

Chapter 1

Tales of a Left-Brain/Right-Brain Thinker

“Ideas are only the beginning,” adults like to tell precocious youngsters. “Ideas are a dime a dozen.”

Easy enough for successful adults to say—they’ve already climbed a mountain or two. But when you’re a 19-year-old kid, born in the Bronx and raised in a small New Jersey town, and you’re not rich and you’re about to be married, good ideas that you can put to practical use are hard to come by.

It wasn’t that I lacked imagination. Like many who grew up in the 1960s, I spent a lot of time inside my own head, trying to figure out what was good and true and worthy. In my case, that project was perhaps made more difficult by my awareness, from a very early age, that I had both left-brain and right-brain interests. Part of me was attracted to a creative, aesthetic way of life—to music and art and fashion and design and writing. And another, seemingly equal part craved logic and order and ideas based in reason.

After a very early first marriage, I had less time to ponder anything. And when I became a father, at age 20, I really had to scramble. I worked all day and went to college at night, studying liberal arts and sociology. It was a tough slog: at the rate I was going, I calculated it would take me nine years to get the right degrees.

When I was 22, we had our second child. Reality and practicality loomed even larger. I recalibrated my dreams: Another 14 years of night school and I’ll have enough advanced degrees to be a high school guidance counselor. I’ll make \$12,000 a year.

Enter the wise man.

Well, that’s how it works in the myth anyway. In my case, I happened to run into a salesman. As it happened, he sold printer’s ink, but he explained that the product really didn’t matter—he just loved to sell. “Do something you love,” he told me. “The success and money will follow.”

Simple enough. But what did I love? I mean, really love? Well, if I cut through intellectual pretension and financial ambition, the answer was cars. Beginning at age 10, I learned everything I could

about them. I memorized my father's car magazines. I knew automotive statistics the way some kids know batting averages. And when the new models were about to come out, I would run to the dealerships just to see how the cars looked under their thick canvas covers.

At this point, according to myth, something else is supposed to enter: synchronicity. That is, now that you have taken the first step on the correct path, you get information that supports your choice and takes you to the next level. In my case, it was another random event—a classified ad for a job in the parts department of British Motor Corporation. This was the company that made the MG and Austin-Healey, those beautiful, classic sports cars so beloved by American automobile buffs. Okay, so it was the parts division, working with computer inventory control systems. No matter. It was cars. I went for an interview and got the job.

EUREKA! AN EARLY CBI

A year later, I had a revelation so stunningly obvious you have to wonder why nobody came up with it earlier: Sports cars, in and of themselves, were not enough for those who bought them. They wanted accessories to make them more personal and authentic. And so they ordered wood steering wheels, racing mirrors, chrome luggage racks, and more. We didn't make or sell those accessories; we just let customers order from a bunch of small specialty companies. But aha! I saw it, we could do more. We could sell those accessories through our dealer organization. And we could do one more thing: We could create a Special Edition MG model that came fully accessorized. We could expand the horizon of our business.

So there we have it: A 22-year-old whose education consists of a continuing bout with night school gets an idea. It's not a trillion-dollar idea, but it does contain an underlying concept that I have returned to over and over again: What business was I in? Specifically, was I in the business of selling parts to car dealers, or was I in the business of discovering what car owners wanted and, whatever it was,

getting it for them? If this were a business school case study, the question would be, “Am I in marketing or manufacturing?”

I WARNED YOU . . .

Back in 1965, I was simply in the enthusiasm business. I had an idea I really liked, and I wanted to see if it would work. I told my boss, who liked it enough to ask me to write a proposal. Shortly thereafter, I found myself in the office of Graham Whitehead, head of British Motors in America. He was the classic Brit: dashing, mustache, RAF demeanor. . . .

His office had no papers, only antiques. Naturally, he was neither chatty nor welcoming.

“Tell Graham your idea,” my boss said at last.

I blurted it out.

“Very interesting,” Graham said. “But I don’t see how we could do it.”

“The challenge is to coordinate with accessories suppliers,” I said. “I think we can do that—we’re sort of doing it already.”

Graham warmed ever so slightly. “Just remember—I warned you,” he said, in the most backhanded way of signaling approval I had ever heard.

Well, the 1966 MGB-GT Special sports cars were a terrific success: We sold every car we built. If we had any problem, it was supply; we had so many orders that the little shops that made wood-rim steering wheels and luggage racks couldn’t keep up with demand. We had to go as far as Australia to find a supplier.

If this were a business school case, we’d be looking for the lesson here. And I imagine it would be something about using the logistics competency of a parts department. I see a different lesson. The guy who had the idea (me) loved the product. Knew everything about it. Was buoyed by the support of others, but would have tried to make it happen anyway.

BEFORE YOU LEAP: Understand that passion is the starting point of all great creative ideas. If you are looking to make your mark by creating something new, make sure you are in a field that totally fascinates and captivates you.

Remember, too, success does not mean you become vice president for Great Ideas overnight. In my case, I followed up my triumph by continuing to work on computer-controlled inventory systems. And I kept on going to night school. The big news was that I switched my major from sociology to psychology.

LEFT BRAIN MEETS RIGHT BRAIN

Then something interesting happened. At school, I needed to choose a couple of electives to finish my degree. I chose Life Drawing and started spending an evening a week sketching nude models. My other class that term was Market Research. The conflict? For me, there was none. In what I now regard as an inflection point, I saw that creativity was the connection between art and market research—and between psychology and my job. For the first time, I sensed I could use my left and right brain in a harmonious way to do worthy, useful work.

Around this time, Volvo Cars called me about a job. What did I know about Volvo? Mostly, that my father had recently bought one because “It’s the safest car on the road, and it will last forever.” I liked that high-minded appeal, so I went there, ostensibly to start a computer inventory system. But my officemate was doing market research—which seemed much more interesting. “Nine of ten Volvos ever sold are still on the road,” he mumbled one day. “How do I prove that for our advertising?” I showed him how. Soon enough, I was spotted by a brilliant vice president of marketing named Jim LaMarre, and he asked me to become director of marketing research. It was 1968. I was 24, fearless, and bulletproof.

Part of my job was to update our ad agency on who was buying Volvos and why. Other marketing research directors liked to present decks loaded with numbers; I liked to tell stories. I felt I was the

ombudsman for consumers because, after all, the knowledge of what will work resides somewhere in the consumer experience. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Volvo had a riveting consumer profile: More than 80 percent of its buyers were college graduates. Which put them in an interesting political sphere. If you were a Volvo owner and lived on the East Coast, you were on the left. If you lived on the West Coast, you were on the right. And if you lived in the middle, Volvo was probably the last car you would think of driving.

I found all this customer information fascinating. I talked about it all the time with the agency people. Which leads me to yet another lesson:

BEFORE YOU LEAP: Recognize that sharing information leads to trust. And trust, as we shall soon see, is the first and most necessary building block of creative collaboration and creative thinking.

After taking a course in marketing, I did what I could never have imagined doing a few years before. I signed up for an MBA in it. A child of the '60s turns. But a Young Turk (as they used to call us) with the beginning of a reputation for creative thinking going for an advanced degree is often a hot property. I soon had three job offers—from Volkswagen, from a New York City research firm, and from a very new and small advertising agency, which now had the Volvo account. Marvin Slovic, one of the founders of that agency, was a wonderfully intelligent and persuasive man, and we had come to know each other during a series of Volvo meetings.

ANYTHING BUT AN ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE

I asked myself: All other things being equal, where can I do something that matters, something that suits my '60s sense of social responsibility? And I kept coming back to Volvo, a company with social responsibility in its DNA. Sweden should not be able to support a car company—the entire country has just 8 million people, about the size of New York City. And yet it had two: Volvo and Saab. Both emphasized people values. Volvo cared about saving lives. A

lightbulb went on when I realized that if it weren't for advertising, Americans would not know about Volvo. So I told the agency I would take the job I never dreamed I would. . . . I was going to work in an ad agency. An agency called Scali McCabe Sloves.

My first order of business was to impress upon my new boss that I had no intention of continuing with only car companies. "No Volvo," I insisted to Marvin Sloves. "Start me on another client. And please, please don't ever call me an account executive." My perception was that the account guys just carry around the bag with everyone else's ideas in them. Marvin said, "Don't worry, Bob, you can be anything you want and have any title but mine. I'll teach you style and you'll teach me substance, and before long . . . you'll be farting through velvet!"

I realized, more than anything, I wanted to bring the voice of people, of consumers, of real-life experience to this brilliant group of young creative people. I did not want to sell ads to clients, I wanted to sell ideas to creative thinkers who could transform them into something that would Make the World a Better Place. Another generation would call this "account planning," and it would become the center of creativity in London and Los Angeles and New York. But for me, it was just the boy of the '60s still wanting to do social good . . . although it was now 1971.

That is how I found myself standing on a chicken farm in Salisbury, Maryland, listening to a curious-looking man named Frank Perdue tell us about the excellence of his flock. He impressed on us that his chickens were better than all the others, and that meant he could charge a premium—a penny a pound more. He was very credible and his speech tough but polished. It should have been considering how often he had given it. . . . Perdue had talked to every agency in New York in search of one that would take his puny \$200,000 ad budget and help him on his way to the poultry—and creative—hall of fame.¹

Perdue talked nonstop. Very quickly, we learned all about chickens—and all about Frank Perdue. As loving as he was toward

his chickens in their brief, nine-week stay on earth, he was just that demanding of his employees. Woe to the truck driver who was 10 minutes late taking Frank's chickens to market. As we watched this remarkable man, an idea began to form—an idea that would eventually make Perdue's fortune. You know it, everyone knows it: "It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken." It was the result of understanding deeply all that Perdue and his company believed in and all that consumers would find good and real. It was brilliantly written by Ed McCabe and art-directed by Sam Scali. It was simply a great advertising idea. It was the beginning of an entirely new way of thinking creatively about even the most mundane of businesses.

BEFORE YOU LEAP:

- Listen, listen, listen, and learn. No advertising executive knows as much about a client's business as the client does. But it is our job to unlock that knowledge and the DNA of the company and discover how it can be used to creatively connect consumers to brands. Become a power listener.
- And know this: There is no such thing as a mundane product or mundane business. Only mundane ideas.

One might marvel at what a clever agency we were to make such groundbreaking advertising for Frank Perdue. And there is no shortage of agency people who will step forward to take credit for building companies like Perdue into giant brands. But who are the real heroes? The clients are! They are the brave ones who create new and better products with no assurance the public will want them. They are the ones who seek great creative partners with whom to make magic. They are the ones who demand courageous creativity from their advertising agencies. And later, they are the ones who never say, "That's good enough."

BEFORE YOU LEAP: Realize that in advertising, as in any good relationship, it always takes two. Clients and agencies. One can't lead, one can't follow. Both have to pull equally and together. Then, magic happens.

A CREATIVE REVOLUTION

For 13 years at Scali, from 1971 to 1984, I worked with a legion of brilliant colleagues and a stream of great clients: Castrol, Conair, Continental Airlines, Data General, Maxell, Nikon, Olivetti, Perdue, Pioneer, Playboy, Sharp, Singer, Sperry Corporation, Texas Air, Volvo, Warner Amex Cable. Creative colleagues included Ray Alban, Lars Anderson, Ron Berger, Larry Cadman, Earl Cavanah, John Danza, George Dusenbury, Mike Drazen, Frank Fleizach, Bruce Fierstein, Geoffrey Frost, Ed McCabe, Scott Miller, Ray Myers, Tom Nathan, Bob Needleman, Joe O'Neill, Jim Peretti, Bob Reitzfield, Sam Scali, Joe Schindelman, Tom Thomas, Rodney Underwood, Bob Wilvers—and many, many more extremely talented associates.

It was a wonderful time to be in advertising. The 1960s and 1970s saw a creative revolution in our business, a shift from the large-scale, quantitatively driven decision-making agencies to advertising that was more human, more real, with more humor. A small number of agencies at the forefront—Doyle Dane Bernbach, Lois Holland Callaway, Papert Koenig Lois, Jack Tinker & Partners—in turn spawned a whole new set of agencies, including Scali, Ally & Gargano, Della Femina, Wells Rich Greene, and Chiat/Day.

The revolution gave us permission to be more creative, and the new agencies helped to shape the future of advertising creativity: DDB's work on Volkswagen; Wells Rich Greene's work for great brands like Alka-Seltzer, American Motors Corporation, and Braniff International Airways; Ally & Gargano's work for MCI, Federal Express, and Dunkin' Donuts. For the first time, clients came to understand and believe that creative thinking could be a superior strategy.

During those years, I also had three different experiences of what agency life is like—working in a small agency, a midsize one, and eventually a big one. They all had the same name: Scali McCabe Sloves. In 1974 *Advertising Age* named Scali Agency of the Year,² and I moved from vice president marketing research director to senior vice president

client services to executive vice president and managing director. When Ogilvy & Mather bought Scali in 1977 to start a second international network, I was tapped to become COO and to run the entire U.S. agency. My early marriage ended after 13 years, and I was single and successful in New York City. I spent increased time with my two sons and started seeing more of the world and enjoying the energy of New York nightlife in the early 1980s. Studio 54 glowed, and for the next seven years I continued to grow and enjoy the wonder of the creative brilliance of great clients and creative thinkers with great ideas.

Despite changing times and my changing roles, the learning only became clearer.

BEFORE YOU LEAP: Understand these three things:

- There are great products, made by wonderful people who care deeply, and it is no social sin helping them become better known. It is good and important work.
- Creative advertising is not made only by famous advertising talents. More often, it is made by a wonderful collaboration of people who deeply understand the client's business and who are passionate about what they do.
- The legendary film producer Dino De Laurentiis used to say, "America is only 50 percent of the world." Though 50 percent still seems excessive, it is imperative to reach out to the rest of the world.

Suddenly I was 39. Ed Ney, chairman of Young & Rubicam, convinced me I should be running a significant agency, one with global reach. Y&R had a plan to build a second global network by creating a joint venture with French advertising giant Eurocom. They would put together all of the Marsteller agencies Y&R owned with all of the Havas agencies Eurocom owned and call it HCM. It was the beginning of the real globalization of advertising. They wanted a president and CEO worldwide who had come from neither organization. I signed on.

BEYOND MADISON AVENUE

In the fall of 1984 I left Scali McCabe Sloves and began a journey into the "real" world of advertising. It was a wonderful,

eye-opening experience. Another inflection point. The realization that the world of creativity is really that—and that what was happening in London and Paris and Brazil was a whole lot more exciting than what was happening in New York. It was exciting to work with international clients like Danone, Peugeot, and Air France.

A couple years and one merger later, I realized I had had a great and transforming short-term experience, but that the situation had the potential to be very unrewarding over the long term. The experience also helped to crystallize something for me: I knew that I wanted to start my own agency, but I wanted to do it right. I resigned and, after 10 years of New York bachelorhood, proposed to a young producer named Stacy Chiarello, the love of my life. I took my first summer off since high school to spend at our home on Martha's Vineyard and hoped the phone wouldn't ring. But it did.

FIVE PRINCIPALS, NO CLIENTS

The man on the phone was Ron Berger. In 1986, Ron and two of his colleagues from Ally & Gargano, Tom Messner and Barry Vetere, had joined with Wally Carey Jr. to found Messner Vetere Berger Carey. Ron, Tom, and Barry had not only shared responsibility for creative direction at Ally & Gargano, they were also central members of the landmark Tuesday Team, the marketing and advertising engine behind Ronald Reagan's 1984 reelection campaign.

Soon enough, we agreed I would join as president and my name would be added to the banner after some months. So there I was, in a new agency with five principals and no major clients and no immediate prospects of generating any major income—all five of us had agreed to draw no salary for the first two years. What was so enticing? A flat organization, with no CEO. An entirely new business model, more like a law firm than a boutique, where we could add partners as we wished. A principal on every account. No media-buying department—we would subcontract that. Strategic planning was more important; we'd burrow into each client's business so deeply that we could be strategic partners in the truest sense.

All was not right with the industry in the later 1980s, and my partners and I represented an alternative. It was a time of acquisitions and mergers for big agencies, and the astronomical prices being paid for agencies had completely disintegrated whatever trust clients and agencies once shared. The commissions agencies made on media buys only fueled the perception of greed. And clients hated it when consolidation led to turnover and people on their account left. There was an interest in agencies that offered something different. We would show them we were different by putting a partner on every account and making clients part of the strategic process. Above all, we would always do what was right for the client.

Being different came naturally to us. There was no other agency we really wanted to model ourselves after. In our view, those agencies that did truly groundbreaking creative work—and were rewarded for it—had a tendency to look to the past when trying to get new work. They wanted to see what they had done and then try to replicate it. To us, that kind of thinking represented a step backward. We wanted to look forward to where we might go and take our clients with us, not back to where we had been.

NEW TIMES, NEW TOOLS

As we grew, our offices even looked different from those of our competitors. We had a computer on every desk. We were, I think, the first agency to use e-mail. We certainly didn't have to; there were only 10 of us—we could have yelled across the room! And we were the first to insist that our clients get wired, too. Our mantra was communication, lots of it. And speed. We liked research, but we didn't live and die by it; our goal was to help clients move their businesses forward.

The first major client that gave us the chance to show our stuff was MCI. Tom Messner had helped create its original and brilliant position at Ally & Gargano. But times had changed. Whereas long-distance phone service had been a commodity, MCI wanted to be a brand.⁴ We came to the strategic conclusion that choosing a

long-distance provider is a lot closer to voting in an election than it is to making an outright purchase. In this case, the candidates were three phone carriers, and the incumbent was AT&T.

We created advertising for MCI as if it were a candidate for office, tailoring our commercials to respond to each new spot from AT&T. We hired a political strategist and a pollster to work with us: Roger Ailes, the famed Republican strategist, and Peter Hart, the exceptional Democratic pollster. We conducted monthly polls, and we shifted our creative based on the findings. But things really didn't start to heat up until we shifted the discussion to savings, with advertising like the electronic board in Times Square that ticked away, showing the billions of dollars Americans were saving with MCI. That really blew the client away—it was an entirely different way of looking at its business.

Soon MCI had such a solid relationship with its customers that it could offer what I would consider the first long-distance brand ever: Friends & Family. That invocation of intimacy was possible for MCI. For AT&T? No way.

This account was significant for another reason: It defined the way we work best. That is, in rooms totally dedicated to the single problem of the particular client. I am talking war rooms. Lots of “windows” of research and information on the walls. Lots of oversized blank paper on stands. And then lots of scribbled notes, odd facts, and first-draft perceptions filling those pages. It is an exciting environment: a literal storehouse of knowledge, with a concentration of energy that feeds on itself. Very much what you would expect to find in a political campaign. Not something you would imagine seeing in an ad agency—at least not then.

Winning the MCI account was a long shot. We couldn't compete on size; we had to be smarter. Winning the account gave us our first major client. We had competed with intelligence and with courage. Some part of that courage came from a sense of financial security. Even before the MCI win, we had said yes to a suitor that had approached us. The French company RSCG wanted us to sell

them an interest in the agency. For five fortysomething ad execs, the idea of financial stability was a no-brainer. Not for ourselves . . . for the idea of the agency. We would have the freedom to invest in new technology and pursue new ways of pitching business. The larger benefit was that, right from the start, we could be an international player. It was time to play ball on a global scale.

THE BIG LEAGUES

A few years passed. We were reunited with clients from our former lives (yes, including Volvo). We connected with new ones, among them Nasdaq and New Balance. By age nine, we had grown to 16 partners and 350 other really talented people, and a lot of people had written about us. *Fortune* called us the new breed of agency, lean and fast . . . with partners focused on clients' businesses.⁵ We had built the agency on a different platform, and that was enabling us to do better work. It was a platform in which everything and everyone is accessible, everyone has access to the same information, and everyone is empowered to make things happen.

BEFORE YOU LEAP: Level the place. If you knock down walls (literally) and do away with doors and traditional hierarchies, you will foster an environment and a culture that promotes creative collaboration on the highest level—and allows for greater and more courageous thinking.

Our nontraditional structure meant we had more insights about our clients' businesses and opportunities. We had more insightful strategies. And we had more clients who had come to believe that as their partners, we could play a deep and meaningful role in their future success.

CARTE BLANCHE

We merged once more, this time with Eurocom (the other France-based agency group from my HCM days) and its New York agency Della Femina McNamee, and became Messner Vetere Berger McNamee Schmetterer (MVBMS) Euro RSCG. A couple of years later I was asked to become chairman and CEO of Euro RSCG

Worldwide. It hadn't been on my list of things to do, but it was 1997 and I had this passionate belief that we were living in an incredibly interesting and exciting time. How could anyone deny that? The explosion of the Internet, the impact of the digital revolution, globalization (and the idea that we are all living within one degree of separation), the deregulation and privatization of state-owned media and industries, consolidation in virtually every industry . . . all of it spelled enormous opportunity. I guess I'm still in the enthusiasm business.

My French partner, chairman and CEO of Havas Alain de Pouzilhac, told me, "Bob, we need you to lead Euro RSCG and make it a truly global network . . . and you have a white card." I thought for a moment and understood: *carte blanche*. I played that card early and often in an attempt to communicate better, faster. We were now a broad-based global services company of more than 10,000 people worldwide, with divisions for advertising, direct marketing, interactive, public relations, and promotions. This platform of agencies could become the launching pad in a major way for what we had been experimenting with at MVBMS years earlier. On a much broader scale, we could make clients part of the strategic process. And we had the resources to execute creative ideas in any form, in any media, anywhere in the world.

We began to hold managers' meetings every 100 days to get people talking and to reinforce that vision. We invited creative thinkers to join us. One was Thomas Krens, director of the Guggenheim Museum. He had a completely radical concept of museums and had brilliantly applied breakthrough creative thinking to that world. It added fuel to a concept that was beginning to gel in my own left-brain/right-brain mind: that of harnessing creativity to direct business strategy, not just communication strategy.

"Creative Business Ideas" were just a few meetings away. The penny was about to drop.