The Maverick of Mid-Century Madison Avenue

by [Jeff Plude](#) (March 2020)

Ad man walking down Madison Avenue, circa 1950, ©Ivan Dmitri/Michael Ochs Archives

I received a book this past Christmas that reminded me of a dinner my wife and I had a few years back with an attorney she used to be a secretary for and his wife. I asked him what he was reading, and he said *Confessions of an Advertising Man*.

At first I was a little taken aback. My wife had told me he was interested in the Civil War, so I expected something along

those lines. Or something to do with movies, he and his wife used to go to the movies every week and he was even an extra in the remake of *Billy Bathgate* when it was filmed in Saratoga Springs.

Then I remembered my wife had also told me that in the three years after he graduated from Williams and before he went to law school at Duke he moved to Manhattan to be a copywriter (he also went to Los Angeles to be an actor). That would've been in the early to mid-seventies, in the wake of the *Madmen* era, when David Ogilvy, who wrote *Confessions* and known as the "Father of Advertising," strode along Madison Avenue with his unique brand of *savoir-faire* and street smarts.

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- **The Maverick of Mid-Century Madison Avenue**
- **Brad Pitt's Oscar and the Risks of Masculinity**
- **The True Cost of Borderline Personality Disorder**

But the attorney was a high-strung, nervous, fastidious type of guy and soon found himself over his creative head. And so he headed off to the secure shores of civil law—at least it was relatively secure back in those days—in the placid but dull backwaters of upstate New York.

So he became a lawyer but was never quite satisfied, I think, always dreaming—still dreaming (he was only a couple of years from retirement when we met them for dinner) of life high up in a heady skyscraper facing down a typewriter like a commercial soldier of fortune with only his wits and willpower as weapons. "The Road Not Taken" and all that . . . except he

took the road well-traveled. But whether “that has made all the difference” for him in reverse, only he knows.

Anyhow I had never seen an episode of *Madmen*, since I quit watching TV around the time it came on the air, but I’d certainly read about it, being immensely popular, and even saw some clips online. It was 2007 and the internet was firmly entrenched, with social media and the iPhone in their infancy, and a nostalgia was beginning to be dredged up for the good old days of smart suits and slicked down short hair and three or four or more Martini lunches.

The internet had driven me kicking and whimpering into marketing, advertising’s fraternal twin, or more precisely into what’s now known as “content marketing,” and less often as “brand journalism.” And I suddenly found myself studying everything I could about copywriting, which was part of the foundation of content marketing along with journalism, the industry that I had come from. I’d always looked my nose down at advertising—a necessary nuisance at best and unavoidable evil at worst to sell the newspapers I worked for.

Advertising is now suffering the same terminal prognosis as the newspapers and magazines it once served and depended on in a symbiotic relationship. I recently saw it on one of those lists of jobs that were disappearing, along with print reporters. In fact if it weren’t for TV commercials, which Mr. Ogilvy profited greatly from but seemed to have little affection for, it seems as if advertising as he knew it would hardly exist. If only he could’ve seen this year’s vaunted Super Bowl spots (I watched the game free online). They were as inane and tasteless as ever.

But once upon a time advertising commanded grudging respect, at least from the clients it generated enormous profits for, if not from the public it sought to influence, or manipulate, as some would say. And Mr. Ogilvy was one of that dubious trade's most commanding and colorful wizards—cultured, arrogant, charming, blunt. He had a flair for the dramatic. *Confessions*, which was published in 1963, only added to the lore.

One look at the cover of his "Little Red Book," like Chairman Mao's in importance, according to one of Mr. Ogilvy's former "young turks" who wrote the introduction to the latest edition, shows exactly who you're dealing with. It's a black-and-white shot of the agency chief sitting on the far end of a muted dark sofa against a gray background, his head and far shoulder softly lit: his dark suit jacket has a silk triangle popping from the lapel pocket; his cuffs have just the right amount showing to set off the cuff links; a white shirt is topped by a compact four-in-hand knot of a lighter colored tie; his short dark hair is precisely parted and slicked back over a finely chiseled clean-shaven face of what may pass for a bust of a Roman patrician; his head is slightly tilted with eyes looking up and off to the other side; his high forehead is furrowed, like someone has just said something questionable; he pensively fingers both arms of his stylish glasses between both his hands. The only accessory missing is his pipe.

It's an intriguing portrait—a successful ad. It shows just the right blend of debonair, gravitas, wryness. He looks every inch the English gentleman, aristocrat. You can almost hear the British accent. You want to know who this guy is.

Which makes it all the more impressive that Mr. Ogilvy became a titan of American advertising. Such an undertaking requires a deep psychological understanding of the target culture that is difficult if not impossible for a foreigner to acquire.

But he was no stranger to cultural displacement. Born in England in 1911, he went to public school in Scotland after his father had a financial setback. He attended Oxford on a history scholarship but dropped out after two years. Then he crossed the channel to Paris and trained as an apprentice chef at the Hotel Majestic. Seemingly far from his Scottish heritage and eventual vocation, it turned out to be a transformative experience for Mr. Ogilvy.

He says he modeled his leadership style of Ogilvy, Benson & Mather (later just Ogilvy & Mather) on the *maître* of this culinary *atelier*. In fact Mr. Ogilvy spends the first six pages of the first chapter of *Confessions* (which is only about 170 pages) showing exactly how this exacting, formidable Frenchman not only ran one of the finest kitchens on the planet, but inspired one of the greatest ad men of the twentieth century.

Monsieur Pitard commanded the thirty-seven recruits in his "brigade" like it was the French Foreign Legion for food, all from his post in his glass-walled office:

> M. Pitard ruled with a rod of iron, and we were terrified of him. There he sat in his glass cage, the *gros bonnet*, the arch symbol of authority. Whenever I made a mistake in

> my work, I would look up to see if his gimlet eye had noticed it.
>
> Cooks, like copywriters, work under ferocious pressures, and are apt to be quarrelsome. I doubt whether a more easygoing boss could have prevented our rivalries from breaking into violence.

Occasionally the *grand homme* would emerge to cook a dish to perfection in front of the grunts. Likewise, Mr. Ogilvy says that as the head of his agency he still wrote an ad now and then so that his copywriters would know "that my hand has not lost its cunning." That cunning was on dazzling display in iconic ads like the mysterious man for Hathaway Shirts (just before the first photo shoot Mr. Ogilvy ducked in a store on a whim and bought the black eyepatch), the suave Commander Whitehead and "Schweppervescence" for Schweppes, and the subdued but daring Rolls-Royce headline: "At 60 miles an hour the loudest noise in this new Rolls-Royce comes from the electric clock."

M. Pitard detested carelessness; he fired three *pâtissiers* in a month when their brioche caps didn't rise evenly. He was stingy with praise, but when it did come you were his "slave." He was a stickler for cleanliness: twice a day Mr. Ogilvy had to not merely scrub the larder table, but to *plane* it. Needless to say, no messy desks were allowed at Ogilvy, Benson & Mather. M. Pitard also lived in a *chateau*, which inspired his troops to follow their leader down the golden-bricked road. When Mr. Ogilvy died in 1999 at eighty-eight, he took his last breath at home, which just happened to be a French chateau.

But more than anything else about M. Pitard, it was his example of sheer industry that impressed Mr. Ogilvy.

> I found my sixty-three hours bending over a red-hot stove so exhausting that I had to spend my day off lying on my back in a meadow, looking at the sky. But Pitard worked *seventy-seven* hours a week, and took only one free day a fortnight.
>
> (This is about my schedule today. I figure that my staff will be less reluctant to work overtime if I work longer hours than they do . . .)

After a year, Mr. Ogilvy apparently had had enough of the hautest of *haute cuisine* and headed back to England to sell cooking stoves. He was such a crack salesman that he was asked to write a manual to help others. On the merits of that, his older brother, who worked at an ad agency, got him a job as an account executive.

In the early years of Ogilvy, Benson & Mather, which was founded in 1949, Mr. Ogilvy spent most of his time preparing and delivering presentations to prospective clients. Later he was in a position to flout these “hoedowns.”

For instance, one time his agency was up against four others for an account with KLM Royal Dutch Airlines. Mr. Ogilvy was their first stop. He started out by saying he had no spec

campaign to show them. Instead he wanted to hear about their problems. Then they could visit his four competitors, and if KLM liked what any one of them had created, the airlines' choice was easy. If not, come back and hire his agency. Then they'd start to work on it.

Guess who got the account?

Ever the raconteur, he recounts many instances of his bold, unpredictable personality overcoming resistance or turning the tide of a campaign. He was not lacking in self-esteem. His gambits weren't always winners, but they were usually memorable.

That's not to say that Mr. Ogilvy didn't do his homework. He revered research. But he also knew that a copywriter does not thrive by numbers alone. The ingredients of what he calls his creative process are simple but not easy. Sounding like William Blake (*Confessions* is highly seasoned with quotations from literary and historical notables), he says most businessmen are severely lacking in imagination "because they are unable to escape the tyranny of reason." Not much of a logician himself ("I am almost incapable of logical thought"), Mr. Ogilvy discovered how to capitalize on his intuition.

> I hear a great deal of music. I am on friendly terms with John Barleycorn. I take long hot baths. I garden. I go into retreat among the Amish. I watch birds. I go for long walks in the country. And I take frequent vacations, so that my brain can lie fallow—no golf, no cocktail parties, no tennis, no bridge, no concentration; only a bicycle.

> While thus employed in doing nothing, I receive a constant stream of telegrams from my unconscious, and these become the raw material for my advertisements.

It's curious indeed that this savvy business executive, wise in the ways of the most worldliest of worlds, should be drawn to the Amish, of all people. But maybe not, for Mr. Ogilvy, a maverick if there ever was one. He got to know them when he and his wife bought a farm in Pennsylvania just after World War II (during the war he worked in Washington for British intelligence). Before the war he worked for the Gallup research company in New Jersey, which taught him much about what Americans on Main Street thought about various things, and even more important what they *felt* about them.

Read more in *New English Review*:
- **Facing the Egalitarian Heresy**
- **A Pair of Literary Judgments**
- **Walking In Manhattan and Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead***

Maybe the number crunching at Gallup explains Mr. Ogilvy's numbered lists. *Confessions* has a good share, prescriptions for how to maneuver in the ad agency wars, including infighting ("listicles," as their now known, are prime clickbait on the internet). Mr. Ogilvy embraces these point-blank orders as "dogma," which he also called "Magic Lamps" in his ad agency's boot camp, and seem to contradict his own idiosyncratic approach. But what's good for Churchill and Patton, as Mr. Ogilvy himself might say, would flatten lesser men.

Likewise, every chapter except one is titled “How to . . . ” (“How to Manage an Advertising Agency,” “How to Write Potent Copy,” and my favorite, “How to Rise to the Top of the Tree—Advice to the Young”). The last chapter departs from this formula and wanders into the speculative: “Should Advertising Be Abolished?” (Asking an engaging question in the all-important headline is a classic, effective go-to for copywriters.)

Mr. Ogilvy says the topic was suggested by a discussion he had with Lady Hendy, “my Socialist elder sister.” But it’s a rhetorical question, an apology for his vocation, which has been blamed, among other ills, for encouraging the foolish spending of money, cheapening culture, and corrupting morals.

In his preamble, Mr. Ogilvy mocks the most damning critics of advertising at the time *Confessions* was originally published as “the dons”—historian Arnold Toynbee of Oxford and economist John Kenneth Galbraith of Harvard. But against these pale specters of academia he pits two contemporary giants who are also highbrows, but broad-minded ones in the arena of world events.

Mr. Ogilvy quotes Franklin Roosevelt as saying that the high standard of civilization for all groups of people at mid-century would be impossible without advertising. He even goes so far as to say:

> If I were starting life over again, I am inclined to think that I would go into the advertising business in

> preference to almost any other.

Winston Churchill concurs:

> Advertising . . . sets up before a man the goal of a better home, better clothing, better food for himself and his family. It spurs individual exertion and greater production.

After this cannonade of testimonials, Mr. Ogilvy goes on to examine and answer a sub-series of questions. But the battle is already over. The rest is a rout.

Still, he fleshes out the decisive victory in a sub-series of questions. Does advertising raise prices? (It lowers them.) Does it encourage monopoly? (Yes, unfortunately.) Does it make people want to buy products they don't need? (Not unless you consider deodorant and beer unnecessary.) Should it be used in politics? (No, it's vulgar.) Should it be used for good causes? (His agency did *pro bono* work for Lincoln Center, the American Cancer Society, the Citizens Committee to Keep New York City Clean.) Is it a vulgar bore? (Sometimes, but he's more offended by "tasteless typography, banal photographs, clumsy copy, and cheap jingles.")

Alas for the snows of yesteryear. Now we have digital agencies who traffic in website content, blog posts, Facebook ads, tweets, pop-up ads, viral videos, Instagram influencers . . . One can only imagine what the kitchen-hardened veteran of M. Pitard would think of it all.

All we can do now, like the copywriter-turned-attorney, is look back with a sigh.

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