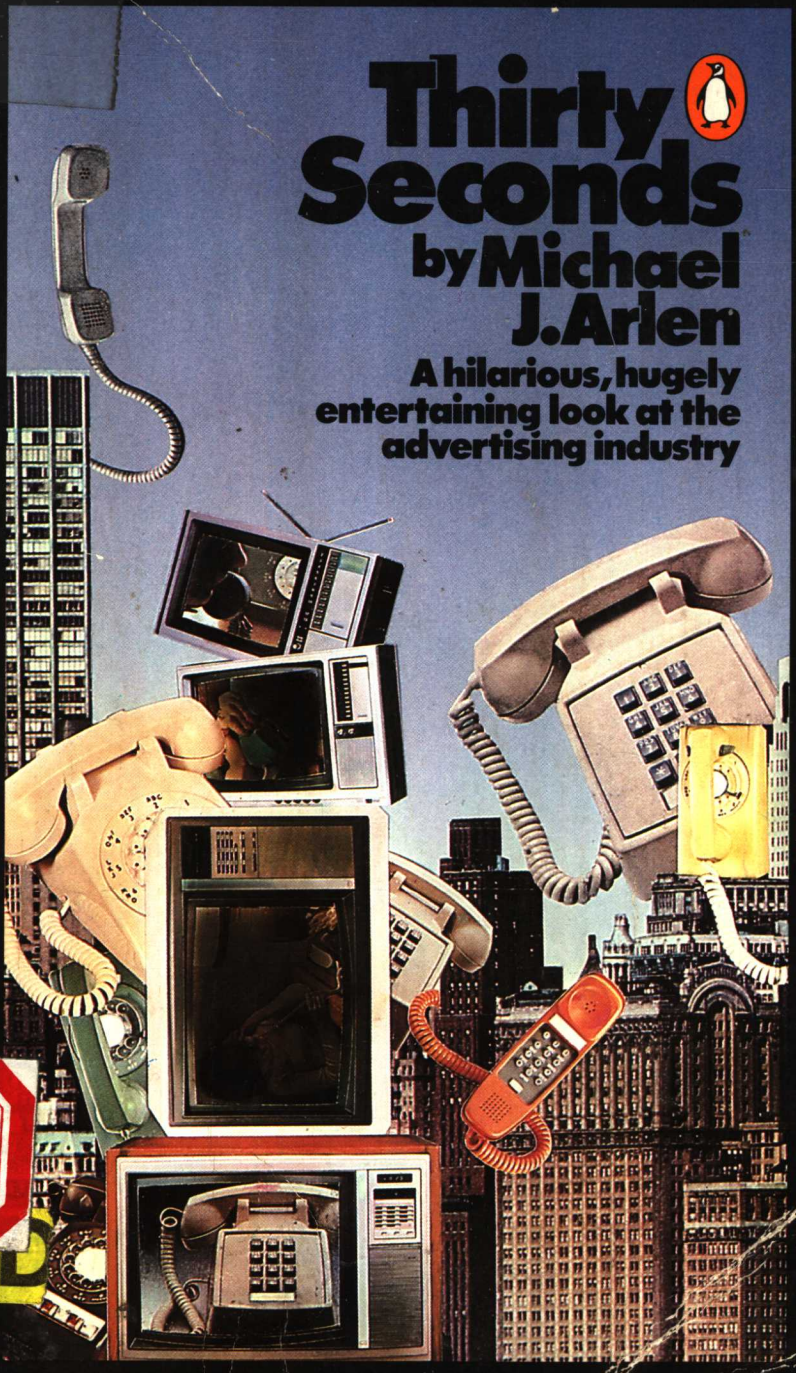
Thirty Seconds

by Michael J. Arlen

A hilarious, hugely entertaining look at the advertising industry



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PENGUIN BOOKS

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth,
Middlesex, England
Penguin Books, 40 West 23rd Street,
New York, New York 10010, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood,
Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Limited, 2801 John Street,
Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182–190 Wairau Road,
Auckland 10, New Zealand

First published in the United States of America by
Farrar, Straus & Giroux 1980
First published in Canada by
McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited 1980
Published in Penguin Books 1981
Reprinted 1982, 1984

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA
Arlen, Michael J
Thirty seconds.
Reprint of the 1980 ed. published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York.
1. Advertising agencies—United States—Case studies. I. Title.
[HF6182.U5A74 1980] 659.1'125'0973 80-25226
ISBN 0 14 00.5810 9

Printed in the United States of America by
Offset Paperback Mfrs., Inc., Dallas, Pennsylvania
Set in Baskerville

The text of this book originally appeared in *The New Yorker.*

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You Can Do Whatever You Want

THERE IS PROBABLY SOMETHING TO BE SAID FOR starting this story near its real beginning—say, with Mr. C. E. Lilly at the Lilly Welding Shop in Ozona, Texas, back in 1966. But for practical purposes (and this is nothing if not a story of practicality, one way or another) we may as well start a little closer to the present day—in the spring of 1979, outside an old dark-green double-width door to what was surely once a coach house or garage, on a quiet, dilapidated side street in New York's East Fifties, close by the river.

Let us open the door. Inside, in near-darkness, are another door, set in a brick wall, and, beside that door, an open entranceway to a steep, narrow flight of stairs leading down.

We descend the stairs into a brightly lit room—no, into a series of rooms; in fact, an office, with fluorescent tubes gleaming in its ceiling. Young women, almost all of them talking on telephones, sit at or stand

beside white Formica desks. Men, also mostly young, and mostly attired in bluejeans, work shirts, and sneakers, move through the office, in between the white Formica desks, some of them carrying clipboards, or Styrofoam cups of coffee, or metal cases of camera equipment, or sometimes nothing at all. We pass through this office area, with its bright—indeed, overbright—lighting, its whiteness, its air of cheerful modernity, and go down a little corridor to an old-fashioned dark wood door. This leads, as we open it, into a middle-sized room, comparatively dim (no fluorescent lights), which has an even more old-fashioned air about it—its walls being covered with Maxfield Parrish prints and an array of what seem to be nineteenth-century school photographs—and which contains, seated around a large oak table that is laden with bowls of fresh fruit, a platter of cheese, and bottles of Perrier, about a dozen men and women.

This is the conference room of Steve Horn, Inc., whose brightly lit offices are outside, and whose studios (mostly filled with props and camera equipment) are on the floor above, inside the green garage door. Steve Horn himself is seated at the head of the table, with half a glass of Perrier in front of him. Even seated, he seems to be a big man, with a large, heavy-boned face (somewhat reminiscent of the late character actor Ward Bond), with a thick brown mustache that stops just short of a handlebar, and with a similarly thick brown head of hair, brushed straight back; his appearance is subtly Western—an effect that is possibly unin-

tended, though not diminished by a gray neckerchief he wears above a work shirt, and boots that stick out from beneath olive-green work pants.

Next to Horn on his left—as at a dinner party, which the conference vaguely resembles, because of the food and drink in the center of the table—sits his wife and partner, a pretty, dark-haired, solemn-eyed woman in her late thirties named Linda. Beyond Linda, in clockwise order, sit the following people: Ray, Joan, Cheryl, Michael, and Alayne, who all work for Steve Horn, and Gaston, Jerry, and Elliott, who all work for the N. W. Ayer advertising agency. Two of the agency people, Gaston and Jerry, wear bluejeans and open-necked sports shirts, but with regular shoes instead of sneakers or boots. The third agency man, Elliott, wears what might be called traditional city clothes, but without a jacket, for he has hung his jacket on the back of his chair; he is the only man in the room who looks as if he were actually in business in New York.

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss locations for a series of five television commercials, each thirty seconds long, that Steve Horn, who is a director of filmed television commercials, will be shooting for N. W. Ayer and its client, American Telephone & Telegraph.

Alayne is speaking (she is a woman in her early thirties, with tortoiseshell eyeglasses and a broad, open Irish face): "Look, the Long Island Game Farm is fantastic, but the problem is we can't use the camel."

Gaston says: "O.K., we cancel the camel."

Linda says: "How about llamas?"

Steve says: "Llamas are terrific. I like llamas, except they spit."

Jerry says: "How badly do we need llamas?"

Alayne says: "Actually, research says kids only remember the little things they can pick up—the cuddly bunnies. Research says if you show a little kid a llama or a camel he usually doesn't remember he's seen one."

Jerry says: "What does he think he's seen?"

Gaston says: "I think a mix might do something for us. How about if we had a kangaroo in the background?"

Steve says: "I don't see that we need a kangaroo."

Alayne says: "Anyway, they don't have a kangaroo."

Gaston says: "O.K., cancel the kangaroo."

A maid brings in a tray of little cookies and some cans of Coke and Dr Pepper. Ray and Michael take Cokes. Jerry, Gaston, and Steve take some of the little cookies.

Steve says: "Let's see, where do we stand on the zoo?"

Linda says: "Vincent is Polaroiding it this afternoon."

Steve says: "O.K. I think now we ought to talk grandmothers. I think we've got some problem with grandmothers."

Gaston says: "I don't see that we have any big problem."

Steve says: "Well, we've got film on every available grandmother in the country right here in the office."

Linda says: "The trouble is each grandmother has been used so many times."

Steve says: "So it seems to me we have three or four grandmothers that are interchangeable—except, of course, for the black grandmother. I think the grandmother-and-grandfather situation needs to be worked out carefully. I also need to know how much time I have for the dissolves."

Jerry says: "You can do whatever you want."

Steve says: "Do we have twelve seconds?"

Gaston says: "I think you have eleven."

Steve says: "I could do it in seven."

Gaston says: "But if you develop an idea it's going to take at least eleven."

Linda says: "He can do it in eight."

Steve says: "Easy in eight. Seven would be pushing it."

Jerry says: "You have eleven. You can do whatever you want."

Now a couple of problems come up with one of the thirty-second commercials which has been provisionally titled "Tap Dancing."

"Tap Dancing" is a so-called vignette commercial, as are many television commercials these days. This means that instead of presenting a generally coherent narrative (as, for example, the Löwenbräu-beer commercials do) it consists of a sequence of only slightly interlocking little scenes and situations: in this case, five situations and ten scenes—of which one scene, according to the script prepared by the N. W. Ayer

agency, has a young Army recruit talking on the phone in his barracks.

Steve says: "I'm worried about that telephone. You mean he has it by his bedside?"

Jerry says: "Well, there could be a phone in the entry hall."

Alayne says: "Ray was down researching Fort Dix and McGuire Air Force Base, and the problem is, in the new barracks they only have phones outside, and in the old barracks they don't have phones anywhere except in the PX."

Gaston says: "Why don't we do the PX? That might make a kind of nice effect."

Alayne says: "The problem is, all the PXs have changed. They're all new, and they're all big concrete things that look like Alexander's."

Elliott says: "You mean, guys don't go anywhere to get hamburgers anymore?"

Alayne says: "I guess they go to the new PXs."

Gaston says: "Sure. They'd always have to have a place to sell hamburgers. They probably have a hamburger place in there somewhere."

Elliott says: "A cafeteria—a cafeteria is what they'd have."

Steve says: "Look, I thought we were talking about telephones. How about using West Point? That might be a nice touch—all that tradition."

Linda says: "I don't think the cadets at West Point have telephones by their beds, either."

Steve says: "Do you actually know that? O.K., how

about instead of an Army guy we have him a rich kid at military school?"

Alayne says: "The problem is, military schools are on the way out."

Jerry says: "Maybe we could still do something with West Point or Annapolis. After all, the phone doesn't have to be just by the guy's bed."

Steve says: "It might be better *not* by his bed. I mean, would it look military with the guy lounging in the sack?"

Gaston says: "Nobody ever said he was *in* the bed."

Steve says: "O.K., Alayne, check out West Point—I don't see we need Annapolis. Check and see if they have entry phones. We could have sort of a cute scene, don't you think? All that tradition."

The Casual, Positive Aspect

JERRY'S LAST NAME IS PFIFFNER, WHICH IS PRO-nounced more easily than it reads: thus—"fifner." He is about six feet tall, with a modest fringe of beard, and is generally quiet-spoken and almost professorial in his demeanor, though there is a stolidity and matter-of-factness to his opinions and general point of view which doubtless derive from his upbringing—in Iowa, where he was born and raised and went to college. He is forty-five years old and is at present a fairly important figure at N. W. Ayer. A senior vice-president on the creative side of the agency, he is the leader of a Creative Group (Gaston and Elliott and thirteen others) whose responsibility it has been to devise the advertising for A.T.&T.'s new campaign.

Jerry Pfiffner is seated at his desk in the N. W. Ayer offices, which extend over seven floors of Burlington House, on Sixth Avenue at Fifty-fourth Street, close by the three network buildings and also the Time-Life

Building—an area that is clearly the new "Madison Avenue" of New York. His office is not especially large or imposing; there is no antechamber, no watchdog secretary to defend the door. It is a typical executive office, one might say, in a company that doubtless has an abundance of executives: it contains a large oak table, beige carpeting, several modern-style chairs, and four grade-school children's drawings affixed with tape to a side wall.

"Basically, I'm a new man on the A.T.&T. account," Jerry says. "By that I mean that it's been in the agency for decades but I've only been working on it for the past year. Before that, I worked mostly in packaged goods—for example, campaigns for Kraft foods or various Nestlé products. The last campaign I directed was Sunrise Coffee, for Nestlé. This was a new product—a new kind of instant coffee, containing chicory. So our basic challenge was to develop a creative strategy that would appeal to chicory users as well as non-users. Right away, we decided on *non-bitter*. Right away, before even getting into the chicory thing, we figured we at least had to promise people *non-bitter* coffee. Then we went to our research people to find out about chicory, and what they told us was that almost nobody had ever heard of chicory. I mean, it wasn't being used for this, it wasn't being used for that; in fact, almost nobody seemed to know anything about it from a user point of view. So research said we could say pretty much what we wanted to about it. For a while, we thought about saying *smoothness,* but the fact is we

didn't really know why chicory made coffee smoother, or even if it did. So we asked ourselves, 'What else besides non-bitter can we say about the coffee?,' and somebody said, *'Non-phony'*—meaning it wasn't a phony, it was natural. Well, we didn't want to say *natural,* since everything else in the stores was 'natural,' so we decided on *better-natured."* Jerry gets up from his desk and reaches over to a shelf on the wall behind him for a jar with a red-and-yellow label, which he sets in the center of the desk. It is a jar of Sunrise Coffee, bearing the slogan "Better Natured Not Bitter."

"There's a lot of challenge in packaged goods," says Jerry, sitting down again, "but it's a special, direct kind of challenge. New products come on-stream all the time and also go down the drain all the time, so your principal thrust is how to *position* the product—how to figure out what's unique about the new coffee or the new yogurt, and then how to put a name on it and package it. I was happy to move over to the Long Lines account—that's what A.T.&T. calls its long-distance operations—because I wanted a change of direction, something with greater emotional texture. Right away, with Long Lines, you start thinking in terms of feelings and emotions. From the very beginning, A.T.&T. wanted us to overcome the negative emotions associated with long-distance—you know, the way people used to think about the high cost of long-distance, the bad-news phone call in the middle of the night. For years, there has been a definitely *negative, uncasual*

quality to a lot of long-distance calling. A.T.&T. wanted us to emphasize the *casual, positive* aspect: long-distance is fun, it's easy, it's cheap. Of course, we didn't want to be sentimental, we wanted to be upbeat and to get across an image kind of thing: people calling for fun; people calling for no reason at all—not just family talking to family but friends talking to friends. So, strategy-wise, we started with a kind of two-faced objective: the casual thing and the people-calling-outside-the-family thing. And right up front we were thinking also maybe a musical thing. There was a lot of up-front input about music; even the marketing guys were thinking it should be primarily a musical approach—maybe with something like the McDonald's theme, only different. In the agency, we started work over a year ago, back around January 1978: at first, not so much nuts-and-bolts work as thinking and theorizing—trying to figure out, what were we really trying to say, what were the basic emotions, and how could we keep them keyed to strategy? We used a lot of writers and a lot of art directors. We tried hundreds of approaches. We tried approaches that were musical and nonmusical, that were humorous and nonhumorous. We tried celebrities and noncelebrities. We had I don't know how many meetings; it seemed as if for months we were always having meetings. And all this time we were looking for the right theme line. By April 7, 1978, we'd narrowed the field down to four theme lines. Speaking personally, I thought the choice all along was between just two of

them: the 'Reach Out' theme we ended up using and 'Keep in Touch, America.' So, late in April, we went out to the client and presented our final selections and frankly admitted that we were split ourselves—we were a house divided. In my opinion, any one of our four finalists could have worked just as well. In the end, as I suspected, it came down to a horse race between 'Reach Out' and 'Keep in Touch,' and the final vote went to 'Reach Out,' because the consensus seemed to be that if there was one thing that America didn't need at that time it was more America-oriented advertising. I'm happy with the 'Reach Out' theme, because it's simple, with emotional content, and it emphasizes the human factor: it speaks to people. I guess you could say I came up with the basic line, though when you work in a group you get a lot of input from everyone else. The thing about writing theme lines is that, creatively speaking, they almost never just happen when you sit down at the typewriter—not like body copy. Sometimes, though, they come up and surprise you, and that's where the magic is."