

Herb Rotfeld's Postscript: How I Met the Late Howard Gossage

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Our first assignment in the graduate class over three decades ago was a small task, to pick a leading name from the advertising business and discuss that person's "philosophy" of advertising communications. This required looking at their speeches or other publications, gaining a bit of insight in reference to their own biographies, and hopefully, applying some of the academic theories that were current when these people were active. I soon stopped by the instructor's office to tell the young Associate Professor Kim Rotzoll that I wanted to cover Rosser Reeves. "No," Kim said, giving me a file of news clipping and magazine articles, "You want to do Gossage."

Who? By this time, Gossage had been dead for a few years, his name did not appear in any textbooks, and all I thought was "That weird guy who inflicted Marshal McLuhan on us?" Reeves was a good choice, or at least an easier choice, or so I thought. Reality in Advertising was straight forward and easy to read, everyone talks about U.S.P., and, this was my hook, I had obtained a copy of Rotzoll's M.A. thesis from the Pennsylvania State University in which he studied Reeve's philosophy and work. (In those days long before home computers, Google and web searches, University Microfilms helped anyone with a good library access to all sorts of hidden treasures.)

But my assignment became Gossage. I started reading Kim's files, filled with articles from old copies of Ramparts or Harper's Magazines, and Penn State's School of Journalism alumni newsletter. In the library, I found a dust-covered copy of a 1962 book co-authored with Miller Harris, Dear Miss Afflerbach or The Postman Hardly Ever Rings 11,342 Times. I also found a library copy of another book published in German, Ist die Werbung noch zu retten? ["Can advertising be saved?"], but it wasn't translated, and since I didn't speak that language, it didn't help on the assignment.

But I got hooked. And I still am.

As a wonderful device for a class writing assignment, Gossage was a wealth of quotable lines, and afterwards I began a lifelong habit of "borrowing" these lines (with full credit to their creator), adapting his descriptions of the world or using his style in research presentations or class lectures. To this day, I sometimes take one of his articles and show it to students with the date removed and then-current event references covered, as they can be lead to think Gossage's comments were composed last month instead of in the middle of the last century. Though I lacked both his talent and genius, I saw some aspect of his thinking or work reflected in my own encounters with the professional world, since he also was a role model for not letting business needs or profits force him to lose sight of ethical standards.

Many other business professionals write books that are more about themselves than providing special perspectives on the business world. Rosser Reeves book, and even Ogilvy's Confessions of an Advertising Man, while providing many timeless insights on how to inform and persuade consumers with effective messages, were both written in part as sales brochures for their themselves and their agencies.

Unlike most other professionals who write their tales about their life and times in the advertising, Gossage's written record remains timeless and because it is not about his work and life, but rather, his view of the business itself. Even his own creative philosophy, his values about what makes good advertising, are logical extensions of his strong and thoughtful view of advertising in society. What Gossage preached, what he practiced, and most important, the examples he presented of socially responsible practice, imply why advertising in contemporary society should be an important part of all advertising education and business scholarship and not just a minor area of research for faculty and graduate students.

Still, the question might be, "Why Gossage?" Some people wondered then or now why his name should appear on a list of leading names in the advertising business.

In his lifetime, he was not a major force in the advertising world. His largest accounts were mostly small spending firms or organizations whose ad campaigns would rarely be recalled by anyone born after 1950. His advertising agency, Freeman Mander & Gossage, never employed more than a dozen people and went out of business shortly after he died of leukemia in 1969. He was not a leader of any business organizations; he has never presented a creative philosophy with corporate buzz words to catch the fancy of a generation of copywriters.

This is not to say that he was not a successful advertising man. A member of the Advertising Copywriter's Hall of Fame, he has been recognized as creating many legendary (though unorthodox) campaigns.

But this is all aside the point.

It is unusual for a practitioner to be able to see much beyond his or her day-to-day dealings, but Gossage possessed such vision. And he made it quite clear that he did not like much of what he saw. "Is Advertising Worth Saving?" directly answers that "From an economic point of view I don't think that most of it is. From an aesthetic point of view I'm damn sure it's not; it is thoughtless, boring, and there is simply too much of it..."

Many practitioners might criticize of the business, or preach against certain evils when interviewed, but they later carry out the same practices they decried. But Gossage knew why they did such things. "Advertising, being a very young thing, is as curiously innocent of the shape of evil as a 10 year old. There is no real comprehension of sin. The industry, it is true, is awash with condemnations of bad practice, but one gets the same feeling as when a child evangelist preaches against fornication. It is unlikely that he knows what he is talking about."

Much of what advertising scholars recall about Gossage's writing, or even his advertising, relate to repeated criticisms of various business practices or of the business itself. Kim Rotzoll used to say that Gossage was that unusual mix of a successful practitioner and devastating critic of the business. He was a great

iconoclast, who would inexplicably be repeatedly invited to business organizations' meetings to say bad things about the business. Maybe some people see critical statements become credible only if voiced by those working in the business, but Gossage provides more than criticisms for its own sake. He provides great insight about the advertising business and its constraints and, in turn, shows how understanding the business can help make the practitioner better on the job.

Even more important, he repeatedly showed how one can do what is "right," what is socially responsible, and still be a success. He even made his criticisms of the business part of his copywriting successes.

His ads for Rover motor cars were extensions of his criticisms of the entire outdoor advertising industry, with a grossly indirect headline, "How Do You Feel About Billboards?" His award winning ads for Fina service stations were based on a primary recognition that all service stations were virtually identical, saying just that with a slogan, "If you're driving down the road and you see a Fina station and it's on your side so you don't have to make a U turn through traffic and there aren't six cars waiting and you need gas or something, please stop in."

Some of his arguments are clearly dated, but that is because some details of the world surely must evolve since the period in which these articles were first written, during the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson administrations. However, the issues raised and perspectives discussed still have relevance to many current activities in the advertising business.

Gossage's basic philosophy of advertising stressed the importance of a single advertising message delivered with respect for the intelligence and values of its audience. An advertiser who prepares an interesting and entertaining ad would no more have to run it multiple times than the newspaper has a need to run the same page one headline day after day. After all, he noted "Nobody reads ads. People read what interests them, and sometimes it's an ad." He repeatedly noted how treating the audience like captives for your sales pitch is asking them to tune you out. Back in the 1960s, few people seemed to pay much attention to his admonitions. He criticized many business approaches as created under a mentality that advertising is shooting fish in a barrel, "But the fish are learning to swim faster and developing armor plate."

Clearly, his discussion of advertising quality, and how so much of it is too damn boring, has special relevance to discussions of more current "problems" of commercial "zapping" or the basic problem of how to show ads in movie theaters without having the patrons tear the screens down in disgust. Today, remote controls and various time-shifting video recorders make viewer avoidance of commercial a physically measurable act. It should be intuitively obvious that the overabundance of dull and repetitive commercials must be playing a role in the decline of movie theater attendance in favor of home viewing, as well as the growth of satellite radio and commercial zapping television audiences. Gossage often noted that his greatest arguments were with clients who wished to waste extra money showing the same ads extra times when no one would care.

There also are basic concerns about how or why the media decide which ads to carry. One does not read about Gossage having problems with advertising clearance, though he knew and understood a great deal about how those charged with a vehicle's standards and practices operate as opposed to most modern copywriters who seem to prefer warfare with the managers charged with deciding which advertising

messages are acceptable for their vehicles. In fact, instead of having problems with advertising being acceptable for publication or broadcast, his ads sometimes ran in places that normally would not accept his client's product category.

For example, Scientific American did not accept liquor advertising, but did accept one of his ads for Irish Distillers International. His ads also generated their own news value for the sponsor, granting publicity value and audience interest that greatly outdistanced direct communication of the first media buy. He noted that he was getting comments on one campaign eight years after it stopped as if it was still active. But noticing his specific criticisms and details of his sample portfolio are beside the point. These are all mere details. The beauty of Gossage's insight is found in the breadth of his vision, his ability to describe and understand how so many different people see the world.

He discussed how people in different advertising jobs see the world or their work (e.g. "How to Be an Art Director" or "How Can an Art Director Become an Advertising Man?"), and with his discussion, comes insight into how the job is done. He can describe the limits of most ad practitioners' alleged goals for "social responsibility," and even how advertising can play a mystical, magical role in people's lives as they decide what product to buy ("That Old Black, White, or Pango Peach Magic"). He understood not just how the business operates, but also, how that business practice influences our entire media system ("Our Fictitious Freedom of the Press," "How to Look at a Magazine," and "How to Look at Billboards").

At its core, a collection of Gossage writings present a critique of advertising as an institution. The criticisms are basic and enduring. His insight is timeless.

The first Gossage quotation that I recall noted how we are all perceptual prisoners of our environments. "In the ordinary course of events we are not aware of our environment any more than a fish is aware of his. We don't know who discovered water, but we're pretty sure it wasn't a fish." Gossage was the fish in the "sea" of the advertising business, but he clearly discussed the nature of his water.

When people say how they dislike advertising, they start to present their list of most obnoxious ads. Gossage presents the faults with the institution itself. Most people criticize outdoor advertising on aesthetic grounds; Gossage lambastes the very idea that we blithely accept something to intrude into our basic line of sight whose sole reason for existence is a sales message. His discussions about people with different types of jobs often refer to the world views that people bring to the job itself: the lack of practitioner thought beyond day to day money making concerns; the commission system; how art directors see ad words not as writing, but as forms to fit into a page.

But at a more basic level, he noted how easy it is for an advertising person to treat customers with such disrespect. David Ogilvy said, "The consumer is not an idiot. She is your wife." Yet Gossage was more accurate in noting that it is easy to not think of the audience as a real person. He wrote, "When advertisers speak of consumers they think they mean People, but they don't. A consumer is a functional being designed to use whatever it is you have to sell. . . .; all mouth or belly, but with just one foot in these hydromatic days. His structure will, of course, vary considerably depending on whether one is selling toothpaste, brassieres, or toilet paper." It is easy to not think of people when your concern is a target, an amorphous blob of humanity that may (or may not) buy your product.

Or take the large business scandal of 2005, the allegations of falsifications of time sheets in the Ogilvy and Mather billing scandal. Of course, the common method of agency compensation in Gossage's day was the commission system, and he frequently attacked the illogical nature of paying an agency as a percentage of how much the client spends. Even the much-touted new performance-based compensation systems use the old commission mentality for a starting point. Yet it is doubtful that Gossage would have approved of the common system of time-sheets and hourly pay, since by his logic, if he is doing good work, the client should be spending less every year on media, the agency should be working less, and agency compensation should go up. As I watched an account executive from a top-20 agencies get grilled by client for every small and petty line on the time sheets, I recalled that Gossage would have said the work should be by the quality of the job, not the half-hours put into it.

As I said, Gossage's observations about the business itself are timeless.

Quite simply, practitioners drift into their own myopic little worlds, seeing or understanding little beyond daily business requirements. However, try to conceive Gossage coming up with his ad campaigns and major successes without his understanding of the big picture.

Gossage often said that you can't teach someone to be creative or how to be a good copywriter. His firm remained small because did not believe he could teach people the "how to" aspects of his business. However, the secret of success might rest on being a bit of a generalist, of knowing how all the parts in the surrounding area fit together. A practitioner who understands the big picture stands a better chance of being successful. At the very least, he or she might question the value or nature of things they do, and be more likely to only engage in more desirable business practices.

Marketing teachers often lament how business education should raise the quality of marketing practice, yet they often see the solution as providing better business training in the classroom. After reading Gossage, one clearly sees how that might merely make matters worse.

Across the nation, students seek a magic key into a business career by a college major with a job title. Students who might otherwise study English, major in journalism. Students who are interested in art or music, major in advertising. If the interest is social science, the major is marketing. For these students, course titles as job descriptions take the place of education value. They aim to remain know nothings with business "skills" while understanding little of the world in which that business exists.

After reading the insight and successes that made the Gossage legacy, one realizes that the business education must have a core of critical analysis of business practices, not job training. Marketing education can get some students to see a collection of business practices, to see how the best and most knowledgeable of practitioners can respond and make decisions. However, only through a much broader understanding of things in general, of acting as an outstanding generalist, can the nature and values of business practices ever hope to be improved.

There should not be any doubt that a collection of Gossage's writings is important reading. He never "studied" advertising, as was the case for other successful practitioners of his day. However, unlike other practitioners, his insight and examples show how understanding the "big picture" of the business can help improve the quality of all aspects of business practice.