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ADVERTISING'S INTELLECTUAL ARCHIVE

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INTERVIEWS WITH CREATIVES

David Berman
David Berman Communications
GDC-National Ethics Chair

David Berman has over 20 years of experience in graphic design and communications. Since 1984, David has worked to establish a code of ethics, which embraces social responsibility for graphic designers throughout Canada. He served as the first elected president of the Association of Registered Graphic Designers of Ontario, North America's first accredited graphic design organization, from 1997 to 1999. He drafted the association's constitution and Rules of Professional Conduct and authored Ontario's accreditation examination section on ethics and professional responsibility. In 1999, the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada named David a Fellow (the second youngest to have achieved the country's highest professional standing in this field) for his work on the Code of Ethics, accreditation and other national issues. In 2000, he was elected Vice President Ethics of the Society, and is currently the national Ethics Chair. David is dedicated to realizing graphic design's potential to help improve the human condition and the global environment. He speaks at local and international conferences about the important role graphic designers can play in enhancing social conditions.

"Christmas in July: Ethics in Advertising?"

Ihaveanidea: Ethics in Advertising? That is, to some, this may be considered an oxymoron. Comments?

David Berman: No, it is not an oxymoron at all. While some assume that the practice of advertising is unethical by nature, the majority of advertising is truthful - for instance, simple messages such as lawn signs that promote specific real estate professionals. And the famous matchbook advertisement - offering 1,000 stamps for collectors - survived the test of time and continues to be successful today.

Ihaveanidea: When did you begin an interest in the ethics of advertising? What is your role in the education and promotion of advertising ethics in Canada?

David Berman: I actually began with an interest in the social aspects of design and visual communications. Over twelve years ago, I got into a debate with a close friend about designers' responsibility to society. This discussion resulted in a naïve petition to an annual general meeting of the Ottawa chapter of the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada (www.gdc.net). Since then, my role has grown to helping develop a National Code of Ethics, and accreditation for designers (which includes a component of ethical responsibility – social and environmental concern). I was the first elected president of the Association of Registered Graphic Designers of Ontario, and the Rules of Professional Conduct we developed for this organization has positioned Canada as leading in the world design community in terms of the adoption of ethical guidelines.

Ihaveanidea: What makes an advertisement unethical? What about working in what one may term the 'grey zone'?

David Berman: When I speak in various parts of the world, I try to communicate to designers about the power they possess and the great responsibility to society that accompanies that. This is a very young profession: 95% of graphic designers who have ever lived are alive today. We therefore have the chance to define what our profession will be about – this is a great opportunity and a huge responsibility.

Some believe that the core of advertising in general is "deceit". For those in this school of thought, advertising is about lying - it's black and white. However, for those of us who see it more as shades of grey, where you draw the line between ethical or not, is simply a reflection of one's own values. The key is to not try to make a distinction between work and the rest of your life: if you simply apply the same principles at the studio and at home, it becomes clear as to where to draw the line. Having consistent principles is the mark of a true professional.

Ihaveanidea: Have you ever encountered an ethical dilemma as a designer and if so how did you react to this?

David Berman: When I first started out I was approached to design a catalogue - the client wanted this catalogue to be translated into Spanish and Arabic, and it turned out that the catalogue was for arms paraphernalia - bullets and so on! How did I approach it? Well, rather than reject it outright, I sat down and spoke with them about why they were in involved in

such a business venture. I think they went away thinking about the issue differently.

Ihaveanidea: Did you complete the project?

David Berman: No, I rejected the assignment. However, I didn't just send them away: we discussed the deeper issues first and I believe we both learned a lot.

Ihaveanidea: As some agencies may push their employees to push the boundaries of convention what 'rules' should creatives use when their executions risk 'crossing the line'?

David Berman: Design and advertising can improve a product's attractiveness, and to be noticed through the clutter, one has to make a product stand out. But this should all be done in good taste. Don't use "cheap tricks" to attract an audience: visual representations that mislead about the product's benefits and attributes. Using such tactics will not only hurt the credibility of your work and the success of the product … but in the long term, the design industry as a whole. When one is truthful, you help to build better relationships with the consumer - which can be more profitable over time than a 'quick buck'.

Ihaveanidea: Advertising may be seen by many as a manipulation of the truth, and a creation of false needs and desires. How can the advertising community change the perceptions of the industry (of marketers - who can be seen as almost 'shadier' than used car salesmen) into one of trust? …or is "the business of business is business" (Milton Friedman)?

David Berman: Advertising supports marketing as a business function. The marketplace works because advertising exists and has existed for centuries. I'm more concerned with what Naomi Klein calls the "brand bullies": those companies that push their brands and products onto an unprepared public, often in developing countries (such as Coca-Cola in Africa).

Ihaveanidea: Can one be both a success and ethical or are they mutually exclusive?

David Berman: Absolutely, in fact ethical behaviour breeds success. To be a successful creative, one must have a poised presence: confidence in your ability to come up with something wonderful right away, unclouded by internal struggles in your own psyche around your methods. And ethical business is good for your clients too because their results will be longer lasting: and successful clients lead to successful designers.

Ihaveanidea: How does the GDC help promote advertising ethics to its members and to the advertising community at large? What steps have been taken to date?

David Berman: The GDC upholds its Code of Ethics. The GDC also created accreditation for graphic designers in Canada, here in Ontario, which includes rules of professional conduct linked to provincial law. As ethics chair, I am available to discuss the subject of design ethics with business people, designers and the public at large, as these stakeholders often have questions. Various countries worldwide are examining our Code of Ethics as a template. ICOGRADA (International Council of Graphic Design Associations – http://www.icograda.org) has suggested our code as the standard for countries that are in the process of developing their own.

Ihaveanidea: On the global stage where does Canada stand in terms of ethics in advertising relative to other countries?

David Berman: We're way up there. Canada's cigarette advertising legislation goes further than anything that has come before it, and is applauded all over the planet. Naomi Klein, Canadian author of "No Logo", is a best seller worldwide. Robert L. Peters, the president of ICOGRADA, is Canadian and he has been involved in a not-for-profit organization called Design for the World (http://www.designfortheworld.org) based in Barcelona, Spain. This initiative was founded by ICOGRADA and its equivalent global organizations in other design disciplines and involves volunteers working with large corporate donations to do good where leading global social organizations (such as the Red Cross, World Health Organization,…) identify the need is greatest.

Ihaveanidea: What steps can young creatives take themselves to further promote the use ethics in advertising?

David Berman: Get involved today - don't wait. When it comes to finding the balance between one's work and professional life, many wait until they're established. By then they've got mortgages and kids to worry about. Do it now: follow your heart. You may be scared that you could lose that job or contract, but what's more likely is that you'll earn respect when you decline to do certain work because it doesn't fit with who you are … or who you want to be.

Ihaveanidea: Any last words to our readers who may be faced with an ethical dilemma in their career, as many undoubtedly will?

David Berman: When you're not sure about a message you've crafted, as yourself: could I look someone I love straight in the eye and deliver this message without flinching? If not, find a truer message. Your work and home life shouldn't be separated by a moral standpoint -

respect yourself: you'll be a better designer and a true professional for it.

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Interview by Emily Bergeron
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Journalist
Ihaveanidea Ottawa

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COMMENTS

"What's positive and negative can be two very different things. Especially at the doctors office! I think you need to follow-the-money and be ethical at the smae time. The route might be different than the face value."
Posted by jay on July 23/2003

"Sorry Jay I didn't answer to your orginal comment ... getting back .... so what about if something positive i.e. smoke alarms on firetrucks or whatever could be considered ethical ... there are various schools of thought ... one being that if the net benefits for stakeholders is + ... then if could be considered "ethical" by this standard ... ethics is so subjective .. there is no right answer ... so again it is a question how one looks in the world ... one just be needs be ready to convince stakeholders of their convictions ... do you think ads such as those that you decribed should be permitted - yes "society at large" may benefit in terms of allowing access to information such as this ... but again who benefits ... and where would it stop ... OK it's alright to put ads on firetrucks that are "positive" .... but then how do you regulate that .... next thing - ads for insurance, then the personal will kit ??? Just a comment ,,,"
Posted by Emily on July 23/2003

"Don't get me started on that one ....I've worked for the Gov ..... but then the question become .... what ethical system is better??? Many regulations like the US (then people only meet the lowest common denominator) or a system like Canada's (Code of Ethics ... but leave it up to people to choose right from wrong) .... Hmmm"
Posted by Emily on July 22/2003

"What about ads for smoke alarms on firetrucks? Or First Aid classes on Ambulances? Makes me think maybe...but then you've got the boys in Ottawa stuffing their pockets and filling their wine glasses with salesman money...I'm not sure either way."
Posted by jay on July 22/2003

"Jay - that's wild. Personally, I follow the ethical guideline .. "would it be right if everyone did this" .... the answer would be no .... what would be next ... ads on firetrucks and ambulances ??? Where would it stop?"
Posted by Emily on July 21/2003

"In a 6-4 vote this Thursday, the North Carolina Ethics Commission stopped just in time a plan by a local ad agency to provide free police cars and other public vehicles to several cities around the state if they accepted advertising on police cars. In extended discussions, commissioners decided the idea would violate the state Ethics Act. -
http://tinyurl.com/hd8w"
Posted by Jay on July 18/2003

"Canada should be proud to have people like David. The GDC is something to be proud of."
Posted by Robert on July 17/2003

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Comments

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