

Everything is in values

In the middle of the May, we were in Maribor, at the 6th Magdalena Festival, the international festival of creative communication, from May 13 to May 15. Magdalena is the alternative to the commercial advertising festivals in Slovenia, like SOF and Golden Drum. Magdalena is not commercial, and this is reflected in the choice of speakers. The keynote speaker was a Canadian named David Berman, who has over 20 years of experience in graphic design and communications, working for clients such as the Canadian government, IBM, the World Bank, and many others. This year, Mr. Berman was also the president of Magdalena's jury. He started his lecture with enthusiasm on the topic of the role of ethics and social responsibility in graphic design. What do ethics have to do with advertising, you're asking? Isn't ethics the domain of doctors, lawyers and priests? David argues that without ethics, advertising can fail and can even do damage to companies and societies. David Berman established a new code of ethics. He is currently the national Ethics Chair for the profession in Canada. He was the first elected president of the Association of Registered Graphic Designers of Ontario, the West's first accredited graphic design organization. That is why we started with a direct question:

By Helena Sustar
Photo: David Berman



▶ **Do you always tell the truth in your life and at your work?**

Berman: I have never lied under oath. I try to be as truthful in my work as in the rest of my life. This is the essence of how to be an ethical professional: to avoid having one set of principles in your work, and another elsewhere. If you maintain your personal ethics and values in your work, you're more than halfway there.

▶ **In high school you created and produced a magazine, between the studies of computers and psychology and typography, you were involved with the student press. For a long time, you have been very active. Is this because that your parents were being active or something else?**

Berman: My parents were activists when they were in high school. They have always taught me the importance of investing time in just causes, and encouraged me greatly in all my pursuits. I am certain they have contributed a lot to why I seek to help pursue justice in the World.

▶ **After that you go even further: as a 21-year old designer you started your attention to the social aspect of design. Isn't this unusual? People usually work many years in practice and then recognize different problems in a branch of business.**

Berman: My first really professional work in graphic design was in the student press. Design was often as not about helping communicate messages we felt the World needed to hear. My early clients were mostly non-

profit organizations working hard to do well. Though, like so many others, I started doing design because I love design, I think the idea that graphic design was a profession about communicating valuable messages, rather than just a communications technique has been with me from the start.

▶ **You studied in different fields that are connected with graphic design. Do you think that you now have a better view on whole sphere?**

Berman: Yes. I think that interdisciplinary exposure always helps us be better at what we do best. We don't have the market cornered on creativity... and the more you understand how the World works, the more you can be of service to your clients and society. Part of what made Magdalena a great festival was the inclusion of an economist and a software architect amongst the speakers.

▶ **What do you think about speaking at the Magdalena festival and about the decision the organizers took in inviting you as the speaker?**

Berman: Speaking and leading the jury at the Magdalena festival was especially a thrill because it gave me the opportunity to be in Eastern Europe shortly after the EU expanded to include many countries there. I am fairly confident that their pleased they invited me: you'd have to ask them!

▶ **It is possible to say that graphic design is starting to be more and more critical in the past few years, or has it always had a key effect on what is happening in the World?**

Berman: Every year, the role of graphic design in the World becomes more influential, as technological change and globalization reduces the cost of reaching ever-larger audiences with visual messages.

➤ **In your lecture, you introduce the Coca-Cola brand and its great influence on developing countries. The company in a tricky way says that people need a bottle of Coca Cola. This seems like spreading a new religion of consumption.**

Berman: Coca-Cola's brand is the most recognized product brand on Earth (perhaps in the entire solar system!). In Tanzania I discovered that their reach extends up the tallest mountains in Africa, to the official branding of villages, institutions and even to the official streets signs of Zanzibar.

➤ **How could you explain that phenomena?**

Berman: Greed.



➤ **What are the most unethical things in graphic design: buying things that we do not need, visual pollution, or »selling hot air«?**

Berman: The most unethical thing in graphic design is when graphic designers choose to betray their own values and principles, by doing things at work that they would not feel comfortable doing elsewhere in their lives. This is most tragic when it manifests itself as helping spread lies through cunning visuals.

➤ **When do advertisements stop being ethical?**

Berman: Only human beings can be ethical or not ethical. Graphic designers stop being



ethical when they either betray their own principles and values or when they betray the agreed-upon code of professional conduct of their profession.

➤ **Designers have a special power to create brands, make things more valuable that they are in reality; they have influence on our emotions, and often design our memories. Graphic design even influenced the result of the presidential election in the USA.**

Berman: The lack of effective information design in the ballots used in the State of Florida during the most U.S. federal election

is believed by many to have caused over 100,000 people to accidentally vote for someone else when they thought they were voting for Al Gore. This was enough to result in George Bush being able to become president, even though most Floridians did not vote for him.

➤ **This means that graphic designers as to be responsible for things they do? They have to think about consequences?**

Berman: This means that graphic designers have to recognize how much power that graphic design has in society, push for society to recognize the importance of having

important design work done by those who understand it best.

➤ **Sex was always present in advertisements. I think that now this is even more so, Slovenia does not have a long history of advertising... that is why in recent years there is huge increase of sex in advertisements. It is possible to stop it?**

Berman: Sex has not always been present in advertisements, however I doubt that sex will ever be absent from advertising, especially since much advertising is about selling things that relate to sexuality. However, it is in the interest of both society and advertisers that people stop using sex to sell things that have nothing to do with sex, while being very careful with those that do.

➤ **Are designers not just instruments in the hand of marketing and advertising? In Slovenia, graphic designers are often just followers in the design process**

Berman: Designers will remain simply an instrument of marketing and advertising if that is what designers choose to allow how their profession is defined. 95% of the designers who have ever lived are alive today: together we can choose what graphic design is going to be about.

➤ **How can a designer be ethical in a tough situation: reject the project? persuade the client? use clever solutions? even just hold onto their morality?**

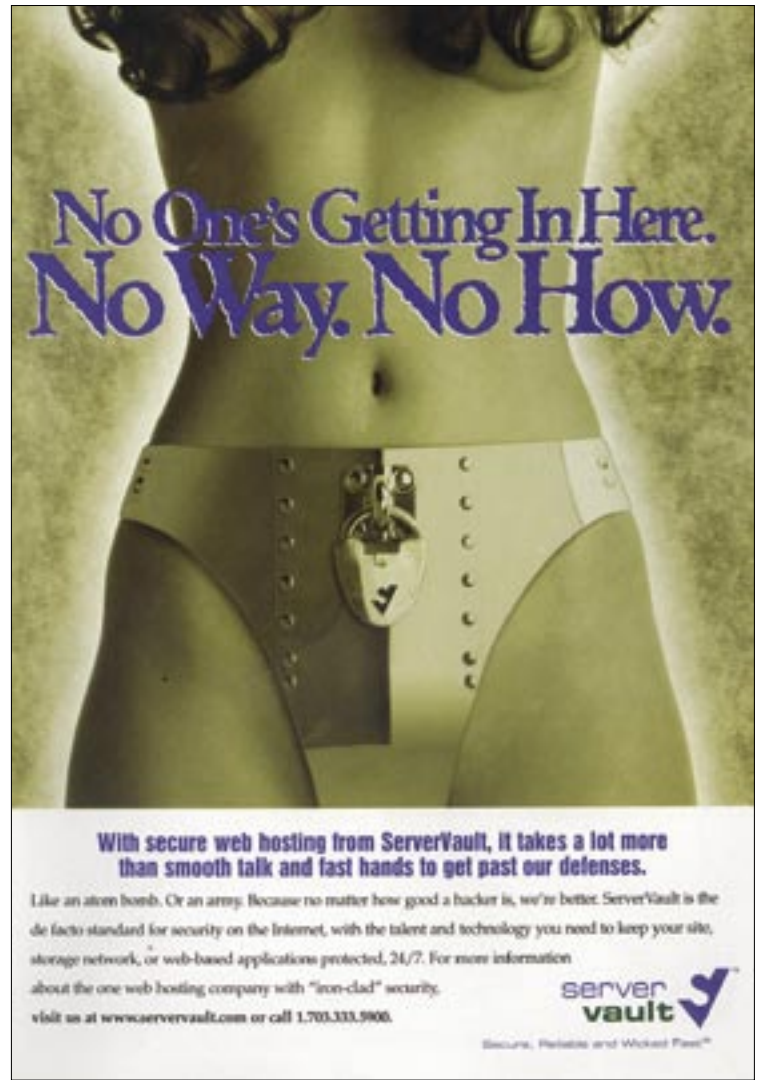
Berman: To be ethical is to reflect both your own morality and the common ethics of the profession in the work you do. While rejecting a project may often be the only answer you can come up with, usually a better answer is to persuade the client that there is an ethical way to get the job done. Such a way is, in the long term, better for the advertiser as well.

➤ **Is there not a very tiny line between ethnic and unethical? How is it possible to find the balance?**

Berman: The line is indeed often thin. The best way to find it is to ask yourself "is this a message I would recommend to a friend?" "Could I look my child in the eye and say this message without turning away?" If not, the message is probably not aligned with your own principles and values.

➤ **Is there any improvement regarding ethics in advertising than when you started working in this field?**

Berman: The definition of ethics in our profession is much stronger and more precise than it was when I started working as a graphic



designer. In many ways things are better, and in many ways they are worse. Overall, I would say that things are getting better, however the size of the impact of the places where there is a destructive lack of ethics is getting worse.

Do you think that professional organizations (including those you participate in) can have influence on more ethical graphic design, or is it all about individual moral values?

Berman: Ethics come from two sources: yourself and your profession. Both are key. Professional organizations are critical in that only through them can we establish a public statement of our common ethics, which we agree to be bound to by our membership in such an organization.

What do you think about Magdalena?

Berman: I really loved Magdalena. Its unique blend of careful organization and creative anarchy makes it unlike any other creative event I have attended. The focus on youth helps amplify the youthful spirit I found wherever I was in Slovenia.



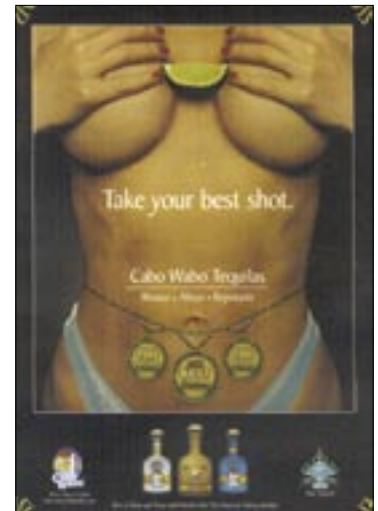
As the president of the Magdalena jury, what do you think about Slovenian young designers? How ethical were their works?

Berman: I was delighted with the quality of work presented by young Slovenian designers, and very pleased with the proportion of

work presented that concerned itself with advancing social causes.

What is the most important note of your lectures on social responsibility and design?

Berman: Ne delaj samo dobro oblikovanje: delaj dobro.



... or I guess, more correctly...

Ne bodi zgolj dober oblikovalec. Bodi dober. I think there is nothing to add. If you want to be ethical in your work, you must keep a tight hold on your principles and your values.