

## George Lois on Advertising

George Lois, a child of the “creative revolution” of the 1950s, was the father of the Big Idea in American advertising during the 1960s. Papert Koenig Lois, which he founded in 1960, was the “second creative agency” in the world, challenging Doyle Dane Bernbach’s hegemony. Lois’s iconoclastic campaigns for Xerox, Wolfschmidt vodka, Coldene, Maypo, and scores of other products were among the most memorable of their time and have rightly earned their place in advertising history. Lois is a critical mass of cultural and political forces, an aficionado of art, and a left-wing activist who has used his skill at propaganda in the service of promoting social causes and political candidates. He has a street-smart way of direct, no-nonsense communication, seasoned with a strong sense of wit, humor, and biting satire. Advertising, he believes, is not about forcing people to acquire unnecessary merchandise; rather, it is a medium that informs, entertains, and, if executed with intelligence, has the power to alter behavior for the better. Lois is not cynical about what he does. He uses the intuition he brings to advertising to sell controversial ideas. Among his many acts of intervention, the most lasting has been the conception and design of *Esquire* magazine covers from the late sixties to early seventies—graphic commentaries that are today among the most memorable icons of this unsettling social and political era. At age sixty-seven, he has been the principal of Lois/USA for over twenty years and continues to be an exemplar of the Big, and smart, Idea.

**You were raised in New York. Your parents were Greek immigrants. Your father was a florist, and you were his delivery boy. How did you become interested in graphic design? And why advertising, in particular?**

When I was still in elementary school in the Bronx, I was more excited looking at a Cassandre poster than looking at a Stuart Davis painting. Also, I could draw very well, and I was very precocious about the history of art. For example, I had a postcard of a Cycladic idol from 3500 B.C. that I kept next to my bed.

**What inspired you to go to art school?**

When I was twelve I had a terrific art teacher, Miss Ida Engel, who asked me if I had enough money to go on the subway. I said, “Yes, ma’am. Why?” She said, “I want you to be at the High School of Music and Art by eleven o’clock to take the entry test.” She gave me a portfolio, which she bought for three or four bucks—a lot of money then. Inside were about eighty of my drawings that she had saved over the past three years at P.S. 7. She insisted that I take the test. I was accepted.

**Did your father encourage you, too?**

No. In fact, my father was very concerned about me because I was drawing all the time, and it wasn’t too manly. Every day I would go out and get the newspapers for 2¢ apiece, bring them into my father’s store, and draw every paper’s headlines three-dimensionally. I

don't know what drove me to drawing, but I was sure I had invented perspective. I remember looking out of my window and a building was here and a building there and there . . . and from my eye, from where I sat in my window, I looked down the street, and you had to be an idiot not to see the perspective going off into a vanishing point. If I lived in the thirteenth century, I would have invented it before the Sieneese!

**And your interest in graphic design?**

There were teachers at the High School of Music and Art who came from the Bauhaus. I would design with that sensibility but always put words into my work. I really had a designer's mentality. I remember doing a poster in my first year, on Switzerland. I got a photograph of the Swiss Alps, then took yellow paper and cut holes all over, making mountains out of gigantic slices of Swiss cheese. I was always looking for visual ideas.

**What was going on in advertising at that time that made you want to enter the field?**

Paul Rand was God to me then. Still is.

**You were still in high school and you were familiar with Rand. But more important, you knew exactly what you wanted to do with your life. Did you go on to an art college?**

I went to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. All during high school I worked in my father's store day and night. After I graduated, I continued going down to the flower market with him at four o'clock in the morning. Then, on September 4, my father came into my room and said, "George, it's four o'clock; you're going to market." I said, "I can't go today, Papa." He asked why not and I said, "I'm starting college today." That's how I told my father that I wasn't going to take over his store. I'm sure he was shattered, but he didn't show it to me.

**Was college as rewarding as high school?**

The first year was terrible because it was foundation year, and they didn't teach the foundations of design nearly as well as they had at Music and Art. Or maybe by that time I was too sophisticated. Most of the teachers didn't know what they were doing. I was kind of a maverick, anyway. In the second year, I took a class with Herschel Levit. He was a great teacher. He talked about music and dance and food, and we'd ooh and aah over Rand's work. Mr. Levit would give an assignment, and I'd come in with six finished ones while everybody in the class was struggling to get one done. However, I didn't go to other classes except for the life-drawing class. Finally, Levit came to me at the beginning of the second term and he insisted, "George, you've got to get out of here." And he gave me Reba Sochis's phone number.

**Who was Reba Sochis?**

Reba had a design studio. She and Cipe Pineles were the first women art directors in the field, and she was the first woman in town who ran a studio with thirty guys working for her. She was a wonderful designer and a great typographer with a light touch. And at the time she needed a young talent.

**This was your first job and you didn't even finish art college. What were you working on at that time?**

Promotion pieces, packages, and very fancy boxes for things like Talon zippers. Incidentally, she had a policy that when you did comp lettering, you had to letter with a brush and you had to letter every word of copy, whether it was 72 point or 8 point. Boy, if you didn't learn there. . . .

**You have always had strong political commitments. Did your leftism, like your passion for art and design, develop during this period?**

Reba and some of her friends were a big influence on me. I'm a humanist, with some communist in it. I hate the unfairness of the system and the continuing injustices in America. I care about the working class, about the working man. I've always had that thing in me, you know—fighting for Ruben “Hurricane” Carter [Lois organized a campaign that helped get the former boxer's murder conviction overturned], giving papers out in front of factories and guys all cursing at me. Reba crystalized it for me, and many of her pals—Paul Robeson, W. E. B. DuBois, and Alger Hiss—became my friends. I agreed with everything they talked about: human rights, racial injustice, the First Amendment, and the right-wing attack on our basic freedoms. McCarthyism was a terrible stain on American history, a terrible time for America.

**Given your political leanings, did you see any contradiction in being an advertising and promotion designer?**

You mean selling capitalist goods? No. To me it was always communicating, designing, convincing.

**From Reba Sochis's studio you were drafted into the army, served in Korea during the war (where I understand you were busted in rank), and returned unharmed to New York at age twenty-one. Then you went to work at CBS television for the legendary art director William Golden. Was this a detour on the road to advertising?**

In those days, if you were in advertising, it was basically a schlock industry. You had to work at a fashion agency to do anything of any quality, but they didn't have ideas. They merely made everything look good. I wouldn't have lasted a day. CBS was not quite an advertising job in that sense. I went to see Lou Dorfsman [art director for CBS radio], who introduced me to Bill Golden. He had been looking for a new designer for a few years, but I was given the job immediately.

I was a month out of Korea and working at a dream job for a graphic designer when the FBI paid Golden a visit and told him I was a communist, obviously trying to get me fired. Bill told me not to worry about it and to go upstairs and see his boss, Dr. Frank Stanton [the president of CBS television], who asked me some questions, including, “Is it true you're a Korean veteran?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Well, don't worry about it, just go back to work.” CBS was a bastion of liberty in those days. They gave work to the artist Ben Shahn, whom the FBI hounded. And, finally, Edward R. Murrow helped put the knife in Joe McCarthy.

**What kind of work were you doing at CBS?**

If Frank Stanton and William Paley [the chairman of CBS] gave speeches, they would lob the text at me, and I would design a beautiful book. Beyond creating letterheads, logos, and promotional pieces for their programs like the great *Playhouse 90*, I did hundreds of tune-in ads. I did the first *GunsMoke* ads, the morning *Johnny Carson Show*, *The Phil Silvers Show* (*Sergeant Bilko*), and *The Ernie Kovacs Show*. Usually I would rewrite the copywriters' copy, and they would complain to Golden. But Golden would look at my jobs and say, “Hey, George, why don't you just write it on your own, and let's keep these people out of it.” That's how incredibly supportive he was.

**If not for Golden, would CBS have been such a design giant?**

If not for Golden and Frank Stanton—Stanton was his client. Everybody with talent in the world wanted to work there.

**Is it true that you designed the official CBS typeface?**

Golden wanted me to redraw Didot Bodoni. He didn't want people to think we just used an existing typeface, he wanted it to be CBS's own. There's nothing more beautiful than Didot Bodoni. I blew it up in stats, redrew it a little bit, and gave it a little more style (what I thought was more style). I did six letters to show Bill where I was going: *A, B, C, D, E, F*. And Golden loved it and told me to do the final pen-and-ink lettering myself. I did one letter a week. They were fairly easy. It was the numbers that were hard! But they turned out beautifully.

**Was there a particular piece of advertising or promotion that you would call a watershed? Something that revealed the unique approach that would become your signature?**

One in particular was done when *The \$64,000 Question* [CBS's most popular quiz show, which was eventually investigated by Congress for impropriety] was on the air. A contestant, a priest, was deciding whether he might or might not go for the \$64,000 question, and we needed a special ad to promote the show. Everybody had gone that particular night, but Kurt Weihs and I, as usual, were still working. A programming guy ran in and said, "We've got to do an ad for the *New York Times* tomorrow." I did an ad that showed the priest's picture and underneath I wrote, "Will he go for the \$64,000?" I didn't use a logo. I didn't put in the time the show would air. Nothing. I gave it to the production guy, who of course asked, "Where's the logo? It's got to have a goddamn logo." I said, "We're running it as is." The next morning the shit hit the fan.

**You committed the sin of omission?**

Golden asked how I could do such a thing! I said, "Bill, it's a terrific ad. You don't need a logo, and you don't need a time. The whole world knows. It's got balls." He said, "Jesus Christ, you're terrific, but you can't do that!" At that point I felt that I'd let him down; I shouldn't have done it. Twenty minutes later he comes into my office to say that now everybody loves it because Stanton and Paley are getting calls of praise from the shakers and movers in town.

**How would you position that ad in relation to your subsequent work. What makes your ads, then and now, different from others?**

I like to do things that change people's minds.

**What does that mean exactly? Is it the power of persuasion or the craft of salesmanship?**

It's the power of a hungry mind and a hungry eye. Back then, I was hungering to work on selling bread or cars or an airline. I was hungering to get my face into changing the culture, my way.

**So, you left CBS and joined the hard-core advertising industry. Did you, in fact, get to engage with different parts of the culture?**

I was asked to be a head art director for the American Airlines account at the Lennen & Newell agency at three times the money I was making at CBS. So I started doing ads like you've never seen before. I had a great beginning. I belted out fresh, exciting ads like an

assembly line. I had ads covering all the walls and all over the ceiling. Since American Airlines had new destination times to L.A., I did an ad with a Brooklyn Dodgers hat on a guy's head with his eyes looking west, and above it the headline read "Thinking of going to L.A.?" This was when the Dodgers were threatening to move from Brooklyn to L.A. It was a killer ad. The day it ran in the *Times* a million New Yorkers smiled. And with that ad under my hat (by the way I posed as the Dodger in the ad), I thought I was gonna kill them at the agency! So I kept doing ads. One was better than the other, all touching on aspects of the culture. But, somehow, the client didn't like them. Why? The head of the account was a good ol' boy by the name of Bill Smith, whose brother was C. R. Smith, who ran the airline. That's why Lennen & Newell had the account. I think the little brother didn't much like that the Dodger ad made so much noise.

**Did you have to accept his caprice?**

A month later, I said that I wanted to see the client. And Bill Smith said no. So I threatened to quit. The next day his secretary said that Mr. Smith would like to see me. I went up to a gigantic room, and on the floor was every ad I did—two hundred ads laid out. And Smith said, "Lois, I understand you are moaning and groaning about. . . ." And he started walking toward me, walking on the ads! As he came, I tiptoed very carefully around the ads, making sure not to step on any of them. I walked all the way to his desk and turned his gigantic desk over. As luck would have it, there was an inkwell on it and it splashed on the pristine white wall. I turned around and began to walk out, and Smith chased me and said in a Texas drawl, "Lois! Goddamn it, don't leave this agency, boy. I'm gonna make you a king 'cause I'm a kingmaker!" It was so charmingly crazy, he convinced me into staying for six more days. Then I came to my senses and left.

**From there you went to Sudler and Hennessey (S&H), the agency where Herb Lubalin was creative director.**

**What did you work on there?**

All their consumer stuff. I looked at the book on Lubalin a couple of months ago [*Herb Lubalin: Art Director, Graphic Designer, and Typographer* (American Showcase)], and by mistake it includes a bunch of jobs that I did.

**What was the difference between your approach and Lubalin's design?**

He tended to do beautiful type, typographic concepts, and he made type talk. His thinking was absolutely exciting and unique. I, on the other hand, wanted to rip your throat out. I always tried to get a big idea into all my work.

**I understand that you were very protective of your work, even belligerent when you experienced interference. How did this manifest?**

I had trouble with Nat Hennessey, a partner and account executive. I'd give jobs to the bull pen (there were a dozen or so in the bull pen), and I was talking to someone when I saw Hennessey talking to somebody about my job. I went over and said, "Nat, what did you just tell him?" And he answered, "I want to change something around." My response was, "Get the fuck out of here before I punch your face."

**I presume that you couldn't tolerate that kind of situation for too long.**

No. Around that time Lubalin and I decided to leave and start an agency with Lou Dorfsman, called Lubalin, Dorfsman, Lois (I wanted to be the last name, like Bernbach

was at Doyle Dane). Herb was hot to trot. Even though he was king shit at S&H, he was very unhappy. It was Lou who just couldn't squeeze the trigger.

**You did, however, leave S&H for the hottest agency in America, Doyle Dane Bernbach, the launch pad of the creative revolution.**

That's when life really got interesting.

**But your first account did not sound like something that would spawn a creative revolution.**

My first assignment was the Kerid account. It was a new earwax remover. The account guy had no information whatsoever. So what else is new? But it was easy enough to understand that when you put the stuff in your ear, the wax comes out. So I took a photograph of an ear with pencils and paper clips and stuff sticking out of it, a dynamic symbol of the strange and dangerous objects people used to clean out ear wax. I did that ad and a bunch of others, all hot stuff. I knocked them out and slapped them all over my walls, boom, boom, boom. No writer or anything, in one furious day. The next morning, Bernbach came to welcome me, and he sees the stuff and he asks, "Who are you working with?" I said, "I'm not working with anybody. I don't have a writer." He said, "I'll be your writer." I said, "Great." I found out afterward he hadn't been a writer for anybody in fifteen years.

**You did work that stimulated people's minds but also ruffled people's feathers. Why was this ear ad, for example, so controversial?**

A few weeks after the Kerid campaign went into production, I was given a great new office with windows, next to Bob Gage [the chief art director] and Helmut Krone [art director on the famous Volkswagen "Think Small" campaign]. I liked Krone, but he was kind of a crazy Kraut and nasty. He went around the agency criticizing the ear ad—rounded up a whole bunch of pussy writers and took them to Bernbach to protest against the terrible advertising coming out of Doyle Dane Bernbach from the young barbarian who just moved in next door.

**Were you angry?**

I was angry, but not mad enough to go in to Helmut and say, "I'll punch your head off." Also, I respected the guy's work. I took it as a guy who was jealous of a different kind of talent and didn't understand it. One of the complaints against me was that I was one of *those* designers; I was a "Herb Lubalin–Lou Dorfsman graphic-schmaphic designer." I was told by two people present at the protest meeting that Bernbach's reaction to Helmut was "I'll decide what's good for the agency. What you don't understand is, George Lois is going to be a combination of Bob Gage and Paul Rand." Now that's what I regard as the ultimate compliment.

**You are a designer and typographer, but the message and how to present that message have always been your first concerns. Moreover, it seems that for you, design isn't just about composition, it's about format.**

**Most advertising is about the glorious full page. Have you tried formats that are more effective?**

Lou Dorfsman had given the CBS radio account to Doyle Dane and requested that I do a full-page ad in the *Times* to announce that CBS was introducing news "every hour on the hour." It was about the eighth station in town to do so and was so behind the times that doing an ad bragging about it would have been a lousy strategy for CBS. So, I wanted to

do twenty-four small space ads, two-column ads (which worked out to about a page), and I wanted to run them throughout the paper: “1 A.M.,” “2 A.M.,” “3 A.M.,” “4 A.M.” I did twenty-four of them, each with the logo and “every hour on the hour.” We would own the paper that day. It was an exciting visual way to make people remember it, and at the same time not crow over it and say, “Look what we finally did.” Of course, the copywriter said I couldn’t do that because “At Doyle Dane we don’t do small space ads.” Talk about anal. I did it anyway and it was terrific. But I got some noses out of joint.

**The terms “creative revolution” and “Big Idea” suggest the shift in advertising in the sixties from formulaic pitch to creative thinking. Will you talk about this revolution?**

Well, it was pretty dramatic. Bill Bernbach was the man who had an understanding of how copy and great graphic imagery work in harmony—how one and one becomes three. He gets all the credit in the world for that. Bernbach recognized the fact that the writer and art director had to work together as a team. But, of course, it had to be two terrific talents or it didn’t work. Bernbach smelled it when, as a writer, he would watch Rand work. Starting with Paul, Bill recognized what he considered the genius and magic of the graphic art director. God knows, he was almost mystical about it. When I worked at Doyle Dane, we’d always go to Bernbach’s office to show him our stuff. And I’d go up there to preen! Because I always knew I had something that he would love. I’d go up there with the writer, we’d show the work to him, and he’d go, “Jesus, oh, wow, George, how did you do it?” The writer didn’t count. It was almost like Bill can write and this other guy can write, but the writer didn’t do the magic, the art director did.

**What impact did that have on you?**

Bernbach was smart enough to look at a guy like me and say that this Greek kid is someone different and something else is going on here. It’s rougher, it’s rawer, it’s street. He loved to look at my type and say, “You don’t break lines the way other people do.” In fact, I still break my copy lines by thoughts and phrases. So he saw me as a different kind of cat.

**At what point did you finally take the plunge and open your own agency, Papert Koenig Lois?**

Julian Koenig and I were at Doyle Dane, and Fred Papert was at Sudler and Hennessey. I liked him because he was a very good writer. He did a lot of things good. He did some good headlines too. A little tame, but his copy! I loved his body copy. So he starts Papert & Free (two husband/wife teams). They were hot, they had a couple of big accounts. But after a couple, three, four years, they had trouble and split. Freddie came over to me when I was at Doyle Dane and said, “George, listen. I want you to go into business with me.” I said, “Freddie, why the hell would I want to leave the best job in advertising to go with you?” He came to me twice, and one day I said, “This is interesting. I’d love to start the second creative agency in the world.”

**Weren’t you courted by Ogilvy & Mather as well?**

They tried to hire me to be the head art director. I said, “You limeys got to be kidding. How could I possibly? Look at your ads. Don’t get me wrong, a lot of them are terrific; but there’s not one thing in your book, Mr. Ogilvy, that I agree with.” He had all these rules. You had to have a square halftone; the logo had to be in the right-hand corner; you



couldn't drop the type out of the photograph. Ogilvy had rules for dos and don'ts as long as your arm. So, basically, trust me, there was only one creative ad agency in the world, and that was Doyle Dane Bernbach.

**So you formed the "second creative agency in the world."**

Yes. I said, "Freddie, if we bring Julian Koenig with us, I think maybe I'll do it." He said, "Who's Julian Koenig?" I said, "He's a writer." He said, "What do you want a writer for?" And I said, "Because he's a much better writer than you. You do the account hustling and the ass-kissing."

**What happened when you began?**

We got a call from the Renault-Peugeot distributorship. They had a \$300,000 account, which was enough to pay our rent. A couple of weeks later, the *Ladies' Home Journal* called us up and gave us their account to do their circulation ads.

**The *Ladies' Home Journal* ads were very precocious at the time.**

*Ladies' Home Journal* came to us, and within two days I had called up Dr. Benjamin Spock and got a picture of him when he was a baby. Under it we said, "What kind of a baby was Dr. Spock?" Then another ad was a story about baby veal, and I had a head of a cow, a sweet young cow saying, "Please don't read this month's *Ladies' Home Journal*."

**Your offices were in the Seagram Building, and it was there that you developed ads for Seagram's brand, Wolfschmidt vodka. I'd say that this was the kind of advertising—witty, irreverent, and a little bit racy—that typifies the Big Idea method and style. Would you say that this put you on the map?**

Yes, but the story is that Sam Bronfman Sr., the head honcho for Seagram, thought his son Edgar was a boob, and never gave him any responsibility. Finally, he gave him their vodka because Mr. Sam didn't really regard vodka as a serious or prestigious product. Smirnoff was the leading brand. My idea was to position Wolfschmidt as a "tasteless" vodka. Since it left no aftertaste, you could drink it at lunch and not be found out. When I did those ads with the talking fruits and vegetables, everybody talked about them. Sales exploded and young Bronfman's old man said, "Gee, the kid's a genius."

**Another client was Xerox. It became such a generic name that it is part of our collective language, but it did not start out that way. What was your contribution to the company's image?**

Ogilvy originally had it but had to give it up because of some strange perceived conflict. Then Doyle Dane got the account, but their Polaroid client thought there could be a conflict with xerography some day. A week later we won the account. Joe Wilson [the Xerox CEO] had thought about changing the name from Haloid Xerox to Haloid, but I convinced him that Xerox could be a memorable brand name. And I showed him a storyboard for a TV spot. He said, "Television? What are you talking about? There are only five thousand people we want to reach in America." He meant the purchasing agents for companies. But I told him that we have a chance now to make Xerox famous fast. I asked him, "If we can make you famous fast, can you make a lot of Xerox machines?" He said, "All we want." So I showed him the storyboard: A little girl goes to her father's office, and he says, "Would you make two copies of this, please," and she toddles off to this funky music over to the Xerox 914. (You've got to understand, in those days making photocopies was unheard of. The first time I saw it, I almost had an orgasm.) She presses



some buttons, lays her doll on the glass plate; then skips back and hands the copy to her father, who says, “Which one is the original?”

**Sounds like a good concept to me.**

After I finished the presentation, Wilson fired me!

**Were you too aggressive?**

He thought we were nuts to spend his budget on television. He wanted us to run trade ads, for chrissakes. So, the next morning, as I was telling Freddie and Julian that I was fired, I get a phone call from Joe Wilson. He said, “I changed my mind. Produce the commercial.” So we ran the commercial, and he called again and said, “Oh my God, my salesmen are so excited; everybody thought Xerox was an antifreeze, now it’s a famous brand.” Two days later we get a cease and desist from the FCC.

**This story just keeps getting more byzantine. Why did you get a cease and desist?**

A. B. Dick, a leading office printing company—and, I always thought, a company aptly named—complained that a little girl couldn’t possibly make a copy that easily. So I said, “I’ll call you back.” An hour later, I called the FCC and told them that I was going to reshoot the commercial so that they could witness the copies being made! They sent down two guys in gray suits, and I shot exactly the same spot, except instead of shooting a little girl, I shot a chimpanzee. A chimp comes up to the same father, who says, “Sam, would you make a copy of this?” The chimp makes the copies (easier than the little girl did), toddles back, swings on a rope, gives him the copies. The father says, “Terrific, Sam, but which one is the original?” We ran the little girl commercial at the beginning of the evening news show and we ran the chimp at the end—and all hell broke loose. I mean, stories, articles—everybody went nuts. It went from a \$350,000 account to a \$9 million account in two months. Xerox really became famous, and almost literally overnight.

**I know this sounds like a naive question, but how does that happen? What is it about us consumers that makes us so susceptible to advertising?**

What is an even crazier question than that is, How do you know that you’ve got the Big Idea that will change world?

**Okay, I’ll bite. How do you do it?**

You try to epitomize the uniqueness of the product by doing it in a way that’s incredibly memorable. The first rule is theater: Attract attention by doing something absolutely fresh and dramatic.

**But does it have to be researched and market tested to make sure that the public will understand it?**

Of course not. For Braniff airlines I came up with the “When you’ve got it, flaunt it” idea. I said to Harding Lawrence [the CEO], “If you’re going to research this, forget it; it’s going to be a dog.” He said, “Well, we’ve got to research it.” So they researched it, and I think 84 percent of the people who saw the ads and flew Braniff said they would never fly it again. That’s how much the test groups hated the campaign. But Lawrence had balls, and he gave me his okay. I did spots with Salvador Dalí telling Whitey Ford how to throw a curveball, and Sonny Liston eyeballing Andy Warhol as he explained the significance of soup cans, and Mickey Spillane, of all people, explaining the power of words to the great poet Marianne Moore. Braniff’s business went up 80 percent. You can’t research an idea

like that. The only ideas that truly research well are mediocre, “acceptable” ideas. Great ideas are always suspect in research.

**To get those incongruous characters together anywhere, whether it’s a plane, a car, or a park bench, is a wonderful idea. But explain to a layman like me what you wanted to convey.**

I was basically saying, “Why fly a dull-ass airline like American when you can fly an airline where some hot shit might happen?” In research, everybody said, “That’s terrible, that’s ridiculous, that’s silly.” But when you sit at home and watch it, it’s entertaining, it’s exciting, and you say, “Gee, next time I go to Dallas, put me on Braniff.” You just know that people are going to go for it. It’s like reeling in fish.

**Do you understand psychology, or is this just intuitive on your part?**

It’s probably intuitive. I’m not sure about understanding human psychology. But I can think of everything I’ve ever done in my life and I know exactly why I did it, and I can write a book talking about each campaign. For example, OTB [New York’s Off-Track Betting] had a terrific first year in 1973. Mayor Lindsay asked me, “What do you think of OTB?” I said it was a winner, but the advertising was running out of money. I thought OTB could be doubling its handle if its advertising could convince everybody who was ashamed to be seen in a betting parlor to go. You don’t have to be genius to know there’s an image problem. So I developed the concept of the New York Bets: “You’re too heavy for the Mets? You’re too light for the Jets? You’re too short for the Nets? You’re just right for the N.Y. Bets!” I approached Broadway stars to be in full-page *Times* ads wearing N.Y. Bets T-shirts. I got Carol Channing, Rodney Dangerfield. Then, before you know it, I had every entertainer who was coming to New York begging me to appear in ads: Jackie Gleason, Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra. We did about two dozen ads, and all of a sudden OTB doubled its take. For me it was a no-brainer.

**I recall that the Greek tourist board came to you to save what was becoming a tourist industry disaster following a comment by President Reagan that Americans should not fly to Greece after an air hijacking.**

There was a terrorist incident over Athens. A plane was going from Athens to Rome and was hijacked. So President Reagan came to life and announced that no American should go to the dangerous Athens airport. I’m sure he said it because Papandreou was the premier of Greece, and Reagan hated him because he was a socialist. Travel to Greece virtually stopped. The Greek government came to me, begging me to come up with some magic that could save their tourist season. I got thirty-nine celebrities to make testimonials, like Lloyd Bridges who said, “My great-great-great-great grandfather came to this country from England on the *Mayflower*, and now, finally, I’m going home . . . to Greece!” Joe Namath said, “My father came to this country from Hungary in 1906, and now finally I’m going home . . . to Greece!” I was saying that everyone’s home is Greece because Greece is the home of democracy, the home of Western civilization.

I shot them one day in L.A. and got them on the air. What the spots actually said was “Fuck you, Reagan; I’m going to Greece.” And they also said that before you die, you’ve got to visit the cradle of civilization.

**So you were responsible for rocking the cradle.**

It was PR at its most aggressive and convincing. I got the head of the Greek tourist

organization, a young guy, to do all the morning news shows and all the shows at night, saying “Greece is fighting back and we ain’t takin’ this shit anymore,” and the planes filled up within four days! You couldn’t get a flight to Greece. I knew it was going to happen. Maybe not that fast, but I knew it was going to happen.

**Why is there so much bad advertising?**

I don’t think so-called creative people understand cause and effect.

**In the industry, there’s so much meat-and-potatoes advertising that gets a product name out there, and because it’s so insidious, it stays in your brain and you accept the brand.**

The only way it’s insidious is if they’re spending \$20–\$40–\$50–\$60–\$80 million. But there are hundreds of brands that spend over \$40 million, and nobody in American has any awareness of the advertising. I don’t do campaigns where you spend zillions of dollars. I do campaigns where they spend not much money, and I don’t have much time to make it famous, and I make it work, pronto.

**I know how you convince a client that your ad is good. How do you prove it to yourself?**

I take civilians into a room and show them one of my commercials and ask, “What happened? What did you see?” If they don’t explain the concept, if they show me that they don’t “get it,” the commercial sucks.

**I’ll watch something entertaining and never know what they’re selling.**

A lot of it is entertaining, and you don’t know what they’re talking about, and you don’t remember the brand name, and you don’t buy the product. Now, if they have \$100 million and they keep running it, sooner or later it might get under your skin. Nike wouldn’t be the brand it is if it didn’t spend a shitload of money with Michael Jordan imagery, from day one. There’s a lot of advertising that has to be seen twenty to thirty times to be semi-understood. The way I judge my stuff is, you’ve got to see it one time, you’ve got to get it, and it’s got to grab you by the throat.

**Let’s talk MTV. Here’s this hip new network, now one of the most successful in the world. When you were asked early on to do its promotion campaign, was it a culture that you could appreciate?**

I thought rock ‘n’ roll was garbage. I didn’t like any of it. I’m a Cole Porter, Giuseppe Verdi man. But I don’t have to love a product to sell the hell out of it. Some young guys came to see me. Their leader was Bob Pittman, who was twenty-seven. They had three accounts, the Movie Channel, Nickelodeon, and a total unknown named MTV. They were going to pick two agencies and somehow split the work up. They asked me to pick two of the three. The Movie Channel was worth \$6 million, Nickelodeon was \$3 million, and MTV was a quarter-million. I said, “I’ve absolutely got to have MTV. If that’s the only one I can take, I’ll take that. I abhor rock ‘n’ roll, but I think it’s a big programming idea that young people would eat up.” They admitted that cable operators wouldn’t touch it, the advertising business thought it was a joke, and the music business thought it was ridiculous. “No one will give us the time of day,” Pittman said, “so what makes you think you can do it?”

**What was your idea?**

I said, “Do all you young punks remember, ‘I want my Mayo?’” [a famous mid-sixties advertising campaign that Lois created for a kid’s hot cereal]. They all had vivid memories

of it. I said, "Now you are all twenty-five to twenty-six, and we're going to say to the world, 'I want my MTV.'" I explained the commercial, to take the *M* logo and always show it with crazy variations (one had a tongue sticking out). A lawyer in the room said I couldn't do that because every time I did they would have to reregister the logo. I told the lawyer to kiss my ass. I said, "I want to create a style that is funkier than anything else on the air." And then, I showed them the commercial where at the end a voice says, "If you don't get MTV where you live, you pick up the phone and dial your local cable operator and say—" Then I cut to Mick Jagger, and he bellows, "I want my MTV!"

**And the result?**

We bought four spots on a Thursday night and waited to see what would happen on Friday. The cable operator in San Francisco called Pittman and said, "Get that commercial off the air! I'm getting thousands of phone calls. I had to shut the line. Oh, by the way, I'll take it!" We blitzed through America that way, and six months later MTV hit the cover of *Time* magazine as the greatest pop-cultural revolution in the last quarter of a century. It became wildly successful, but we probably destroyed world culture.

**How much of your output is just you, and how much is you in collaboration?**

The idea, almost always, has got to come from me—the truly Big Idea. I'm never satisfied with somebody else's idea because I always feel that I didn't push my own head. Once I feel I have all the input I need, I totally concentrate and nail the idea. If I have trouble coming up with what I consider to be a thrilling concept, the reason is that I didn't really understand all the input. But when I nail the idea and I'm bursting with it, I love to work things out with a great writer. Boy, is that great fun.