

The ad game!

A former 'Mad Man' tells it like it was:

Thriller writer Clinton Smith spent much of his life dreaming up ad campaigns for multinational agencies. He lived through the great days and even remembers some of them. A sample:

One morning, when I passed the office of John X, a clever and savvy copywriter, I found him standing on top of his desk.

Standing on his desk looking down at his chair.

In those days, all kinds of things happened in agencies. People rode Harleys through the corridors or punched their fists through the partitions. They tripped people up with their remote controlled model cars, hung newbies out the windows by their ankles, rooted each other on car bonnets in the carpark, filled rooms full of black balloons...

So to notice someone standing on his desk was comparatively normal.

I don't think I asked him directly what ailed him but I was curious.

Then someone filled me in.

The guy was working on proposition for a cigarette campaign.

I'll try to unpack that for you.

This particular agency had a department that developed selling propositions. It's job was to assemble the bare bones of a selling statement or six, research the hell out of them, then present the winner to the creative department.

For instance, the winning proposition, authenticated by scores of well-compensated housewives selected from all three socio-economic groups (they love that kind of language) might be '*OMO had more effective bleaching agents*'. The creative department would then translate this into '*OMO has blue beads of bleach*'. Of course, that wouldn't be the entire execution or even the slogan but it might kick off a TV campaign.

So this guy was working on a coffin-nail brand. (We were allowed to in those days.) And the proposition they'd given him was: '*The man who smokes Brand X is taller than anyone else in the room.*'

As my fellow creative could recognise insanity when he saw it, he knew that the proposition department had vanished up it's collective arse. So, after standing on his desk for a couple of days, he told them to shove their proposition up there as well and went on to a distinguished career in several less constipated agencies.

Those were the practically free lunch days because expense accounts were claimable. So you'd wipe yourself out with the most expensive lunch and not look in on the office after that - because, by then, you were staggering drunk.

Of course you'd drive home (no breath tests) at considerable speed, barely able to discern the steering wheel, let alone the traffic around you. And every so often, you'd contrive to write yourself an overseas trip.

You'd decide, for instance, that the new Olivetti computers would look remarkable on plinths in the Trevi Fountain or placed in the centre of the Colosseum and filmed from a chopper. Or sitting in the middle of Times Square.

And when the commercials were approved and there you were in Rome, you'd discover that at least five versions of Italian carabinieri wanted backhanders to let you do it. So, to the amazement of startled tourists, you'd shove computers in the fountain, shoot the hell out of them, then rack off to the Colosseum, where you'd bribe security to let you set up right in the centre where the lions used to be kept.

And on your weekend off, you'd take a meandering trip around the Amalfi Coast and stay in the most expensive hotel.

I remember that trip. The director - a wild man - and the client (who came along for the fun) decided that we had to go to Positano. So we assembled ready to roll. I had an overnight bag containing two pairs of underpants, two handkerchiefs, toothbrush et al. The client had nothing but a toothbrush stuck in his top pocket. The director, fresh from a night with some girl he'd found (He said he'd drunk her pretty) had what he stood up in.

The client said to him, "'Don't you have a toothbrush?'

The director said, 'F*%?! You can buy a toothbrush anywhere!'

Another shoot involved driving and filming a new Renault model in Paris, the South of France and Monaco. The first day was fraught. We were working with a skeleton crew and I had to collect the car from the Renault factory, and drive it to the Arch de Triumph where the male and female talent were to hop in and circle the damned thing, looking cool. Simple enough if you've ever driven a left hand drive car on the wrong side of the road in a traffic-jammed foreign city. I hadn't. And bending the car wasn't an option. We only had the one prototype. As it happened, luck was with me. But the whole shoot could have gone up the spout right there.

Then there was the aftershave shoot in New Zealand. We wanted to film hang-gliders taking off from mountains in the Aspirings and soaring above the snow-clad peaks. All good. Except when you are suddenly choppered up 3,300 metres and have to lug heavy camera cases to the peak through deep snow, it's not that easy to breathe.

But did those two hang-glider fliers get lucky! For days, they were flown to the top of the mountain, took off, flew like birds then landed in the valley, followed by the ever attentive chopper. It waited for the glider to be repacked and strapped to the skids, then flew them up to the top again for another go. All day for days. There was no way those two young guys could ever have afforded such a gig themselves. To use a contemporary expression, they were stoked!

There were tragic moments, too.

For instance, they say never work with children or animals. But what if you're doing a cat commercial and need pussy to bound across the floor and lick his pretty owner's ears?

Well it can be quite simple if you put enough fish-paste in her ears. But on the other hand, you could be there all day doing take 85 of a five shot commercial.

Once my TV producer, a hard-bitten woman, and I took the afternoon off to see a movie. We went to Truffaut's *'Day For Night'* - a wonderful exposition of what it takes to make a film. At one stage in that masterpiece, the street is all blocked off, there are great banks of floods and reflectors, spots on scaffolds, trucks everywhere - gaffer, catering, grip, generator - the whole catastrophe. A camera on a crane, dollys on

tracks, fifty anxious crew. And, in the middle of it all, they're trying to get a cat to drink its milk.

And the cat will *not* drink its milk!

Despite the enormous forces assembled, nothing anyone can do can make the damned cat drink its milk.

My agency producer and I sat in that darkened, almost empty theatre and sobbed. Why did we case-hardened ad types sit there bawling? Because, in one seminal scene, Truffaut had crystallised the anguish we had lived so often, had captured the nobility and tragedy of the process.

Looking back, it was the best of times and worst. And only a fool would want to live it again.

In fact, you can't.

The Internet has cut the meat out of the media buy. Audiences are becoming so dispersed that simple access to them is gone.

God knows how agencies cut it now. And he's welcome to the information.