider the opposite of your product.

What doesn't the product do? Who doesn't need the product? When is the product a waste of money? Study the inverse problem and see where negative thinking leads.

I saw a great opposite idea in a student book. It was a small poster for a paint manufacturer that painters could put up after their job was finished. Above the company's logo, this warning: "Dry Paint."

Avoid the formula of saying one thing and showing another.

"Your kids deserve a licking this summer" . . . and then you have a picture of some kids with lollipops. Get it?

Again, this isn't a rule. But if you use this sort of setup, make sure the difference between word and picture is breathtaking. The polarity between the two should fairly crackle. A good example is the ad from Leagas Delaney shown in Figure 3.23.

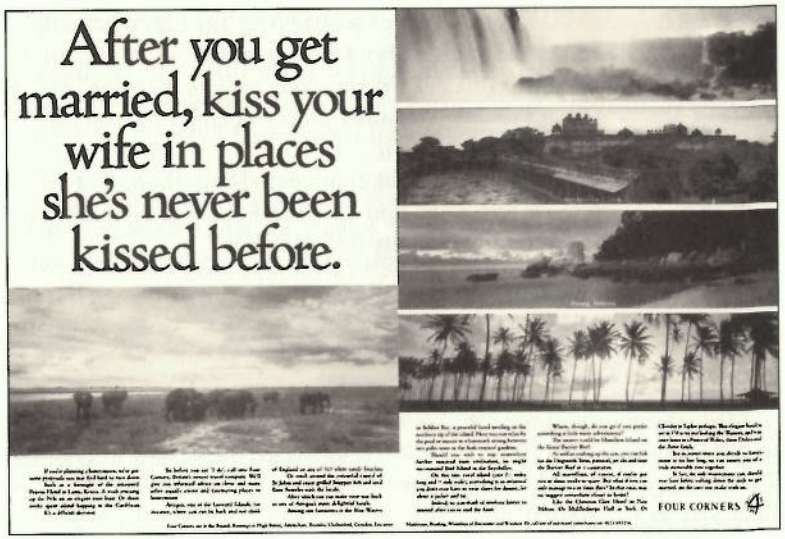

Figure 3.23 A good example of image playing off word, done by some naughty British boys.

Move back and forth between wide-open, blue-sky thinking and critical analysis.

It's like this: Up there in my brain, there's this poet guy. Smokes a lot. Wears black. He's so creative. And chicks dig 'im. He's got a million ideas. But 999,000 of them suck. He knows this because there's also a certified public accountant up there who tells him so.

"That won't work. You *suck.*"

The CPA is a no-nonsense guy who clips coupons and knows how to fix the car when the poet runs it into the ditch on his way to Beret World. Between the two of them, though, I manage to come up with a few ideas that actually work.

The trick is to give each one his say. Let the poet go first. Be loose. Be wild. Then let the CPA come in, take measurements, and see what actually works. I sense that I'm about to run this metaphor into the ground, so I'll just bow out here by saying, go back and forth between wild dorm-room creativity and critical dad's-basement analysis, always keeping your strategy statement in mind.

Make sure you don't get stuck always doing the ol' exaggeration thing.

Sometimes I think there's this tired old computer program inside every copywriter's and art director's head. I call this programming circuitry the *Exaggeration chip.*

Say you're doing an ad for, oh, a water heater. The Exaggeration chip's first 100 ideas will be knee-jerk scenarios about how cold the water will be if you don't buy this water heater: *"What if we had, like, ice cubes comin' out of the water faucet. See? 'Cause it's so cold, the water faucet will have like ice cubes, see? Ice cubes . . . 'cause . . . 'cause they're cold."*

Now, granted, there are plenty of great commercials out there that use exaggeration to great effect. I'll just warn you that the E-chip is typically the first mental program many creatives will apply to a problem.

Buy a lottery ticket and you'll be so rich that _____. (Fill in with I'm-really-rich jokes here.)

Buy this car and you'll go so fast that _____. (Insert cop-giving-ticket jokes here.)

It's just a little too easy. But here's the other thing. The E-chip will rarely lead you to a totally unexpected solution. You'll likely end up somewhere in the same neighborhood as you started, just a little further out on the whacky edge, but still nearby. A place you will likely share with everybody else who's working on the problem with an E-chip. In which case, it'll simply come down to who has the wackiest exaggeration.

I'm not sayin' it's off-limits. Just be *aware* when you're employing the Exaggeration chip. Pete Barry further cautions that if you're going to do an exaggeration scenario, make sure you base it on a truth; otherwise, you have an only silly contrivance—as in this cousin of the E-chip Teressa Iezzi identifies in her book *The Idea Writers:* the "I'm so distracted by the awesome nature of the product that I didn't notice (insert outrageous visual phenomenon here!!)."[24]

A tired old idea to which we say . . . *"Meh."*

Interpret the problem using different mental processes.

From a book called *Conceptual Blockbusting,* by James Adams, I excerpt this list[25]:

build up	dissect	transpose
eliminate	symbolize	unify
work forward	simulate	distort
work backward	manipulate	rotate
associate	transform	flatten
generalize	adapt	squeeze
compare	substitute	stretch
focus	combine	abstract
purge	separate	translate
verbalize	vary	expand
visualize	repeat	reduce
hypothesize	multiply	understate
define	invert	exaggerate

Put on different thinking caps.

How would the folks at today's top agencies solve your problem? R/GA, for instance. How would they solve it at Crispin Porter + Bogusky? At Goodby, Silverstein & Partners? How would they approach your problem at Pixar? At Google?

Shake the Etch A Sketch in your head, start over constantly, and come at the problem from wildly different angles. Don't keep sniffing all four sides of the same fire hydrant. Run like a crazed dog through entire neighborhoods.

Whenever you can, go for an absolute.

This will be hard because in today's market there are often very few differences between a product and that of its competitors. What usually happens here is that the client or agency ends up trying to leverage some rice-paper-thin difference that nobody gives a fig about. *("Legal won't let us say anything else.")* But try your hardest *not* to settle for an "-er." As in a product being *quieter.* Or *faster.* Or *cleaner.* Go for an absolute; go for an "-est." *Quietest, fastest, cleanest;* that's all people will remember anyway. All the rest of the claims in that middle ground are boring.

Metaphors must've been invented for advertising.

They aren't always right for the job, but when they are, they can be a quick and powerful way to communicate. Shakespeare did it: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"

In my opinion (and the neo-Freudian Carl Jung's), the mind works and moves through and thinks in and dreams in symbols. Red means ANGER. A dog means LOYAL. A hand coming out of water means HELP. Ad people might say that each of these images has "equity," something they mean by dint of the associations people have ascribed to them over the years. You may be able to use this equity to your client's advantage, particularly when the product or service is intangible such as, say, insurance. A metaphor can help make it real.

What makes metaphors particularly useful to your craft is they're a sort of conceptual shorthand and say with one image what you might otherwise need 20 words to say. They get a lot of work done quickly and simply.

The trick is doing it well. Just picking up an image/symbol and plopping it down next to your client's logo won't work. But when you can take an established image, put some spin on it, and use it in some new and unexpected way that relates to your product advantage, things can get pretty cool.

As soon as I put those words on paper, I remembered an execution from the marvelous British campaign for the *Economist.* Reprinted here (Figure 3.24), an unadorned keyhole is simply plopped down next to the logo. One stroke is all it takes to give the impression that this business magazine has inside information on corporations. So much for rules.

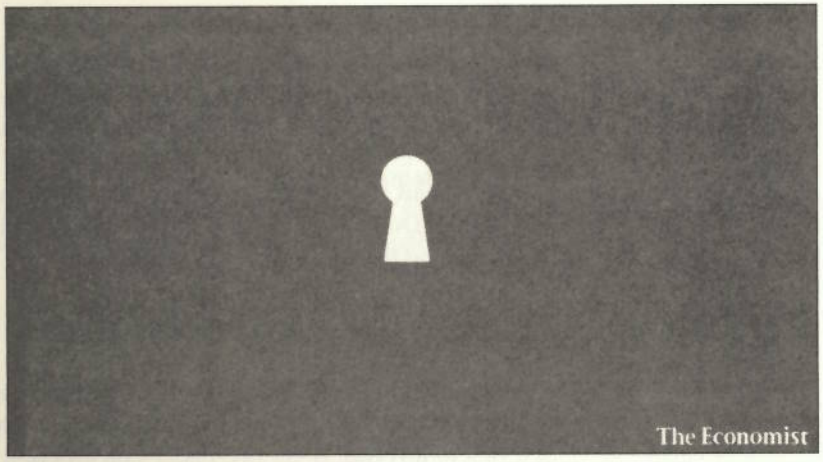

Figure 3.24 Metaphor as ad. Keyhole = competitive business information.

Still, I stand by the advice. Symbols lifted right off the rack usually won't fit your communication needs and typically need some spin put on them.

Example: By overlaying the image of stairs descending into the ocean, the creative team is able to paint a very quick picture of what awaits you at the Sydney Aquarium (Figure 3.25).

Verbal metaphors can work equally well. I remember a great ad from Nike touting their athletic wear for baseball. Below the picture of a man at bat, the headline read, "Proper attire for a curveball's funeral." In Figure 3.26, another verbal metaphor is put to good use to describe the feeling of flooring it in a Porsche.

"Wit invites participation."

Part of what makes metaphors in ads so effective is that they involve the reader. They use images already in the reader's mind, twist them to the message's purpose, and ask the reader to close the loop for us. There are other ways you can leave some of the work to the reader, and when you do it correctly, you usually have a better ad.

Here's an example. Nikon cameras ran an ad with the headline: "If you can picture it in your head, it was probably taken with a Nikon." Above this headline were four solid black squares, and inside each square was a small headline in white type describing a famous photograph.

"A three-year-old boy saluting at his father's funeral."

"A lone student standing in front of four tanks."

"An American President lifting his pet beagle up by the ears."

"A woman crying over the body of a student shot by the National Guard."

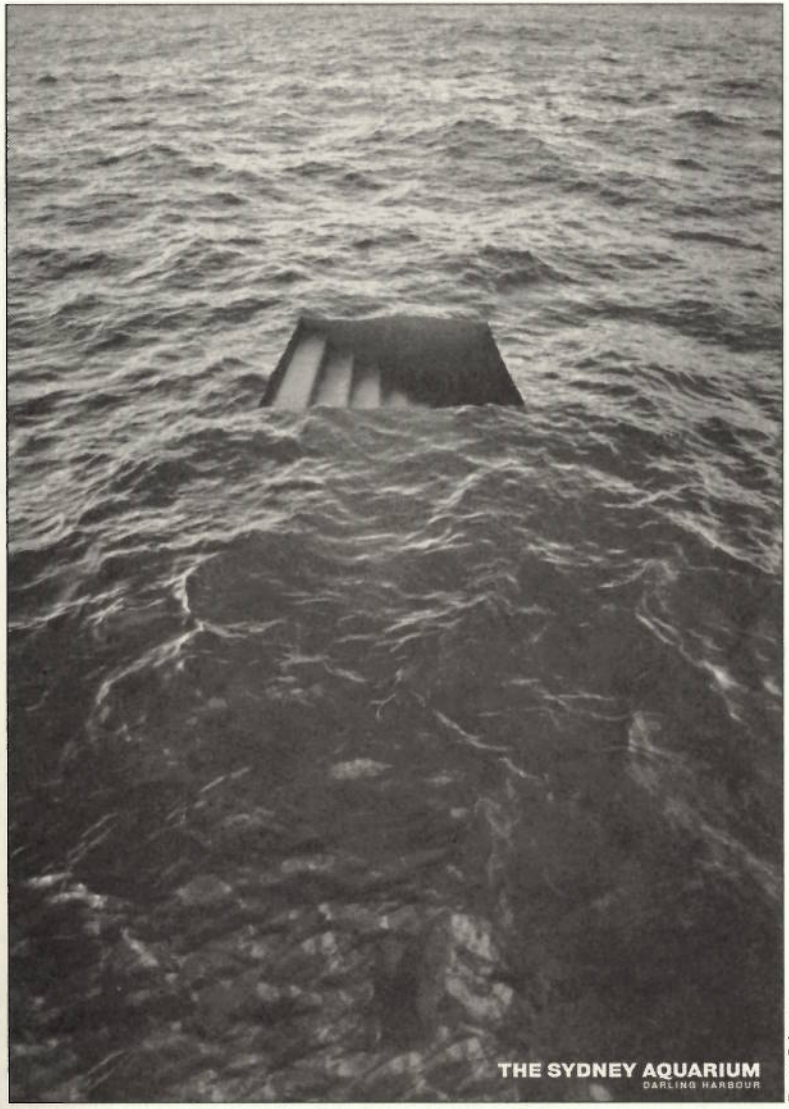

Figure 3.25 Metaphors use concepts you already understand to help you see new concepts.

Instead of showing these famous photos, the negatives are developed in the reader's head. The reader sees JFK Jr. He sees Tiananmen Square. He sees LBJ and Kent State. "Hey, I know all these photos." The reader connects the dots and, in doing so is rewarded for applying intelligence, rewarded for staying with the ad. The client is rewarded, too, with a reader actively closing the loop between the famous photos and the cameras that took them.

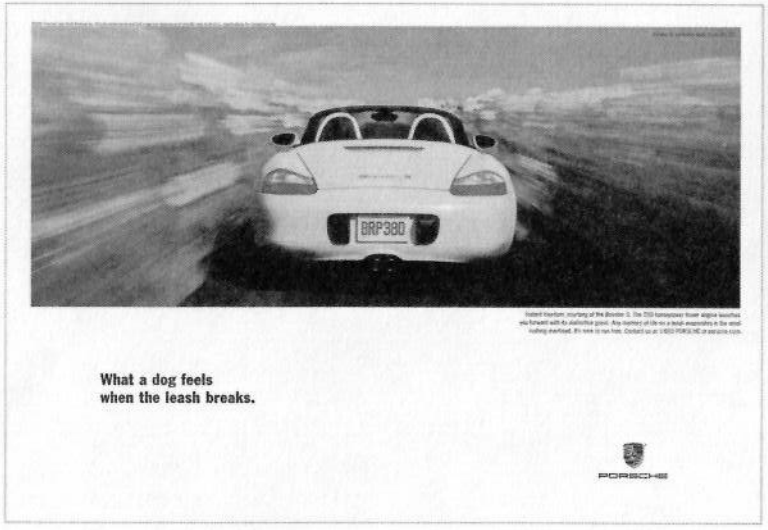

*Figure 3.26 Verbal metaphors work just as well as visual ones.**

In a great book called *A Smile in the Mind: Witty Thinking in Graphic Design*, authors McAlhone and Stuart say that "wit invites participation."

> When wit is involved, the designer never travels 100 percent of the way [towards the audience]. . . . The audience may need to travel only 5 percent or as much as 40 percent towards the designer in order to unlock the puzzle and get the idea . . . it asks the reader to take part in the communication of the idea. It is as if the designer throws a ball which then has to be caught. So the recipient is alert, with an active mind and a brain in gear.[26]

Their point about traveling "only 5 percent or as much as 40 percent" is an important one. If you leave too much out, you'll mystify your audience. If you put too much in, you'll bore them.

Testing the borders of this sublime area will be where you spend much of your time when you're coming up with ads. Somewhere between showing a picture of a flaming zebra on a unicycle and an ad that reads "Sale ends Saturday" is where you want to be.

Check out the marvelous VW ad shown in Figure 3.27. Isn't that a nice feeling? When the little >CLICK< happens inside and you get it?

*The PORSCHE CREST, PORSCHE, and BOXSTER are registered trademarks and the distinctive shapes of PORSCHE automobiles are trade dress of Dr. Ing. h.c.F. Porsche AG. Used with permission of Porsche Cars North America, Inc. Copyrighted by Porsche Cars North America, Inc. Photographer: Georg Fischer.

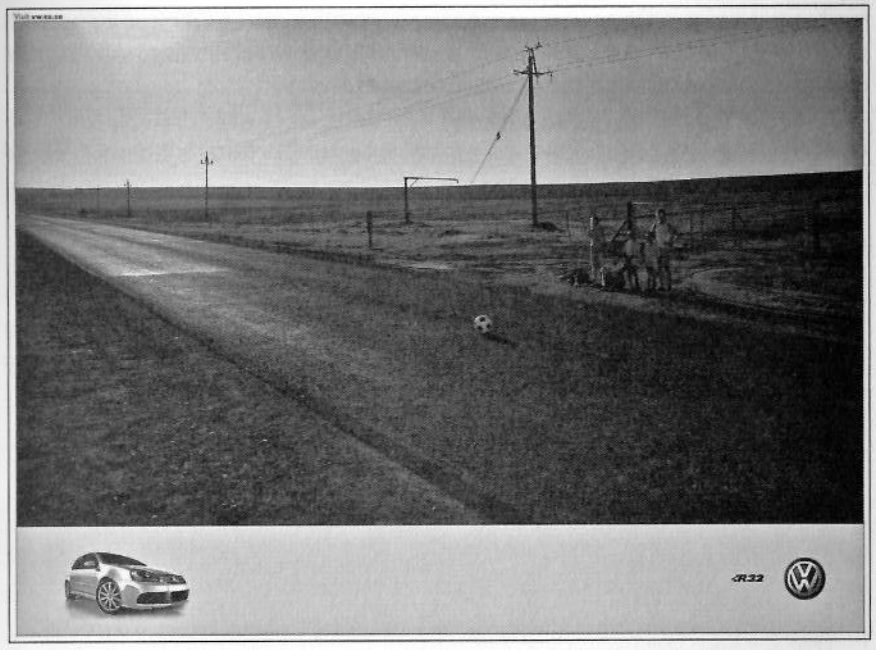

Figure 3.27 The reader leans in because something interesting is going on. And then the reader gets it. Poof. A smile in the mind.

The wisdom of knock-knock jokes.

Consider these one-liners from stand-up comedian Steven Wright: "If a cow laughed, would milk come out her nose? . . . When you open a new bag of cotton balls, are you supposed to throw the top one away? . . . When your pet bird sees you reading the newspaper, does he wonder why you're just sitting there staring at carpeting?"

Well, okay, *I* happen to think it's funny. In the last bit, for instance, the word *newspaper* begins as reading material and ends as cage-bottom covering. A shift has happened and suddenly everything is slightly off. I don't know why these shifts and the sudden introduction of incongruous data make our computers spasm; they just do.

You may find that jumping from one point of view to another to introduce a sudden new interpretation is an effective way to add tension and release to the architecture of an ad. That very tension involves the viewer more than a simple expository statement of the same facts.

Creative theorist Arthur Koestler noted that a person, on hearing a joke, is "compelled to repeat to some extent the process of inventing the joke, to recreate it in his imagination." Authors McAlhone and Stuart add, "An idea that happens in the mind, stays in the mind . . . it leaves a stronger trace. People can remember that flash moment, the click, and recreate the pleasure just by thinking about it."

A good example is the famous poster for VW from the United Kingdom, shown in Figure 3.28. As a viewer, you don't need it spelled out; in your head you quickly put together what happened, backward.

"And that, dear students," said the professor of Humor 101, "is why the chicken crossed the road." Suddenly, that's how this section on humor feels to

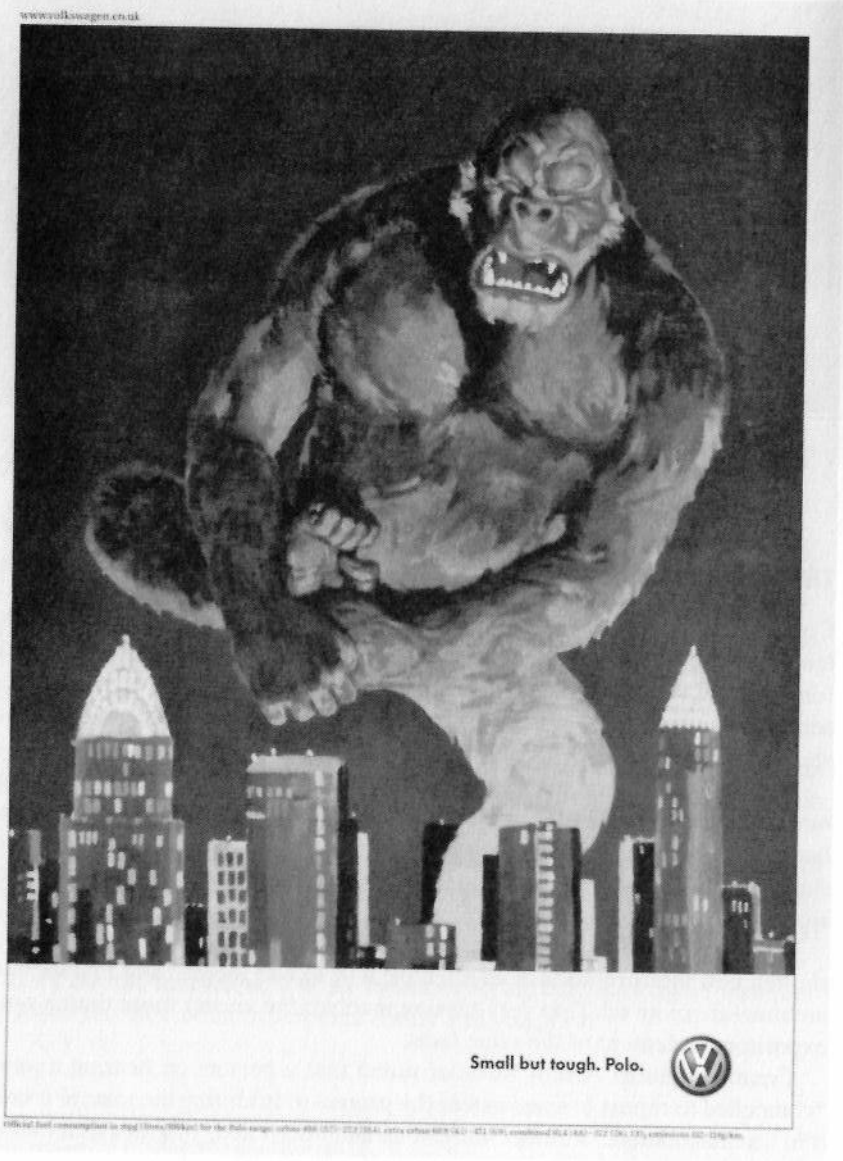

Figure 3.28 Does this ad rock, or what?

me. Pedantic. So I'll just close by saying that jokes make us laugh by introducing the unexpected. An ad can work the same way.

Don't set out to be funny. Set out to be interesting.

Funny is a subset of interesting. Funny isn't a language. Funny is an accent. And funny may not even be the right accent.

I find it interesting that the Clios, a highly overrated awards show with far too many categories, had a category called Best Use of Humor. And, curiously, no Best Use of Seriousness. Funny, serious, heartfelt—none of it matters if you aren't interesting first. Howard Gossage, a famous ad person from the 1950s, said, "People read what interests them, and sometimes it's an ad."

SIMPLE = GOOD, PART II.

If you take away one thing from this book, let it be this advice: simple is almost always better.

Maurice Saatchi, of London's M&C Saatchi, on simplicity: "Simplicity is all. Simple logic, simple arguments, simple visual images. If you can't reduce your argument to a few crisp words and phrases, there's something wrong with your argument."

"Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!"

Henry David Thoreau, sitting in his shack by the famous pond, penned this oft-quoted line. Seems to me Hank needs a dose of his own medicine:

Simplicity, ~~simplicity, simplicity~~!

There. That's better. Do the same thing with your ads. That reminds me. There's an old axiom called *Occam's razor:* when you have two correct answers that both solve the problem, the more correct answer is the simplest one. Why? Because it solves the problem with fewer moving parts. It solves the problem more elegantly.

"How difficult it is to be simple."

—*Vincent van Gogh*

Simple is hard to miss.

I've always thought a stop sign is a perfect metaphor for a good ad. It makes me stop. It is relevant. It has one word. And most of all, it is simple. It says, "STOP."

There is no introduction to "stop." No asterisks are needed to understand "stop." You don't have to link to another site to understand it. And "stop" needs no snappy wrap-up. Google, Answers.com, and Wikipedia.com are good site examples of stop signs. You see their home pages and you know exactly what you're looking at and what you need to do.

So how is a stop sign different from a good ad in a magazine? I'm turning the pages and suddenly right in my face is a big, simple, relevant message. How can I ignore it? Check out the simple CNN piece shown in Figure 3.29. Every single extraneous thing has been shaved away.

Simple is bigger.

On May 7, 1915, a German U-boat sank a passenger ship, the *Lusitania,* killing some 1,190 civilians, many of them women and children. America was finally too angry to stay out of the Great War, and enlistment posters began to appear in shop windows, one of which is reprinted here (Figure 3.30).

Most other World War I posters were not as visual and instead used headlines such as "Irishmen, Avenge the Lusitania!" and "Take Up the Sword of Justice." Seems to me, all these decades later, they're not nearly as powerful as this one simple image, this one word.

Look at Google, one of the biggest brands in the world and the best search engine out there. Yet the simplicity of their home page could hardly be scrubbed down any further; in fact, it hasn't changed much since they first went online. It's

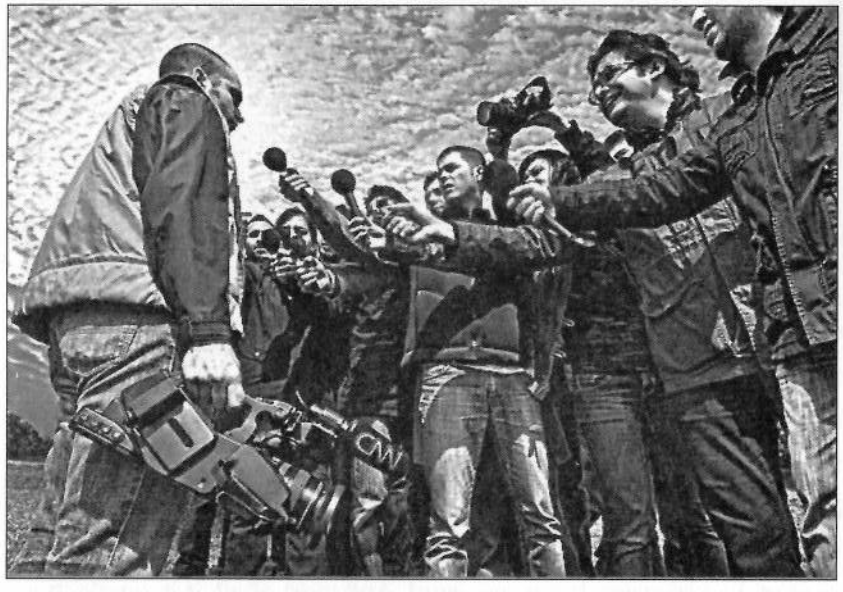

Figure 3.29 CNN cameraman as news source.

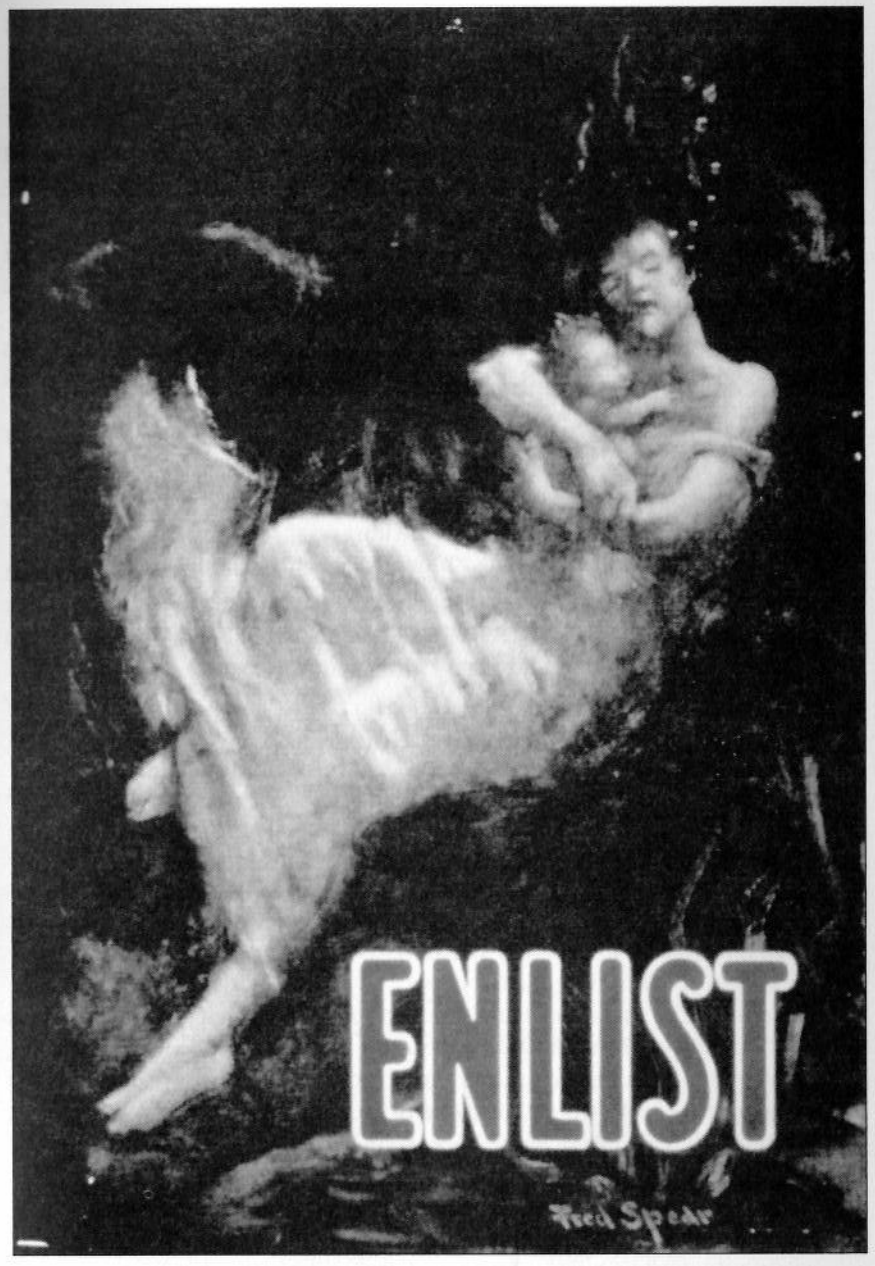

Figure 3.30 Simple graphic images are powerful. Even decades later, this World War I recruitment poster still works.

very simplicity makes it easy to approach, easy to use. If they ever start adding stuff to the home page *("To see more links to YOUR favorite activities, click here!")*, I'll probably search somewhere else.

Remember, in a cluttered TV or print environment, and in a world where your customers are sometimes watching three screens at once, less is truly more. So have your radio spot be one guy saying 40 words. Have your print ad be all one color. Lock the camera down and do your entire TV spot on a tabletop. Show a scorpion walking up a baby's arm; I don't know. Just do something *simple.* Simple is big.

The artist Paul Cezanne said, "With an apple, I will astonish Paris."

Simple is easier to remember.

On a rainy November day in 1863, a U.S. senator named Edward Everett walked up to a podium and gave a two-and-one-half-hour speech consecrating a new cemetery. It was an impassioned speech, I'm sure, but I have been having trouble finding a transcript of this speech at the library.

The speaker who followed gave a 273-word speech, beginning with the words "Four score and seven years ago . . ."

Which of the two Gettysburg addresses given that day are you more familiar with?

Simple breaks through advertising clutter.

As we noted earlier, the only effective antidote to clutter is simplicity. How can anything else but simplicity break out of clutter?

Even the Super Bowl, with its annual collection of eye-popping TV commercials, has its own brand of clutter. Call it "pretty good clutter" if you will. But it's clutter just the same, and you have to find a way to improve what a scientist might call its signal-to-noise ratio. You have to break out. You can do that only with an idea of sparkling simplicity.

The commercial that introduced the ultrathin Mac Air computer was (as are most Apple spots) a study in simplicity. To the tune of a cool current song, viewers saw the open computer and got a look at its great screen. Then the machine was closed and slipped into one of those tan office routing envelopes, all against Apple's signature white background. That was it. I don't remember the copy but that hardly matters; they made their point visually. And did it so well I remember hearing a customer in my local Apple store ask to see "that envelope computer."

Keep paring away until you have the essence of your ad.

Let's start with three observations from three different men: one dead, one British, and one crazy.

Robert Louis Stevenson said, "The only art is to omit."

Tony Cox, a fabulous British writer: "Inside every fat ad there's a thinner and better one trying to get out."

And then there's Neil French, an absolutely stellar writer from Singapore. I had lunch with him one day and he walked me through this exercise in the art of omitting, of reductionism.

He started by drawing a thumbnail sketch of a typical ad (number one in Figure 3.31). You have your headline, your visual, some body copy, a tagline, and a logo.

Okay, he asked, can we make this ad work without the body copy? Maybe we could do that by making the headline work a little harder. We can? Good, let's take out the body copy. That leaves the slightly cleaner layout of number two.

What about that tagline? Is it bringing any new information to the ad? No? Then let's broom it. Look, the third layout's even better.

Now, about that headline. Is it doing something the visual can't do? And that logo—isn't there some way we can incorporate it into the visual?

Ultimately, Neil reduced his ad to one thing. He suggested I do the same with my next ad. Get it down to one thing. Sometimes it's just a headline. Sometimes a picture. Either way, he said, the math always works out the same. Every element you add to a layout reduces the importance of all the other elements. And conversely, every item you subtract raises the visibility and importance of what's left.

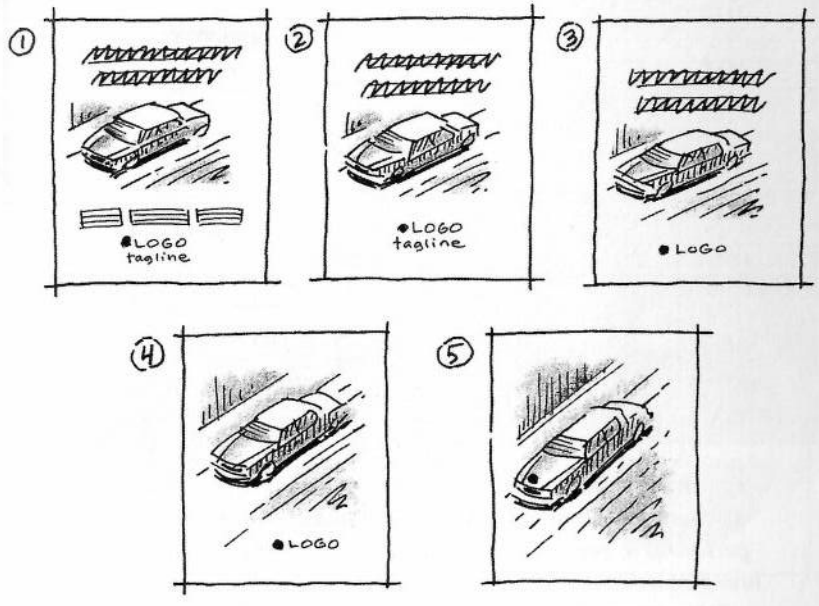

Figure 3.31 Neil's cool idea: reductionism. Ad number five is almost always going to be better than ad number one.

I admit, this kind of draconian reductionism is hard to pull off, especially when you have a client wanting to put more in an ad, not less. In my career I've done it only once. But to this day, that ad remains one of my favorites. It's the one you see here, reminding store buyers to stock Lee jeans (Figure 3.32). No logo. No headline.

The less you have to put in the ad, the better. The writer Saki said, "When baiting a trap with cheese, always leave room for the mouse."

When you have distilled a good idea into its simplest form, you're in the neighborhood of "great." This is where you wanna be. John Hegarty described great this way:

> I always love the fact that, when you look back at a piece of really successful advertising, a great piece of work looks so simple. I suppose in many ways that's its hallmark—it looks bloody obvious. It's "obvious" because it is so right for the brand. And while it may all look simple, getting to that place takes sweat, perseverance, determination, intelligence and, of course, that thing that creativity provides: magic.[27]

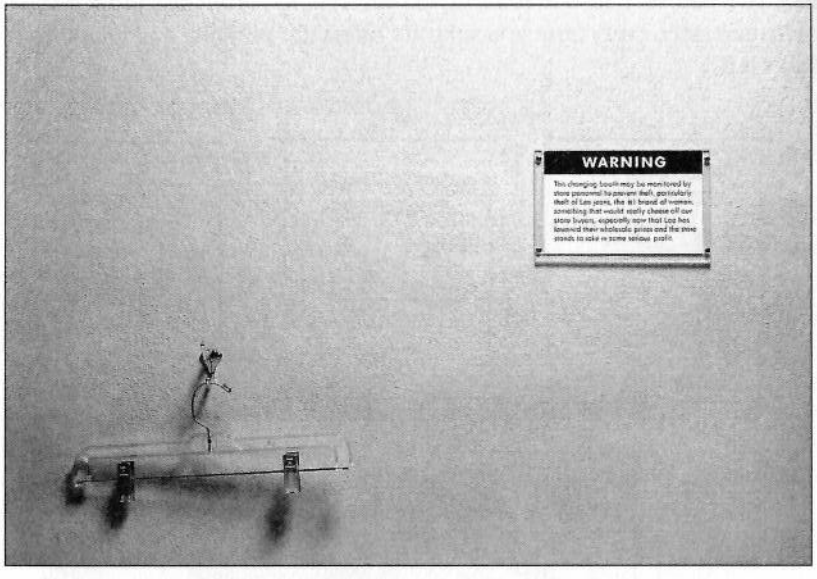

Figure 3.32 It's hard to read as it's reprinted here, but the little warning sign says: "This changing booth is monitored by store personnel to prevent theft, particularly theft of Lee jeans, the #1 brand of women, something that would really cheese off our store buyers, especially now that Lee has lowered their wholesale prices and the store stands to rake in some serious profit."

A FEW WORDS ABOUT OUTDOOR. (THREE WOULD BE IDEAL, ACTUALLY.)

Billboards, banner ads, posters, 15-second TV—they all force you to be simple.

These media may be some of the best places to practice the art of simplicity. Because there's no room to do much *else* other than get right to your idea. There's no drum roll here, folks, just cymbal crash.

It's been said that an outdoor board should have no more than seven words. Any more and a passing driver can't read it. But then you have to add the client's logo, which is one or two words. Now you're up to nine words. And if your visual is something that takes one or two beats to understand, well, in my opinion, you've already got too much on your plate.

When you think about it, is a banner ad any different? You're cruising along the Internet at about 90 clicks an hour and—zoom—what was that we just passed? *("Oooooo, was that a banner ad? Pull the car back around, honey.")* Given the speed of our passing audiences, I suggest draconian measures. Shoot for three words, tops. It doesn't mean you'll be able to keep it to three. But start with three as your goal. The board from the 1960s pictured in Figure 3.33 works with just one word.

Here's a great way to test whether your outdoor ad is simple enough and works fast. It's also a great way to present it to the client. Walk up to your client, holding the layout of your idea with its back to your audience. Say, "Okay, here's a board we were thinking about" and then flip it around and show them the idea for two seconds.

Just two seconds—one Mississippi, two Mississippi—then flip it back around again.

Check out the wonderful board in Figure 3.34 for a new flavor of Altoid's Curiously Strong Mints. It's marvelous. And it's fast. Two words and a product shot. You hardly have to count past one Mississippi to get it. Same thing for the

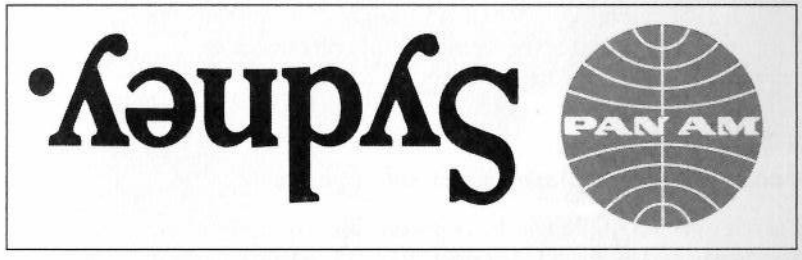

Figure 3.33 This old 1960s billboard for Pan Am Airlines does its job with one word.

great board for the JFK Museum (Figure 3.35). One visual, three words. Elegant and very fast.

Your outdoor ideas will have to work just as quickly. Visualize precisely how your idea is going to be viewed by the customer. Car approaches, billboard whizzes by, and it's gone. Web surfer zooms by and is gone. If the ideas you're showing are as fast as the ones pictured here, this presentation technique can be persuasive. Remember, the rule is your idea has to go at least 65 miles an hour.

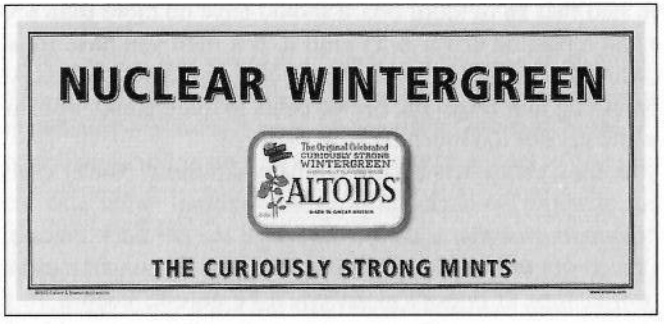

Figure 3.34 An example of a billboard so simple you could actually present it to a client in 2 seconds.
Reprinted with permission of Callard & Bowser-Suchard, Inc.

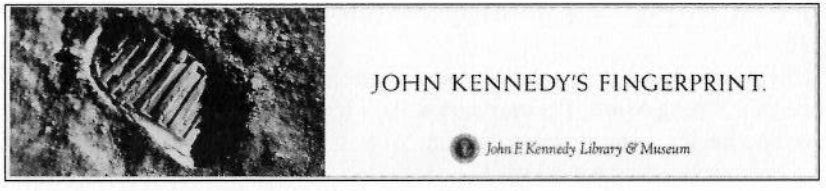

Figure 3.35 Three beautifully chosen words that make the reader reinterpret the visual.

Outdoor is a great place to get outrageous.

Big as they are on the landscape, outdoor boards are an event, not just an ad. In fact, what makes for a good print advertisement doesn't necessarily make for a good billboard. Whatever you do, don't create something just okay. The final size of a billboard out there in the world only magnifies how your okay idea is just

OKAY.

You don't wanna be just okay.

Check out the outdoor idea shown in Figure 3.36; it's way better than okay. Go Fast! is one of Amsterdam's more popular energy drinks. Y&R used Amsterdam's much-photographed canals as a place to launch water bikes with the Go Fast! logo on the side; water bikes driven by actors and powered by a fast, silent, and invisible motor. The cameras came out in droves and the idea ended up being viewed online by a global audience.

Outdoor begs for the ostentatious. Go for broke. Remember, you're in "made-you-look, made-you-look" territory here. Outdoor companies, prop makers, and tech firms can help bring just about any wild idea to life. And now with the confluence of the Web and mobile phones, people on the street can interact with boards. There are some good examples of this on the OBIE awards website.

Your outdoor must delight people.

Except for the handful of great ideas in the One Show every year, most of the outdoor I see really sucks. The thing is, when an idea sucks online, I click and it's gone. But if I live across the street from a bad outdoor concept, there's nothing I can do about it except close my curtains and drink myself to sleep.

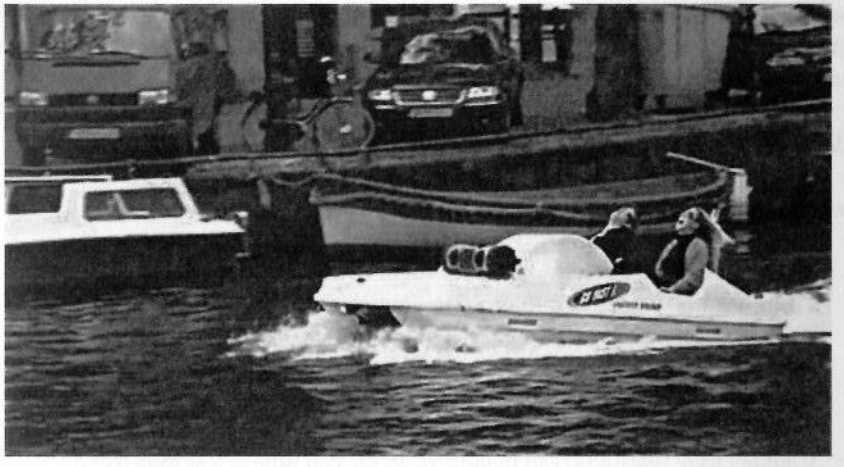

Figure 3.36 An example of "outdoor as event."

Copywriter Howard Gossage didn't believe outdoor boards were a true advertising medium:

> An advertising medium is a medium that incidentally carries advertising but whose primary function is to provide something else: entertainment, news, etc. . . . Your exposure to television commercials is conditional on their being accompanied by entertainment that is not otherwise available. No such parity or tit-for-tat or fair exchange exists in outdoor advertising . . . I'm afraid the poor old billboard doesn't qualify as a medium at all; its medium, if any, is the scenery around it and that is not its to give away.[28]

The city of Sao Paulo, Brazil, has already outlawed billboards, and here in America, several states are weighing similar bans. (Yay.) So, until the day billboards are outlawed altogether (either as "corporate littering" or perhaps "retinal trespassing"), you owe the citizens of the town where your outdoor appears—you owe them your very best work. Let your work enrich their lives in some way. *Delight* them.

A FEW THINGS BEFORE WE BREAK FOR LUNCH.

Two questions to help you gauge the size of an idea.

"What is the press release of my idea?"

This first question is credited to the folks at Crispin, where creatives are often advised against presenting their campaigns by showing the TV, the website, the print, and the outdoor. Instead they're asked to answer the question: "What is the press release of your idea?" Is your idea cool as words on a clean sheet of paper? Do the words that describe something so interesting that the press would want to talk about it? A tall order, I know, but it gets easier when you quit trying to come up with "advertising ideas" and work instead on coming up with ideas worth advertising.

"Is my idea cool enough that people would seek it out and watch it on demand?"

This question comes from PJ Pereira of San Francisco's Pereira & O'Dell, who goes on to elaborate:

> When I started in advertising, I was taught to ask if my ideas were big. Today, I'd rather ask if they are interesting enough to be worth experiencing on-demand—not only as on-demand TV, but any form of user-initiated media consumption. . . . The good news is that contrary to what some people tried to make us believe, consumers don't mind being advertised to, as long as these ads are interesting enough for them. Otherwise, Nike's "Write the Future" wouldn't have reached seven million views on YouTube in less than five days.[29]

Learn to recognize big ideas when you have them.

There will come a time when you see a great idea in a One Show annual, a campaign that'll make you go, "Damn! I thought of that once!" It's a hard thing to see, "your" idea done—and done well. That's why you have to be smart enough to pursue a promising idea once you've stumbled onto it. I'm reminded of a line by Ralph Waldo Emerson: "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts."

See that one idea you have up on the wall? The one that's so much better than the others? Investigate why. There may be oil under that small patch of land. A big idea is almost always incredibly simple. So simple, you wonder why nobody's thought of it before. It has "legs" and can work in a lot of different executions in all kinds of media. Coming up with a big idea is one skill. Recognizing a big idea is another skill. Develop both.

Big ideas transcend strategy.

When you finally come upon a big idea, you may look up from your pad to discover that you've wandered off strategy. Well, sometimes that's okay. Good account people understand this happens from time to time and will help you retool the strategy to get the client past this unexpected turn in the road.

My friend Mike Lescarbeau compares a big idea to a nuclear bomb and asks, "Does it really have to land *precisely* on target to work?"

Don't keep runnin' after you catch the bus.

After you've covered the walls with ideas and you've identified some concepts you really like, stop. And I mean covered the walls. This isn't permission to stop because you're tired or you have a few things that aren't half-bad. It's a reminder to keep one eye on the deadline.

Blue-skying is great. You have to do it. But there comes a time (and you'll get better at recognizing it) when you'll have to cut bait and start working on the really good ideas. You have a fixed amount of time, so you'll need to devote some of it to making what's good great.