



Book Review: The Art of Writing Advertising

Sashwatha Sridhar

Mirroring the feelings and fears of many struggling copywriters, James Vincent O’Gara, executive editor of Advertising Age set out on a mission to learn and share the tricks of the advertising trade from the five advertising greats. He asked senior editor Denis Higgins to interview (The) William Bernbach, George Gribbin, Rosser Reeves, David Ogilvy, and Leo Burnett who had been elected to the New York Copywriters Hall of Fame. This book is the collective wisdom of advertising veterans documented word to sigh and play to pause, as heard from the horse’s mouth.

The interviews are streamlined with a specific set of questions and are consistent in their probe. This allows the reader to compare and contrast responses, identify patterns and recurring thoughts. The style is conversational and honest, which makes it easy to read (not necessarily comprehend). However, if you are taking furious notes in anticipation of tried and tested formulas, then you may not be the right audience for the book, or rather, this book may not serve your purpose. As Higgins realized halfway through the interviews, you will see how the seemingly straightforward questions extracted unusually convoluted answers that cannot be deciphered in one read. The responses are spontaneous and not weighed out for accuracy. They may seem to digress from the topic as they reflect on their experiences, but even that has invaluable insights to offer the reader.

One must be careful not to get muddled up thinking about the different schools of thought. It is important to clarify your stance as you read to avoid confusion and find where you fit in. The part that stands out is the prelude to each interview where Higgins describes their office space, how they are dressed, their actions, their tone, and attitude toward the interviewer among several other subtle, nevertheless significant details. From Ogilvy’s bright red suspenders under a soft grey suit to the muted brown and red walls in Gribbin’s suite, the vivid imagery in his reporting style paints an interesting personality sketch in the reader’s mind as a sneak peek into the life of these legends.



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I was intrigued by the contents of the book, how a background in journalism, research, or a related field was the common factor for all five advertising greats. It is evident from their views that reporting news and curating articles flexed their writing muscle and influenced their approach toward advertisement copy. An exception to the rule was William Bernbach, who, despite having written speeches for governors and content for encyclopedias, protested the “worship of research”. According to him, it is not facts that sell but the writer’s ability to make them provocative, original, and fresh. He believes that knowledge only goes so far that it serves the purpose of inspiring creativity, not replacing it.

Reeves, on the other hand, detests charming, witty, and warm copy. Making an advertisement different is not as much a priority to him as making the product interesting. Burnett belongs to the same school of thought and finds that saturating himself with knowledge of the product is key to writing great campaigns. He too stresses on being natural and not trying too hard to be clever or humorous, and to recognize the inherent drama in a product than rely on gimmicks to grab attention.

Although Ogilvy approaches advertising from the standpoint of a researcher, he is seen reflecting on how he was more confident when he was less disciplined and even less knowledgeable. He goes from “Facts, facts, facts” to “this approach may be too well-defined and restrictive” in the same breath. As a copywriter, I am faced with the same conflict on a daily basis. I find that the more I research, the more I know, and the more I know, the harder it is to do something that has never been done before. The unintended consequence of information explosion is the availability of innumerable reference points to start from. Consequently, every idea will begin to ring a bell because we’ve heard or read or seen it somewhere before.



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Another common thread that runs through the interviews is that they were avid readers albeit having polar differences in the kind of books they took to. Burnett was in the habit of reading editorials that extensively focused on advertising. Gribbin who is a Biology and Botany enthusiast, preferred that writers go beyond weekly/monthly magazines and try to read outside of their field. He firmly believes that it helps his copy. As an exception, Ogilvy and Reeves do not believe that reading inspires or influences writing. I do not quite agree with that. At the least, being on the reader's seat instead of the writer's desk helps understand what works or is considered enjoyable from the audience's point of view.

It was also interesting to note how some of them were comfortable with the client establishing some ground rules while others didn't seem to like the interference. Reeves opines that clients are in a position to do so by virtue of their expertise in the product while Bernbach is not very appreciative of the idea and prefers that the job be left to the expert. Ogilvy is of the same opinion and says that he cannot work with ground rules and would rather make his own. This observation is of consequence to copywriters who often feel torn between the client's needs and their own creative impulse.

When asked what the common characteristics of great copywriters are, Ogilvy refused outright saying there is no way to know, while others outlined qualities that were desired of copywriters. Variations of 'the ability to think thoroughly, being widely read, having a flair for expression, tendency to steer clear of cliches, and participate in life' were observed in their responses. All of the above show that a copywriter is a sum total of habits, experiences, and a passion for the written word. In supposing that "You either write symphonies or you don't write symphonies," Reeves suggests that writing is an inherent talent that cannot be learned with prescribed procedures. I find that statement debatable because I believe that nobody is born a writer. We all stand a chance to become one.



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Nonetheless, they all seem to agree that the best ads come from life and personal experience which is why products of personal interest are easier to write about. As Burnett remarks, "We cannot persuade others unless we feel intellectually and emotionally invested in the subject." There is also an impression that a "writer is usually better if he hasn't made a normal fit into living as a younger person," since he/she is more likely to be empathetic which is central to good writing/advertising.

For me, the key takeaways from this book are in knowing that Leo Burnett keeps a folder of corny language and that Ogilvy turns to brandy, music and the oxford dictionary to get his train of thoughts started. I enjoyed learning the rationale behind their best advertisements and having them walk me through their creative process. Reading about their rituals spurred me to find my own. For instance, I recently discovered that listening to a podcast on The Rise of the Straw Hat and the Riots of 1922 or about an astronaut who's really not into outer space but goes to the moon anyway, really gets my creative juices flowing.