

OGILVY

ON



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Ogilvy
on
Advertising
David Ogilvy



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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

- [1 Overture](#)
 - [2 How to produce advertising that sells](#)
 - [3 Jobs in advertising – and how to get them](#)
 - [4 How to run an advertising agency](#)
 - [5 How to get clients](#)
 - [6 Open letter to a client in search of an agency](#)
 - [7 Wanted: a renaissance in print advertising](#)
 - [8 How to make TV commercials that sell](#)
 - [9 Advertising corporations](#)
 - [10 How to advertise foreign travel](#)
 - [11 The secrets of success in business-to-business advertising](#)
 - [12 Direct mail, my first love and secret weapon](#)
 - [13 Advertising for good causes](#)
 - [14 Competing with Procter & Gamble](#)
 - [15 18 Miracles of research](#)
 - [16 What little I know about marketing](#)
 - [17 Is America still top nation?](#)
 - [18 Lasker, Resor, Rubicam, Burnett, Hopkins and Bernbach](#)
 - [19 What's wrong with advertising?](#)
 - [20 I predict 13 changes](#)
- [Reading list](#)
- [Index](#)



1

Overture

‘Let us march against Philip’

I do not regard advertising as entertainment or an art form, but as a medium of information. When I write an advertisement, I don't want you to tell me that you find it 'creative.' I want you to find it so interesting that you *buy the product*. When Aeschines spoke, they said, 'How well he speaks.' But when Demosthenes spoke, they said, 'Let us march against Philip.'

In my *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, published in 1963, I told the story of how Ogilvy & Mather came into existence, and set forth the principles on which our early success had been based. What was then little more than a creative boutique in New York has since become one of the four biggest advertising agencies in the world, with 140 offices in 40 countries. Our principles seem to work.

But I am now so old that a French magazine lists me as the only survivor among a group of men who, they aver, contributed to the Industrial Revolution – alongside Adam Smith, Edison, Karl Marx, Rockefeller, Ford and Keynes. Does old age disqualify me from writing about advertising in today's world? Or could it be that perspective helps a man to separate the eternal verities of advertising from its passing fads?

When I set up shop on Madison Avenue in 1949, I assumed that advertising would undergo several major changes before I retired. So far, there has been only *one* change that can be called major: television has emerged as the most potent medium for selling most products.

Yes, there have been other changes and I shall describe them, but their significance has been exaggerated by pundits in search of trendy labels. For example, the concept of brand images, which I popularized in 1953, was not really new; Claude Hopkins had described it 20 years before. The so-called Creative Revolution, usually ascribed to Bill Bernbach and myself in the fifties, could equally well have been ascribed to N. W. Ayer and Young & Rubicam in the thirties.

Meanwhile, most of the advertising techniques which worked when I wrote *Confessions of an Advertising Man* still work today. Consumers still buy products whose advertising promises them value for money, beauty, nutrition, relief from suffering, social status and so on. All over the world.

In saying this, I run the risk of being denounced by the idiots who hold that any advertising technique which has been in use for more than two years is *ipso facto* obsolete. They excoriate slice-of-life commercials, demonstrations and talking heads, turning a blind eye to the fact that these techniques still make the cash register ring. If they have read Horace, they will say that I am *difficilis, querulus, laudator temporis acti. Se puero, castigato, censorque minorum.*⁴ So what? There have always been noisy lunatics on the fringes of the advertising business. Their stock-in-trade includes ethnic humor, eccentric art direction, contempt for research, and their self-proclaimed genius. They are seldom found out, because they gravitate to the kind of clients who, bamboozled by their rhetoric, do not hold them responsible for sales results. Their campaigns find favor at cocktail parties in New York, San Francisco and London but are taken less seriously in Chicago. In the days when I specialized in posh campaigns for *The New Yorker*, I was the hero of this coterie, but when I graduated to advertising in mass media and wrote a book which extolled the value of research, I became its devil. I comfort myself with the reflection that I have sold more merchandise than all of them put together.

I am sometimes attacked for imposing ‘rules.’ Nothing could be further from the truth. I *hate* rules. All I do is report on how consumers react to different stimuli. I may say to a copywriter, ‘Research shows that commercials with celebrities are below average in persuading people to buy products. Are you *sure* you want to use a celebrity?’ Call that a *rule*? Or I may say to an art director, ‘Research suggests that if you set the copy in black type on a white background, more people will read it than if you set it in white type on a black background.’ A *hint*, perhaps, but scarcely a rule.

In 18th-century England, a family of obstetricians built a huge practice by delivering babies with a lower rate of infant and maternal mortality than their competitors. They had a secret – and guarded it jealously, until an inquisitive medical student climbed onto the roof of their delivering room, looked through the skylight and saw the forceps they had invented. The secret was out, to the benefit of all obstetricians and their patients. Today’s obstetricians do not keep their discoveries secret, they publish them. I am grateful to my partners for allowing me to publish mine. But I should add that the occasional *opinions* expressed in this book do not necessarily reflect the collegial opinions of the agency which employs me.

This is not a book for readers who think they already know all there is to be known about advertising. It is for young hopefuls – and veterans who are still in search of ways to improve their batting average at the cash register.

I write only about aspects of advertising I know from my own experience. That is why this book contains nothing about media, cable television or advertising in Japan.

If you think it is a lousy book, you should have seen it before my partner Joel Raphaelson did his best to de-louse it. *Bless you, Joel.*

David Ogilvy

¹Testy, a grumbler, inclined to praise the way of the world when he was a boy, to play the critic and to be a censor of the new generation.