

A **McGRAW-HILL** ADVERTISING CLASSIC

CONVERSATIONS WITH

William Bernbach

George Gribbin

Rosser Reeves

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Leo Burnett

The

Art of

Writing

Advertising

INTERVIEWED BY DENIS HIGGINS



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BUSINESS/ADVERTISING

## Five Pioneer Advertising Writers Reveal the Secrets to Great Advertising and Great Writing

**F**our decades ago, five of the original giants of advertising copywriting—William Bernbach, Leo Burnett, George Gribbin, David Ogilvy, and Rosser Reeves—discussed their writing techniques with *Advertising Age* magazine. Fascinating and enlightening, these interviews were so popular with writers everywhere that they were compiled into the book you now hold.

*The Art of Writing Advertising* allows history's greatest advertising copywriters to freely discuss what they know best—writing and creating. The classic primer for professional copywriters, it has over the years become equally prized as a hands-on idea starter for writers of every stripe from all walks of life.

*“To the reader who has any interest at all in advertising, in advertising writing, or indeed in writing or expression of any kind, the five interviews in this volume are certain to be of absorbing interest. Here are the masters of their craft, talking—not writing—informally, freely, and cogently about their craft, their skills, their ideas, their notions, and their ideals. Let’s join the conversation.”* —From the Introduction

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*New York Chicago San Francisco Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City  
Milan New Delhi San Juan Seoul Singapore Sydney Toronto*

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## *Introduction*

FOR MOST PEOPLE writing is a lonely, frustrating and sometimes unhappy experience. The writer who actually enjoys the process of writing seems to be unusual; most writers enjoy *having written* but get no joy whatever from the actual task of moving a pencil across a sheet of paper or hitting one key after another on a typewriter.

Buckling down to the task of writing is a sort of horror, to be put off until the last possible minute. An infinitely complicated and pointless ritual, much like the contortions a baseball pitcher frequently goes through before he finally cocks his arm and actually starts the pitching motion, is often involved. Paper must be stacked just so; the typewriter or the pencils must be fingered, caressed, carefully lined up. Coffee must be drunk, or not drunk. The window must be opened, closed or adjusted. The chair must be raised, lowered, moved in, moved out, or replaced. That new, funny looking spot on the neck must be carefully inspected in the bathroom mirror; or the girl whose profile shows in the window across the business canyon must be speculatively regarded. Time moves on, and so does the pointless ritual, until at last the moment can no longer be postponed. It is time to *start writing* . . .

It was the intimate knowledge of this sort of harrowing experience that was in the mind of James Vincent O'Gara, executive

editor of Advertising Age, when he suggested one day to senior editor Denis Higgins that he interview the five "advertising greats" who had thus far been elected to the New York Copywriters Hall of Fame.

"The essence of this business is putting effective words and phrases down on paper," he said. "And practically every writer of advertising, like every writer of anything else, goes through these horrible gyrations on his way to turning out a page of print copy, or a television commercial, or a set of instructions on how to assemble Widget A without losing either your patience or your thumb. Talk to these great and successful writers of advertising about this mundane but important matter of how they prepare themselves to get at it. See if they have developed any little gimmicks for getting the productive juices to flow more freely. Ask them if they have learned anything in their rich experience which might help other aspiring writers to get there faster with less frustration and, perhaps, somewhat better results."

So Denis Higgins hunted down his five hero-victims, armed with tape recorder, a fistful of questions (some of them innocuous) and an inquiring and somewhat unconventional mind.

What emerged from these sessions is what appears in this book. Far from developing into a pedantic discussion of how to sharpen pencils before sitting down to write, Higgins' victims gave forth, under his prodding, with some of the most interesting discussions on the writing of advertising which it has ever been my privilege to see.

When these discussions were published in the Feature Section of Advertising Age, they created tremendous interest, along with innumerable requests for their reproduction in permanent form.

To the reader who has any interest at all in advertising, in advertising writing, or indeed in writing or expression of any kind, the five interviews in this volume are certain to be of absorbing interest. Here are masters of their craft, talking—not writing—in-formally, freely and cogently, about their craft, their skills, their ideas, their notions and their ideals. Let's join the conversation . . .

S. R. BERNSTEIN

*Publisher, Advertising Age*



***"One of the problems [is] worship of research. We're all concerned about the facts we get, and not enough concerned about how provocative we make them to consumers."***

# William Bernbach

In a recording studio in the offices of Doyle Dane Bernbach on New York's 43rd St. sits William Bernbach. He is smaller than one expects, soft spoken, conservatively suited. He sits on a folding chair, back to a battered piano, regarding the interviewer in the manner of an innocent man being grilled by an auditor from the Internal Revenue Service. The interview begins . . .

Q. *Mr. Bernbach, how did you get into writing advertising copy?*

A. Well, actually, I used to ghost speeches for a lot of famous people—for governors, mayors, a lot of prominent people. And I had an interest in art. I think the combination of writing and art led to an integration of graphics and copy that made for a perhaps more efficient use of the total medium of advertising.

Q. *Going back before that, even, what I wanted to ask you was, what made you decide you wanted to get into this business? Into writing?*

A. Well, I think we're getting too precise. I don't think that everything is measured by definite decisions—on one day when suddenly I was going into advertising. I don't know how that happened. It just gradually happened. I was interested in writing. I was interested in art, and when the opportunity came along to do writing and art in advertising, I just took the opportunity. Directly before I went into an advertising agency, I worked at the old New York World's Fair.

Q. *In 1939?*

A. That was in 1939. I was in charge of the literary department—we called it the research department. We wrote for the Encyclopaedia

Brittanica on the history of fairs; we wrote many articles for various publications and I worked on some of the art end for the fair. And after the fair was over, someone had told an agency man about me. He asked me to come down and see him, and I did, and I was challenged by the opportunity to get into advertising. . .

Q. *Who was the man?*

A. The man was William H. Weintraub. And I competed for a job there with many veterans of the advertising business, and got the job on the basis of some writing I was asked to do by Mr. Weintraub. Which I think, maybe, is proof of a position I hold today. I wouldn't go for too routinized men in my copy department. I pull 'em in from all over the lot. I think it tends to give a fresh point of view, an outside point of view. And what there is to know about advertising, we teach them later.

Q. *That touches on one of the questions I wanted to ask you. Do you think writing ad copy is more difficult than writing other kinds of factual copy?*

A. No. I think it takes a discipline, with a knowledge of advertising and what you're trying to accomplish. Learning what you're trying to accomplish comes later. I think the first and most important thing in advertising is to be original and fresh. Do you know that 85% of the ads *don't* get looked at? This is a statistic gathered by people commissioned by the advertising business. By the Harvard

IN BERNBACH MANNER—*One of many Ohrbach ads written by Mr. Bernbach himself, this one follows the writer's demand that each ad be fresh and original: "One of the disadvantages of doing everything mathematically, by research, is that after a while, everybody does it the same way . . . If you take the attitude that once you have found out what to say, your job is done, then what you're doing is saying it the same way as everybody is saying it, and you've lost your impact completely."*

# LIBERAL TRADE-IN



bring in your wife  
and just a few dollars  
... we will give you a new woman

*Shirbach*

"A BUSINESS IN MILLIONS.  
A PROFIT IN PENNIES"

What does a woman of the  
modern age want and desire and  
think you can't give her? At Shirbach,  
we have the answer. High priced but beautiful  
clothes. And they're so beautiful you'll  
buy them again and again. Here we  
offer you the most beautiful, well made  
clothes in the world. It's all in  
the price. The difference is only a few  
dollars. It's all in  
the quality of your own mind!

NEW YORK, 130 ST. PETER'S PLAZA, 5TH FLOOR - IN NEWARK, MARKET & HAINES STS.

Business School. And we tried to find out what people think of advertising. We wondered whether the advertising community was loved by the American people. We're not even hated! They ignore us. So the most important thing as far as I'm concerned is to be fresh, to be original—to be able to compete with all the shocking news events in the world today, with all the violence. Because you can have all the right things in an ad, and if nobody is made to stop and listen to you, you've wasted it. And we in America are spending so darn much money for efficiency, to measure things, that we're achieving boredom like we've never achieved before. We're *right* about everything, but nobody looks.

Q. *Getting back to copywriting. You say you want writers from all over. What kinds of writers do you look for?*

A. Well, I don't look for writers according to the specific job . . .

Q. *Let me rephrase that: You've had many writers working for you in your time. Have you discerned any striking characteristics about any of them—the more talented or creative people?*

A. I think I have said before, and I'm going to repeat it to you now. One of the problems here is that we're looking for a formula. What makes a good writer? It's a danger. It's this attitude that makes for poor writers. It makes for people trying to be writers who shouldn't be writers.

I remember those old *Times* interviews where the interviewer would talk to the novelist or short story writer, and say, "What time do you get up in the morning? What do you have for breakfast? What time do you start work? When do you stop work? . . ." And the whole implication is that if you eat corn flakes at 6:30 in the morning, and then take a walk and then take a nap and then start working and then stop at noon, you, too, can be a great writer.

You can't be that mathematical and that precise. This business of trying to measure everything in precise terms is one of the problems with advertising today. This leads to a worship of research.

We're all concerned about the facts we get, and not enough concerned about how provocative we make those facts to the consumer.

Q. *Mr. Bernbach, people who write do have certain ways of accumulating ideas and maybe storing them away for some future time. In your time you have had lots of striking ideas, and I wondered if you find it easier to write with ground rules established by the client—you have to have a picture of something, and have to write to it—or do you find it easier to write when you have carte blanche?*

A. We don't permit any client to give us ground rules. We think it's bad for the client. Look, let me put it this way. We think we will never know as much about a product as a client. After all, he sleeps and breathes his product. He's built it. He's lived with it most of his life. We couldn't possibly know as much about it as he does. By the same token, we firmly believe that he can't know as much about advertising. Because *we* live and breathe *that* all day long. And the fact that we're handling the same product has nothing to do with that.

We require a different set of skills from his. He requires skills to make and market that product and we require skills that can provoke and persuade the consumer. They're two different things, entirely different things. And one of the disadvantages of doing everything mathematically, by research and by mandate, is that after a while, everybody does it in the same way. Because you go out and find out the same things—and if you take the attitude, as many people do, that once you have found out what to say, your job is done, then what you're doing is saying it the same way as everybody is saying it, and then you've lost your impact completely.

Q. *What we're talking about, Mr. Bernbach, is from the individual's point of view, rather than the industry's point of view. Now, there are lots of people in the advertising business who are writers, per-*





*"A very, very big prospect once said to me, 'What would you say, Bill, if you were told exactly where to put the logo and what size it would be.' I had \$10,000,000 riding on my answer, and I said, 'I would say we are the wrong agency for you.'"*

*haps not-so-good writers, but writers who want to be better writers. What we're trying to get out of this is not formulas, or precise theories about how you go about being a better copywriter; what we're trying to get from you, a veteran in this business who has demonstrated his ability as a copywriter, is what these writers can do to improve their own skills.*

A. Well, I wish I could give them an equation, so that all they have to do is follow it. But I can't. What they have to do is keep working, keep thinking, keep being as honest as they can about what they're doing, keep practicing . . . I know these are bromides, but to go beyond that would be trying to fool you.

Q. *Well, I've asked other people what outside sources they use, what interests they pursue, to keep their points of view fresh. Could you answer me that one?*

A. Well, I do a lot of reading, if that's one of the things you mean.