

# To tell the truth...

You help people sell things for a living. Be honest: how often do you have to lie to do it?

by SARA CURTIS

**D**o you consider yourself a liar? According to David Berman, if you work in visual communications you probably are—at least, some of the time. As the national ethics chair of the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada in Ottawa, the integrity of what designers and art directors do consumes much of his professional—and personal—time and energy. He has spent the better part of the past two decades writing and lecturing on the subject and has come to the conclusion that “as visual communicators, we are the people that help create visual manipulations, which range on a continuum from subtle coercion to out-and-out lying ... Graphic designers are much more influential in the world than we tend to think. It is political. And it is untidy.”

He first became aware of the “untidy” nature of branding and design as a young designer back in 1984, when a friend challenged him with the idea that all he did for a living was manipulate images to create misrepresentations, and that graphic design was, in fact, intensely political. He was so moved by their discussion that, at the age of 21, he attended his first GDC meeting, armed with a few handwritten notes about the importance of professional ethics in the industry. His little presentation engendered a heated debate among the designers there that night, and culminated with the president of the local GDC chapter asking David to look into the topic a little further. And so he did.

Sixteen years later, the national GDC ratified Berman’s code of ethics, which emphasizes the importance of social responsibility in design. Along the way, he also served as the first elected president of the Association of Registered Graphic Designers of Ontario (North America’s first accredited graphic design association) from 1997-99, and drafted the association’s constitution and Rules of Professional Conduct, as well as the section of the accreditation exam on ethics and professional responsibility. In 1999, he was named a GDC Fellow, and he was elected national ethics chair in 2000.

Amazingly, he has also found time over the past 20 years to



David Berman

build a successful design business. For 10 years, from 1990 to 2000, he was vice-president of Herrera Berman Communications in Ottawa, before selling his interest in that firm and setting up his own shop, David Berman Communications. His client list has included the CBC, Nortel, Metropolitan Life, the Sierra Club and the International Space Station. For the past 15 years on and off, he has taught typography and Web design at Algonquin College and the Internet Institute in Ottawa. And he has had a longtime passion for plain language and plain design, producing award-winning projects for clients including Justice Canada, Canada Customs and Revenue Agency and the Ontario Literacy Coalition.

But perhaps his greatest professional passion is for public speaking—he lectures regularly at local and international conferences about the important role designers and marketing professionals can play in improving the human condition and the global environment. In the past two years, he has lectured in the Middle East and Europe, and across Canada; this year, he has been booked into speaking engagements in Denmark, Dubai and Qatar, and in the U.S. I first met him at a design conference in the Czech Republic last summer, where his seminar, entitled “Social Responsibility & Graphic Design: how logo can we go?” electrified the crowd of more than 500 designers from 44 countries around the world. From an ethical point of view, says Berman, design and marketing professionals are at a crossroads: either they can continue to spend much of their time concocting visual lies for their clients, or they can decide to use their talent and influence to speak honestly to people, disseminate important information, and help heal the planet. “There’s no limit to how much we can do with our skills,” he says. “Or we can just lie to people so they’ll eat more hamburgers.”

*Applied Arts interviewed David Berman from his office in Ottawa last December. Following is an abridged version of that conversation.*

**Applied Arts:** *I'd like to start by talking a bit about the seminar that you gave at the Icoagrada conference in Europe last year about ethics in design and advertising. What was the thesis?*

**David Berman:** Essentially, the thesis goes like this: Environmental degradation of our planet is the biggest issue of our day and represents the largest threat to humans and other life-forms if we continue living the way we've been living. What is causing the environmental degradation? It's all about consumption—consuming more and more stuff is what is causing us to change the nature of the surface of our planet, the sky, the sea. Larger and larger populations in the developing world are taking part in our Western consumption lifestyle.

We're teaching that, in order to succeed in life, you need to consume things. And so they get caught up in our getting-and-spending lifestyle, which we know is unsustainable. This has become North America's largest export: the idea of overconsumption.

I argue that the largest forces in the world causing this behavioural shift are multinational companies. They've discovered that powerful branding campaigns are the most efficient way to get these untapped populations to consume their product. Rather than developing new products, or more targeted products, they're developing new ways of convincing people who don't necessarily need a product into thinking that they do. They hire designers and art directors to craft cunning visual manipulations that associate false needs with product consumption. As visual communicators, we are the people that help create those powerful emotional associations, which range on a continuum from subtle coercion to out-and-out lying. But, wherever we are on that continuum, we are as culpable as they are if we participate in it. Graphic designers are much more influential in the world than we would tend to think. We have power and we can choose how it will be used.

**AA:** *So is branding and advertising, by its very nature, misleading?*

**DB:** No, not at all. And I'm glad you bring that up, because I don't have any issue with advertising per se. I think it's a powerful and useful tool in our economy. If we have something of value to offer people, then advertising is a great way to communicate its features and benefits, so they can choose whether a certain product or service is appropriate for them. And there's all kinds of perfectly ethical, wonderfully clever and delightful advertising where people are presented with a value proposition which is true and clear. The key is simply whether we're telling the truth or not. That's what it boils down to.

**AA:** *If you take a product like Coke or Twinkies, something that really has no inherent value—it's not good for you, it doesn't help you in any way, it's just enjoyable to consume—is it possible to advertise that to people in a way that's truthful? You're not going to say, 'Buy Twinkies, I know they're*

*really bad for you but they taste good.'* How do you reconcile doing that job without lying to some degree?

**DB:** Well, first off, we have to wonder if those products would even be on the radar screen if they had been historically sold in an ethical way. Why are so many products that present little value to society so popular?

But as a branding professional, how do you deal with the day-to-day reality? I think it's definitely answerable. If a client comes to you and says, 'We have a warehouse full of widgets to get rid of and we'd like you to lie in such-and-such a way to get rid of them,' usually there is a better way. It isn't a zero-sum game. There's a proper way to get things sold, and usually an ethical solution ends up better for everyone.

Any car manufacturer will tell you that the way to make the most profit as a car manufacturer is not to sell someone one car, but to sell them many cars in their lifetime. You don't just convince them to buy one Toyota, you get them to recognize the quality that the Toyota brand represents. If I learn that Toyota won't sell cars that are poorly made, then I learn to trust the Toyota brand.

There are two ways of selling a car. You could say, 'Now, here's a potential car for you, here are its features, in terms of fuel efficiency, how safe it is, how comfortable it is to drive, how much fun it is, and so on. If these are the things you're looking for in a car, you should buy ours because we offer that at a reasonable price.' If you buy that car you'll be satisfied not just for the first month, but five years later. And when it's time to trade it in, you're likely to buy another Toyota because you're so happy.

Or you can sell the car by saying something like, 'If you buy this car you will be more successful. If you buy this car you'll get more sex. If you buy this car, people will think you're smart.' We know that the human brain has its weaknesses, and if you show me a picture of a car with someone naked sitting on the hood, or you pretend the car is a toy, you're selling a myth. You may trick me into parting with my money when it isn't the right car for me at all. And now, you've got the wrong people buying the car. And so, five years later, will I buy another Toyota? Probably not. I'll have a deep sense of dissatisfaction, or maybe even have noticed the lie and be angry about it and go buy something else.

**AA:** *Brand loyalty is not created from that type of advertising?*

**DB:** Absolutely not—not long term, anyway. If you're fulfilling real needs that I have, you get my loyalty forever.

Good design is a strategic response to a business problem. So you can come back to that client and say, 'Maybe we can sell a lot of your product by telling these white lies about it, or pretty dark lies about it, but, in the long run, we're going to make you more profitable if we apply a truthful approach to selling your product.' Perhaps we have to think a little harder, and maybe we have to

spend a little more time, but in the end, we'll be more useful to the client than if we just blindly say, 'Sure, we're happy to play a role in your game.' Maybe we can come back to them with something that isn't saying 'no,' it's just saying a better 'yes.' And what you'll find, as a design or advertising professional, is if you sell a service like that to a client, over time the fly-by-night clients will disappear, and the clients you really want will stick with you.

Social responsibility is good business on the individual level, as well as for our industry. It's good for us to carefully position ourselves as delivering ethical solutions. Because it won't be long until someone's going to figure out that we are in a profession that lies to succeed. Look at what happened to the accounting industry this past year: they allowed their own professional conduct to slip below society's level of what's acceptable, and it has damaged their industry for some time to come. Or big tobacco, with cigarette companies paying out these huge lawsuits in Florida: how long until someone says, 'Hmm, wait a moment. Didn't the ad agencies have the strategic briefs? Doesn't it say in there how the nicotine thing works—to trick people into buying more cigarettes? Aren't the agency creatives culpable?'

Our society has a legal code that is very much based on words—we recognize a word-based lie very easily. But we're not as visually literate a society; it's not as obvious to us when there's a visual lie. When a sentence is made up of pictures, and the sentence is not true, we're more likely to allow that—for now, anyhow. But I believe over time, as our society becomes more and more visually literate, people will say, 'Well, no. That's not okay.'

**AA:** *It's true. Creating impact or manipulating through images is probably more effective than even lying with words. Images provoke such a visceral reaction in people, they don't even realize it. A lot of it is so subtle that you don't even realize that you're being duped.*

**DB:** Our defences aren't as strong in that area. To paraphrase Steve Mann, the eye is the largest bandwidth pipe into the human brain, which is why, as communicators, we focus on the visual. Humans excel at pattern recognition and real-time stereotyping—we are constantly editing what comes in. If you're taking a stream of words in, you can pretty much control that experience: you can stop in the middle and say, 'I don't want to read anymore.' But when it comes as a barrage of images, especially with the saturation of visual messages we get even driving down a highway or walking down a city street, it's simply impossible for us to edit out all the crap, so some stuff sticks.

And that's fine if it's truthful. But, if we're part of a system of careful, cunning deceit, then we're really dragging our profession and our spirits in the mud. You were asking earlier about products like Coca-Cola and Twinkies, and how do you deal with your day-to-day professional life in terms of what people ask of you? I'm not here to decide for anyone where they should draw the line—

whether you decide, for instance, that an SUV is inherently evil, while a Diesel Golf is okay. All I'm asking you to do is be aware of your principles. And part of what we do as professionals, as with a doctor or a judge or an engineer, is to maintain our principles when we arrive at work every morning.

**AA:** *And that's because your professional life is personal.*

**DB:** That's right. When it comes to the question of whether it's right or wrong, we just have to ask, 'How would I deal with this on a personal level? Would I recommend this product to my children? Could I look my daughter in the eye and say this message I've concocted, or would I have to look away?' That's a good test for whether you're comfortable with whatever it is. Because I'm confident that if we all simply did that, then we'd get the critical shift in how much graphic design contributes to the social good. We'd be contributing a lot more than we're taking away.

**AA:** *David, some people reading this might be thinking, 'How do I turn away a \$10 million client that sells Twinkies, that wants me to position them to children, in a fun, light way, and that's how they've been doing it over the years?' Do you turn away that client? Are you suggesting that you say, 'I will not have anything to do with Twinkies or chips or soft drinks?'*

**DB:** Well, if you are going to do that work, you have to identify what it is that people find beneficial in Twinkies, and tell the truth about it. Marketing to children, lying to children, is particularly a cowardly way of fulfilling one's greedy impulses. Because, of course, we know that children don't have the same defences or knowledge. If we burden them with a barrage of lies, that's bad enough. But if we are actually successful in convincing children that the world is different than they thought—that they need things they don't need—that's pretty predatory. Would you invite someone into your house who would lie to your kids? No, you'd throw them out. So why would we invite people into our studios who would ask us to help them to lie to children?

**AA:** *I read that the age that children recognize that advertising is not always telling the truth—i.e., that someone is trying to sell them something—is eight.*

**DB:** Well, at what age will a child stop putting their tooth under the pillow for the tooth fairy? We're talking to a crowd who are buying into Santa Claus without too much reinforcement—even in the face of contradictory evidence, they will hold on to those beliefs. So when McDonald's is marketing to five-year-olds, that's really creepy.

And then there's teenagers. I was recently lecturing in a couple of countries in the Middle East, and I talked to a lot of young design students in Jordan about the effects of being bombarded by icons of success and beauty and power, as represented by the West. I casually counted that four out of five billboards in Amman

depicting humans show people obviously from the West. And these are icons of what it is to be successful, to be attractive, to be loved and admired—this is what they are encouraged to emulate.

When I spoke to the young people about it, they reported a strong feeling of inferiority. They told me, ‘We know we are behind and not as good as those people.’ And I wondered to what degree this comes from having a lifetime barrage of such imagery. It’s not just about the relative naiveté in children; there’s also a relative naiveté among people of the developing world, who haven’t grown up in a culture that has prepared them to be lied to visually from an early age, so they’re much more vulnerable to that type of thing.

**AA:** *Is that a more major global threat—not so much what’s going on in North America in terms of branding and marketing, but in these developing nations that are just being introduced to these things?*

**DB:** Where we have the severest impact in the world is in developing countries. In North America we sort of have this system of checks and balances, where our 10-year-olds have learned how the lying works to some degree and have certain defences. There are still big risks, but the larger risks are in these huge populations who are taking on a Western style of life. Not only is it spreading over-consumption and garbage and foreign dependence, but it undermines their very culture that could keep them on an even keel.

**AA:** *I want to talk about a recent trip you took to Tanzania. I understand that some of the smaller towns there, for all intents and purposes, had been entirely ‘branded’ by Coca-Cola.*

**DB:** Yes, it was quite fascinating. Here in North America, I’ve always been amazed at how overwhelming advertising has become in our public spaces—so many people competing to use up whatever amount of visual space there is, filling it with signs and messages. And then when I got to Tanzania, I was just shocked by the way that they’d gone about it there, in such an unbridled fashion.

You drive along the highway in Tanzania, and you come to these very small villages, and each one will have as its official village sign a Coca-Cola sign like what we’d see at a corner store here. It’s not just Coca-Cola—you see Pepsi and you see some of the cigarette companies as well—but I’d say Coke dominated by about 90 per cent. The signage is being provided by Coke, not just for the town, but for their schools, orphanages and hospitals, and even the milestone signs between cities—the official permanent signage is a Coca-Cola advertisement that also tells you how many kilometers there are to the next town. Clearly, they’ve got an arrangement with the government to put these signs up. So basically, you’re driving through an ongoing Coke ad as you drive through parts of Tanzania.

These countries in Africa have a lot of very big problems to grapple with, like poverty and disease, so it’s easy to imagine how someone like Coca-Cola could come along and say, ‘We’ll take care of all your town signs for you while you deal with things like a million Africans a year dying of malaria.’ And they’re not paying huge money to do this—we’re talking between \$50 and \$200 a year to brand a village. So it’s not a matter of economics.

What’s more intriguing is that these towns actually love their Coke signs. I spoke to people there and they’re actually very proud of their Coca-Cola signs, because they’ve been taught that Coke is a symbol of success. So they feel like they’re part of something wonderful, something modern and something good, and that Coke is all that the West is about, when we have so many better things to share. And that, on its own, is a scary thing. How does that undermine the local culture?

**AA:** *But is Coke actually funding the hospital and that’s why they’ve agreed to having the signs? Because then you’ve got this Catch-22 of the somewhat distasteful advertising on the one hand, but there might not be a hospital in this town unless it was funded by Coke.*

**DB:** Is it like Ronald McDonald House, where McDonald’s is providing a place for people to stay? I don’t think it is. I didn’t get a sense of that. They were simply buying the right to put their name on a sign. And because of the lack of regulations there, and the lack of people understanding what they’re really selling, it’s very easy for them to do that. Whereas here, there would be a lot more public resistance to that sort of thing.

It’s even more sinister, because when you speak to people in Africa, you discover that Coke is actually considered to have medicinal qualities. Many actually think that if they drink Coke, they’ll be healthier, and that it’s medicine.

**AA:** *Why is that? Are there subtle things that the advertiser does to imply that?*

**DB:** I don’t know where this comes from. I didn’t see any advertising that said, ‘Drink Coke, it will make you more healthy.’ It’s the same messaging as it is here: ‘Coke adds life,’ and stuff like that. The reality is that there’s a belief there that Coca-Cola is good for you. And in a society where wicked diseases are rampant, and people don’t have a lot of money, they are successfully selling lots of it. You can buy a Coke on the streets of Tanzania for about 80 cents Canadian. And I find that ironic, because that’s about what a malaria pill costs. And people buy a lot of Coke.

**AA:** *If there are advertisements that say ‘Coke adds life,’ and there are healthy-looking, robust-looking people drinking that product, with sparkling eyes and glowing skin, that would imply that these people look happy and healthy and they’re drinking Coke ...*

**DB:** It could be that basic. In these societies they don't have the defence mechanisms built into their culture: how to deal with powerful visual lying. Big, colourful, shiny kinds of lying. It's very coercive. It's very attractive.

**AA:** *Are there certain industries that you see as more culpable, more guilty of these types of visual lies?*

**DB:** Well, the pattern is that the less substance a product has, the more likely one will have to resort to telling non-truths to get people to buy into it. The big players tend to be tobacco, soda pop, fast food, cosmetics, alcohol ... where there's very little product differentiation. Anyone in beer marketing knows that most Canadian beers are pretty much the same. It's all about the label and the branding.

**AA:** *Is a lot of branding and advertising based on fear?*

**DB:** Yes, I think a lot of it's fear-based; fear of not being good enough, of people not accepting you. I think what it usually comes down to is social acceptance. The human emotions we are appealing to in advertising are obvious: the desire to escape, the desire for more sex, the desire to be loved. These are the things that drive humans. Beyond our most basic needs—oxygen, food,

and shelter—these are the things that people worry about. And I'm all for helping people fulfil their emotional needs. But you're not really helping someone self-actualize by addicting them to behaviours that make them feel okay.

We as graphic designers could be developing campaigns that tell people that they're okay as they are, and create a whole vocabulary with self-esteem. We have so many great things to share, and we can use visuals to share them way more effectively than reading books about them.

**AA:** *You said in your seminar in Europe that you recommend that people that work in visual communicators devote 10 per cent of their professional time to doing work that benefits the planet in some way.*

**DB:** When I speak to graphic designers, whether they are professionals or students, whether they're in Lebanon or Canada, I'm really trying to drive home the same message. At first I want to shake them out of the assumption that what our industry is about today is what it has to be. More than 95 per cent of the graphic designers who have ever lived are alive right now. It's such a young industry. And every one of those people I'm speaking to is one of those 95 per cent. So as soon as they get their head around that, they realize, 'It's up to us! We are the graphic designers.' There aren't thousands of years of history saying that graphic design



For a nominal fee—\$50 to \$200 a year—Coca-Cola has “branded” entire towns in Tanzania. Other major Western brands, like Camel and Pepsi, are also very visible there

must hold this role in society: helping companies sell things by lying about them, or making them more enticing in ways that are stretching the truth. This isn't what it has to be about at all.

We've just begun. It's up to us to decide what graphic design is going to be about. Is it going to be about selling sugar water to children? Or is it going to be about finding ways to really take a role in society which is honoured—like with doctors, lawyers, registered nurses, who people turn to when they need a certain area of stewardship properly dealt with. People ask me, 'So what can I do?' and I say there are two things. One is to simply commit that you're going to use the power you hold as a designer for the things that are in line with your personal principles.

**AA:** *Whatever your personal principles are.*

**DB:** Exactly. Just make sure that you don't betray your personal principles. And that's a much more relaxed way to live, anyhow. And then the second thing is, because we have a problem on our hands that needs some type of a proactive approach, I ask that they commit a tithe of 10 per cent of their professional time to doing things that are actively part of the solution rather than part of the problem. It doesn't have to be pro bono work—it can be paid work. Design for someone who works for some company or organization or government which is doing something

clearly for the social good. Did you know that there are over a million graphic designers on the planet? If you had one million graphic designers spending four hours a week—that's four million hours of doing good a week—imagine the effect we could have on the world. We just have to decide to do it.

**AA:** *Do you think we're at a critical point now: either we try to turn things around right now, or it's going to be too late?*

**DB:** Well, in terms of our role in the degradation of the world's environment, we're at a critical time because it's reaching the point that if we don't turn this ship around now, we're not going to be able to. But from the more general philosophy of choosing what graphic design is about, I don't think we're actually late at all. I think the time is perfect. Because of the increase in visual literacy in our society and the arrival of accreditation for designers in Canada, things are coming together and they're creating a situation where it's easy for us to avoid running the ship aground. Fifteen years ago, if you said you were a graphic designer, people asked, 'What is that?' Well, today, they tend to already know. So now people are asking, 'What are they really about? Are they tradespeople? Are they craftspeople? Are they professionals? Are they ethical?' What's our answer going to be? It seems the perfect time to be able to say, 'We're about this, we're not about that.'

When my life is over, and people are giving a eulogy at my funeral, and they say, 'A big part of who he was was a graphic designer,' do I want people to say, 'Yeah, he sure could trick people! He sure was good at lying with pictures.' Or do I want people to say, 'He used his skills as a graphic designer to help end wars, and to help make sure people had medicine and food, and to get homeless people off the streets, and to spread public health information.' There's no limit to how much good we can do with our skills. Or we can just lie to people so that they'll eat more hamburgers.

**AA:** *Or, if you do spend part of your time selling hamburgers, because that's one of your clients, then you also spend part of your time doing other work that actually has a benefit, whatever that might be. Because someone's got to sell the hamburgers, right? They're going to find someone to sell the hamburgers.*

**DB:** I think you can balance the two, and again, it comes back to your personal principles. It's probably the same balance you find at home—you sometimes eat fries, but you probably usually eat healthy food. It's the same with your work: if you ate nothing but fries all the time, you wouldn't feel good about yourself. And if you design nothing but ads for fries, you're probably not going to feel too good about yourself, either. 🍟

#### **WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THIS TOPIC?**

Do you agree with David, or do you think he's full of it? E-mail us at [editor@appliedartsmag.com](mailto:editor@appliedartsmag.com), and let us know. ~ ed.