

ABSOLUT BOOK.

THE ABSOLUT VODKA ADVERTISING STORY

RICHARD W. LEWIS

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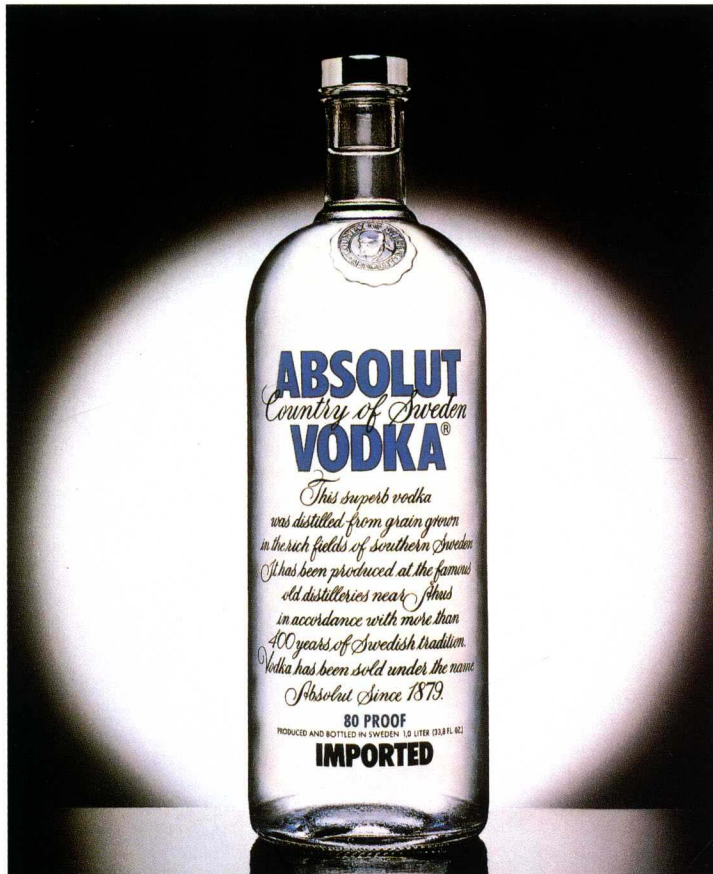
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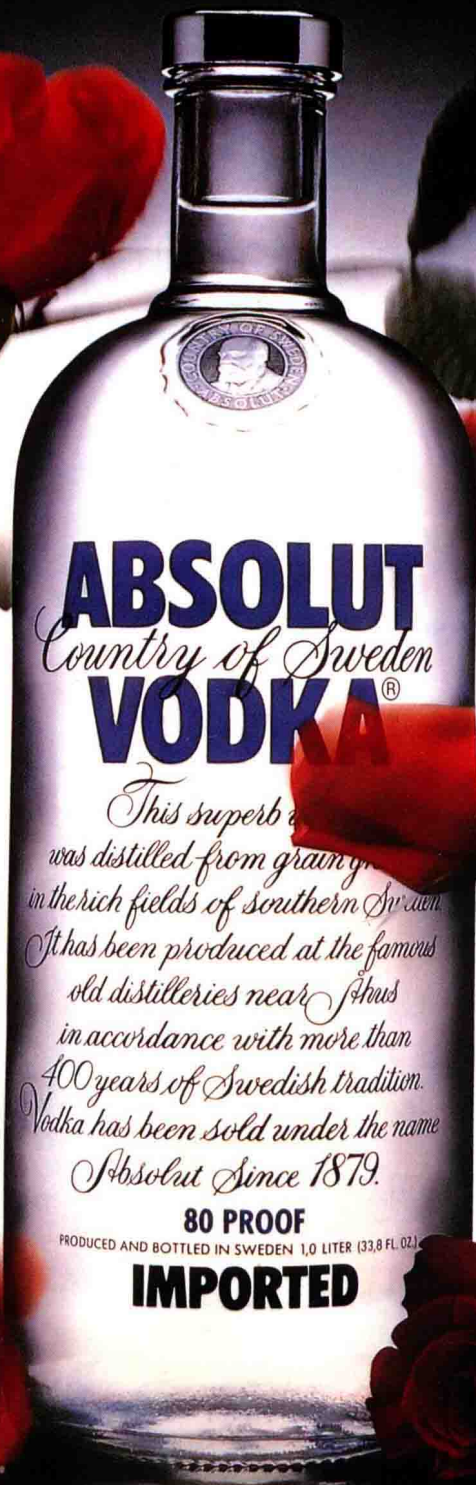
ABSOLUT BOOK.



Dedicated to Isabel, Ariane, Amanda, and Sam:
my ABSOLUT FOUNDATION.

“There are no absolutes in life, only in vodka.”

—Detective Mike Kellerman, *HOMICIDE: Life on the Street*



ABSOLUT
Country of Sweden
VODKA®

*This superb vodka
was distilled from grain grown
in the rich fields of southern Sweden.
It has been produced at the famous
old distilleries near Åhus
in accordance with more than
400 years of Swedish tradition.
Vodka has been sold under the name
Absolut Since 1879.*

80 PROOF

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IMPORTED

ABSOLUT BRAVO.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Fifteen years plus a few hundred ads equal a long list of thank you's. The following list is (I hope) every "creative" person who contributed to the campaign from The Absolut Company (Vin & Sprit of Sweden), Carillon Importers, The House of Seagram, and the many TBWA offices that have dreamed up ideas, created headlines, imagined visuals, and even sometimes wrote copy—or made any of these elements better—in the campaign.

Geoff Hayes, the father of Absolut advertising, without whom there would be no story to tell.

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Thank you to my friends at Absolut who trusted me with such an important project: Egon Jacobsson, Goran Lundqvist, Lars Nellmer, Claes Fick, Peter Bunge-Meyer, and Claes Andreasson.

There is also a group of people at TBWA/Chiat Day New York who have been indispensable in helping me compile this book. On the production side, Ira Lager and Sandie Torres crawled through the archives, supplying and preparing material for publication. My assistant, Kimberly Hines, who trafficked and logged the various permissions this book required and put up with my bad puns and general crankiness. And Elizabeth Morse, who was a crackerjack at wheedling and securing the approvals from the photographers, artists, and models whose work appears here.

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ABSOLUT INTRODUCTION.

(Don't skip this part.)

The Absolut Vodka advertising campaign has been running nonstop for 15 years, since 1981. This is remarkable because in the advertising business, campaigns can change as often as every year, as marketers attempt to keep their brands' personalities fresh.

Still, Absolut advertising is celebrated not just for its longevity but also for its ingenuity. Readers tear out the ads and hang them on their walls. Librarians have to guard their magazines from being de-Absoluted. College students actually collect and trade ads. A SoHo antique shop hawks copies of ABSOLUT WONDERLAND, while a Madison Avenue newsstand carefully razors the Absolut pages from its stock and sells them for a few dollars apiece (naturally, selling the magazines as well). What's going on here?

Readers enjoy a relationship with this advertising that they have with few other advertising campaigns, especially in the print media. They are challenged, entertained, tickled, inspired, and maybe even befuddled as they try to figure out what's happening inside an Absolut ad.

The advertising has won hundreds of awards, including charter membership in the American Marketing Association's Marketing Hall of Fame. Absolut was inducted into the Hall in 1992 along with just two other brands: Coca Cola and Nike. Of the three, only Absolut accomplished this feat without the benefit of another, much more powerful advertising medium: television.

As rewarding as the recognition within the advertising and marketing fields has been, however, it takes a backseat to the simple but real purpose of the campaign: to build a healthy and enduring brand for Absolut. The campaign was conceived by TBWA Advertising (now called TBWA/Chiat Day after our merger in 1995). As this is our signature account at the agency, naturally, we're very proud that the advertising has played a role in the Absolut success story. When the campaign began, in 1981, Absolut was selling about 20,000 cases annually in the U.S.A.; last year, sales were over 3 million cases—an increase of 14,900%!

Some people say we've had an easy job, and maybe they're right. After all, the Swedish producer, The Absolut Company, handed us the world's finest vodka, in a beautiful, even arty bottle, with a catchy brand name. Michel Roux, President of Carillon Importers, the U.S. distributor, was a made-in-heaven client who believed that advertising could change a brand's destiny and continuously supported that belief. It was up to us not to screw it up. And I guess we didn't.

In this book, you'll learn who *we* are. There are a lot of names because many talented people have contributed to the advertising. I've tried to help you keep them all straight because they're worth getting to know, and they're even nice people. My position at the ad agency earned me the opportunity to tell the story.

I joined TBWA Advertising in 1987 as a midlevel account manager in charge of running the day-to-day business of the Absolut account. I was hired by two account management supervisors, Brian Barry and John Doman, who preceded me on the Carillon business. Doman, incidentally, later went on to become a professional actor. Two generations ago, actors—and artists, pilots, circus performers, you name it—became admen. Today, in a career twist, the path is reversed. Prior to joining TBWA, I had managed corporate-, entertainment-, computer-, and automotive-related advertising accounts, but I had virtually no experience in marketing liquor. (I mention this only because advertising, like many other fields, can often have a catch-22 attitude toward experience.) But the enlightened management at TBWA seems to have considered my lack of direct experience to be a benefit, thinking I could provide a fresh perspective, and the client either didn't care or figured I couldn't do too much harm. By then Absolut was already a successful brand, though it wasn't yet a famous success.

As Account Director, I was responsible for pulling together the agency's creative, media, and research resources and for building an agenda for our weekly meetings around the conference table at Carillon's

offices in Teaneck, New Jersey. Move the projects forward, move the brand forward, and, I hoped, move Richard Lewis forward. These meetings were fun because like the product, Absolut Vodka, we didn't take ourselves too seriously. And to be honest, things were going very well.

Today I'm in charge of Absolut's advertising worldwide. And with nearly a decade's experience, I can remind my colleagues that I'm one of the Absolut dinosaurs whenever someone wants to change everything. Still, it's this change that has kept the campaign constantly fresh, even as it embraces a single, simple idea: the Absolut bottle is the hero.

We learned early on that great ideas could come from surprising sources. As the campaign became infectious, it began to seem that nearly everyone had an idea for an ad. We've never been too jealous of protecting our turf or too proud to seek out the best thinking, whatever the origin—whether it's the magazines that carry the advertising, family, friends, or the public. Even the client.

More about the client. Michel Roux, President of Carillon, Absolut's U.S. importer until 1994, was one in a million. He understood—and helped us understand—how to market premium products. He lived the brand, day and night, leading us to do the same. If one week we showed him a crazy idea that he thought was all wrong, when we returned the following week with something equally outrageous, he'd never begin the meeting with, "I hope you haven't brought me another ad with insects in it," or whatever. He'd forgive and forget.

And while we undertook considerable research into the market, the competition, and our customers, we never had to "test" the ads to determine whether they were *good*. Rather, we knew it was our job as the ad agency to figure out, along with Michel's team, what exactly constituted *good* advertising. (In some respects, this was a throwback to the creative freedom of the 1960s and the great advertising campaigns for Volkswagen, Chivas Regal, and Alka-Seltzer.) Therefore,

we didn't have to pluck consumers off the street and ask them questions like "What is Absolut trying to communicate in this ad?" If we had done that, some of the more daring ideas would surely have been left on the focus-group floors.

Thank you, Michel. And thanks also to our Swedish client, The Absolut Company, and its American distribution partner, The House of Seagram, which has continued to endorse the philosophy against testing the ads.

The Absolut campaign is about five hundred ads deep. (And most of them are actually pretty good.) I don't think anyone knows exactly how many have been produced, but this book will reproduce a great many, if not all, of them.

Over the course of the book, I'll explain what we had in mind as we opened new and different doors for the advertising. Because the campaign has encompassed many different kinds of ads—art, fashion, cities, spectacles, Hollywood, etc.—that's how I've organized the book.

I'll point out where we were smart and where we were lucky. And where we were both.

However, I've tried not to be a slave to chronology, especially since many of the various advertising paths have been explored simultaneously. And because it isn't a matter of opening one ad door, pushing through to a conclusion, and then selecting another door, we haven't really exhausted any of the paths. That's why, though the bottle has assumed the identity of dozens of different objects over the years, we can still create Absolut ads in which the bottle is even made of glass. I like to characterize this evolution as a circular one, in which each path can return to its beginnings, as opposed to a more traditional, linear evolution lacking such flexibility. The result is a campaign that can go on, well, for a long, long time.

RICHARD W. LEWIS

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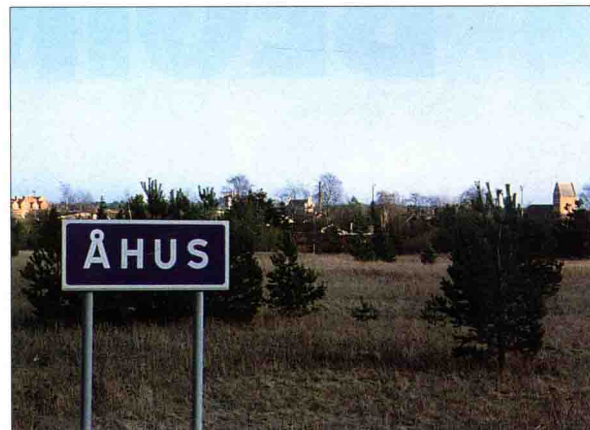
BEGINNING

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ABSOLUT BEGINNING.

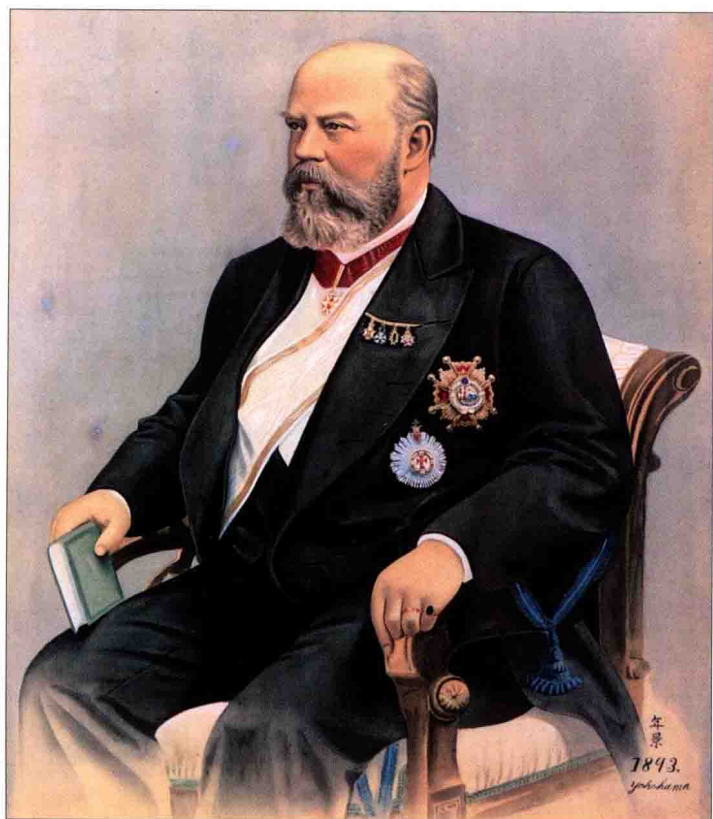
Like so many other stories, the Absolut story begins in the fifteenth century. By that time, Sweden already had a bustling industry of vodka distillers, with hundreds of entrepreneurs preparing their own secret recipes for vodka and sharing them with their family and friends to help them get through the long, tough Swedish winters.

Although Swedish vodka was an unrefined product, it nonetheless contained some of the world's finest raw ingredients: pure Swedish water and rich Swedish wheat. Its creation was a most imprecise science, however, and the home distillers lacked the equipment and the know-how to remove the impurities that are a natural result of the distillation process.

Push the clock ahead some four hundred years. In 1879, the Swedish inventor and industrialist Lars Olsson Smith changed everything with his creation of a new distillation method called rectification, which is still in use today. In this method, a series of distillation columns separate different sets of impurities, allowing the removal of nearly all the congeners, or impurities, produced during the vodka-making process. He called his product *Absolut rent brännvin*, Swedish for "Absolute pure vodka." And for these accomplishments he earned the sobriquet King of Vodka.

Over the next hundred years, Absolut Vodka was steadily refined and improved, even as every single bottle continued to be distilled in the little village of Åhus, in southern Sweden. Åhus (pronounced OR-hoos) is a picturesque port town on the Baltic Sea, with a population of only ten thousand. By the late 1970s, however, it was clear that if the distillery was to survive, Absolut would have to become an export product with enough sales volume to justify keeping it open and running.

Earlier in this century, the Swedish government had taken control of the production and distribution of the beverage alcohol industry, including Absolut. The brandowners in Stockholm, Vin & Sprit, knew what market they had to tap to keep Absolut alive: America.



Lars Olsson Smith.

In the 1970s, the United States accounted for 60 percent of the vodka consumed in the free world—about forty million cases. (Each case consists of twelve 750-milliliter bottles, or nine liters.) However, about 99 percent of the vodka consumed in America was produced in America, and most of it was very inexpensive. Conventional wisdom held that “all vodkas are alike,” due to the relative ease of production, the few ingredients necessary, and the fact that no aging is required, as with Scotch and other whiskeys. Also, because most consumers combined their vodka with orange juice, tomato juice, tonic, or any number of other mixers, they didn’t much care about the underlying quality of the vodka itself: the cheaper, the better.

The remaining 1 percent—the imported-vodka market in America—was interesting. It was dominated by Stolichnaya, the Russian vodka. Stolichnaya had been imported since 1968 by a subsidiary of the Pepsi-Cola Company as payment, in lieu of hard currency, for the Pepsi sold in the Soviet Union. Created specifically for export, it was good vodka, some of Russia’s finest, and the only Russian vodka “officially” exported to

America. The U.S. consumer paid about ten dollars a bottle for it, or up to twice as much as for domestic brands. Being Russian, Stolichnaya possessed a seamless authenticity for many Americans: from the czars to the revolution to the summit meetings, vodka and Russia have long been synonymous in consumers’ minds. (Most of the vodkas made in America even have Russian-sounding names: Smirnoff, Romanoff, Georgi, and so on.)

A much smaller segment of the imported market was controlled by Finlandia, the vodka from Finland. It arrived in this country a few years after Stolichnaya, but its modest success proved that a Scandinavian vodka could be compelling, too, possibly because Finland is physically—and maybe psychologically—near Russia. Its sales amounted to nearly fifty thousand cases. Several other brands were also just getting their feet wet, including Wyborowa from Poland and vodkas from other Eastern European countries.

By 1978, Vin & Sprit was ready to test the waters. It sent a delegation to the United States, led by Lars Lindmark, its energetic President, and Curt Nycander, its Director of Export. Carrying different prototypes and concepts for the “American” Swedish vodka, they arrived with 80 proof optimism. In all, they had six Swedish vodka ideas, Absolut being just one of them.

Arrangements had been made through various Swedish and American intermediaries for the delegation to visit the leading U.S. distillers and importers, and in short order, they met with representatives from Hiram Walker, Seagram, Brown-Forman, and Austin Nichols. In equally short order, Lindmark and Nycander were rejected by all of them. Each found fault with the bottle designs, the product names, the Swedish origin, or just the notion of a new vodka. There weren’t many options left, though there was the proverbial last chance.

Carillon Importers was a small New York liquor-import company headed by the charismatic Al Singer. Carillon’s leading product was Grand Marnier, the prestigious French liqueur, but the company also imported England’s Bombay Gin, Achaia Clauss wines from Greece, Bertani wines from Italy, and other specialty items. Singer himself was something of a character: a gambler, a high liver, and a sharp businessman.