

## **How to Train Ideas to Come When They're Called: Notes and Advice for Young People in Advertising**

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### **About Suzanne Pope**

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## **How to Train Ideas to Come When They're Called: Notes and Advice for Young People in Advertising**

In this article, I'm hoping to impart some useful information about advertising ideas and how one arrives at them. I'm hoping this information will bring comfort and peace and a touch more confidence. Not to you, of course, because I know that you personally have no particular anxiety about your ability to produce great ideas on demand. No, the advice that follows has been prepared so that you might pass it on to some deserving friend or colleague or classmate. Perhaps you have someone in mind already. Perhaps it's the young woman of your acquaintance, the one who is certain that she's a hack, who knows that the two decent ads in her book were flukes that will not be repeated. Or maybe it's the young man who studies old show annuals like the Torah because he privately knows he has no interesting ideas of his own. What I hope to do for these friends of yours is to persuade them that there are practical steps one can take to generate ideas that are good and maybe even great. I want them to understand that, yes, there is magic involved in creativity, but the magic is accessible to even the most discouraged among us, even if we've never won an award and don't think we ever will.

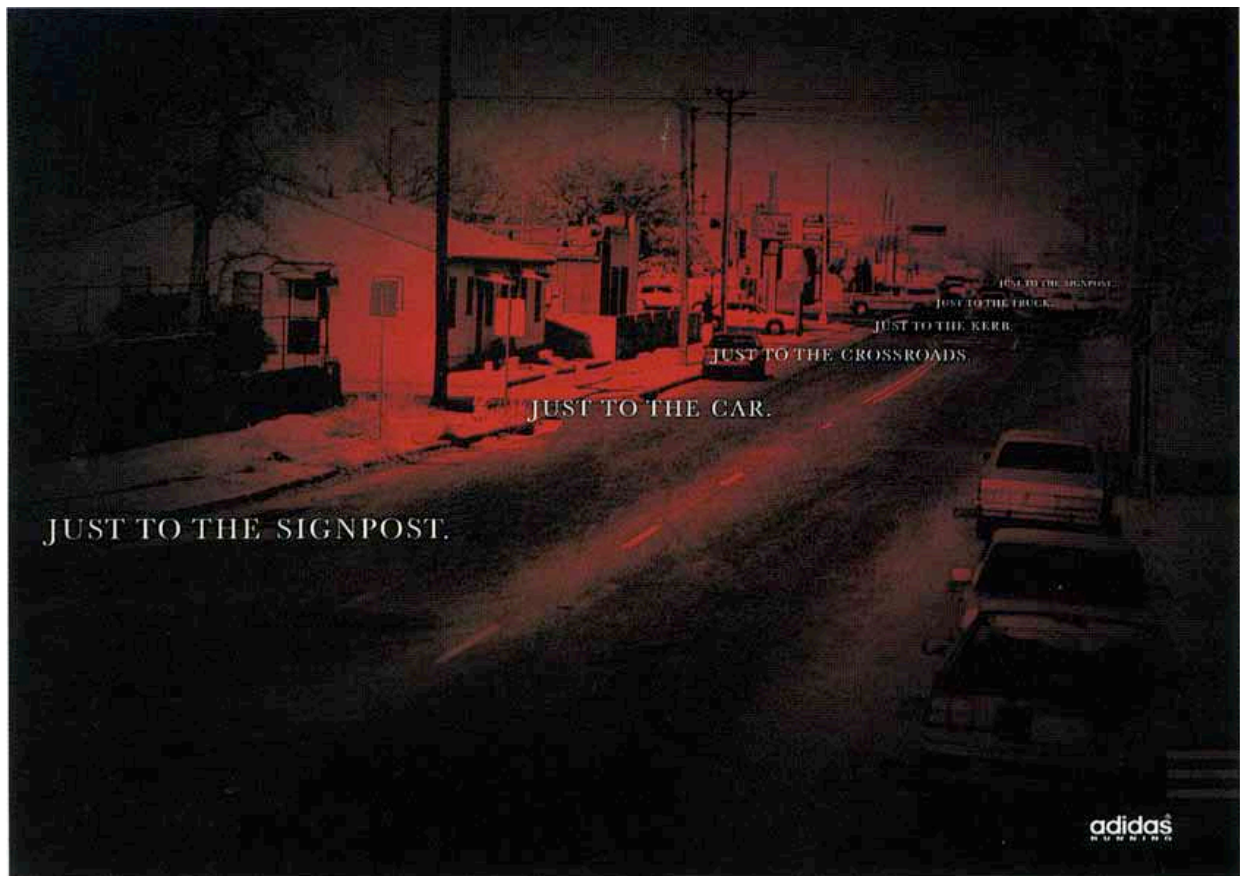
Before we talk about how to come up with advertising ideas, let's take a step back and understand what people mean when they speak of advertising ideas as being good or bad or nonexistent. Every creative brief provides information that needs to be conveyed. But no matter what your account folks or

clients tell you, conveying that information should be regarded as the least of your duties. Because unless that information is CURE FOR CANCER or FREE SURF 'N' TURF DINNER, people aren't likely to care about the message in its unadorned state. Every day, most people face a tsunami of detail. They learn to tune most of it out, because letting it all in would lead to a psychological breakdown. Our job as ad people is to embellish or interpret our raw information in such a way that it turns into real communication. Notice that information is not regarded as communication here, because we don't yet have the confidence that people will notice or retain it – surely two prerequisites for saying that something has been communicated. So, for our purposes, let's agree that an advertising idea is anything – a theme or rhetorical device or graphic element – that changes the selling message from mere information to persuasive communication.

But how do we know when that change has happened? How do we know when we've changed SIX GRAMS OF FIBRE PER SERVING into something people will actually want to buy? We can't know for sure, because advertising will always be more art than science. But we will have our best odds of success if we're able to show that we've found an intersection between the things our consumers care about (namely, their lives) and the things they don't care about – by which I mean our clients' products.

An intersection. A point of emotional connection. A moment of overlap, however fleeting, between the offering of some product and the private yearnings of people who just want to feel understood and respected.

Ad people try very hard to reach that intersection through comedy. This is because ad people understand that the average person loves a good laugh, especially if he's spent the entire weekend locked in a room judging an awards show. Comedy obviously works brilliantly when it works, but the most insightful ads tend to be the ones that don't also labour under the burden of trying to be funny. There's a 1996 Adidas ad (from Leagas Delaney, London) that still makes sense today because it found a pure and perfect intersection between running shoes and how people really feel when they're running. The ad isn't funny in the least, but it still feels deeply true:



Seeking a deeper point of connection can help us even when our subject is already packed with emotion. One such subject for most young women is that of date rape. There are many excellent websites on the topic. Here's a screen grab from one of them:



**WATCH YOUR DRINK.COM**

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**"How To Protect Your Daughters, Sons and Yourself from the Hidden Danger of GHB and other Date Rape Drugs Now Being Used in Business, Hotels, Parties, Restaurants, Bars and College Campuses Everywhere!"**

**Discover The Secret Worldwide Epidemic That's Affecting Families!**

**WHO'S WATCHING YOUR DRINK!**

This website gives a ton of information on date rape drugs and how to avoid having one slipped in your drink. Any woman with a sense of vigilance about her safety and dignity will probably pay close attention. But if this were an ad, we could rightly say that it lacks an advertising idea, and that its inherent impact would be significantly increased with the use of such an idea. The website's information is certainly relevant, but it's still abstract, still probably somewhere outside the reader's immediate experience. TBWA\London turned this

information into a brilliant ambient idea: little cocktail umbrellas that were taken to nightclubs and popped into women's drinks when their backs were turned:



As helpful as the website's information was, it could not match the power of a simple advertising idea to make the core message immediate and personal and terrifying. The women driven to the website had more reason than ever to take its advice to heart.

We've now reviewed what an advertising idea is and why it's important. So let's move on to the process of generating ideas and why that process doesn't have to feel scary or beyond our abilities. The wonderfully reassuring news about ideas is that one doesn't have to be a particularly original thinker to get them. That is because there is no such thing as a completely original idea. All new

ideas are combinations or extensions of ideas already in existence. It's said that Gutenberg's printing press was inspired by the wine and olive presses of the day. The fax machine was just the union of a photocopier and a phone. The Swiffer WetJet is nothing more than a diaper on a stick. This same truth applies to advertising ideas as well. The reason we understand an advertising idea is that its elements are recognizable from our past experience. If they weren't, we wouldn't get the ad. As an example, let's look at this much-awarded ad for Stella Artois from Lowe, New York:



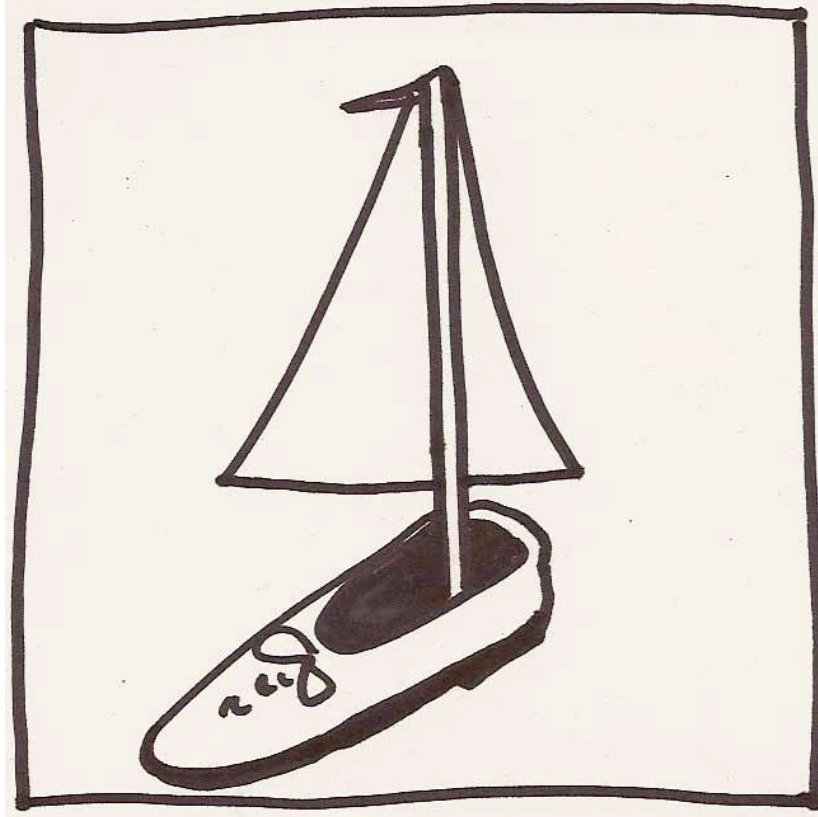
Now, we're all familiar with the idea of discount coupons. We see them every day. And we're all familiar with the idea that one should expect to pay more for a premium-quality imported beer. The genius of this ad was that it united two ideas that were previously antithetical to each other. This unexpected connection very cleverly delivered the message that Stella drinkers are paying more than they need to for beer, but that the extra quality is worth it.

Unexpected connections. They're the heart and soul of the best advertising ideas. But as you seek out the unexpected, please be careful, because not all unexpected connections result in good ideas or lasting ideas. Consider, for example, this unexpected connection between Inuit culture and shepherd's pie:



I have a jpeg of the recipe if you're interested, but I don't imagine you are. Unexpected connections that fail can happen to even the most talented ad people. A long time ago, I was fortunate enough to attend a lecture by Bob Levenson, the legendary copywriter who worked at Doyle Dane Bernbach throughout the 1960s. He spoke of working on a retail client's brief to advertise a shoe sale. He had approached Bill Bernbach with a layout that looked something like this:





Bernbach looked at the layout but said nothing, so Bob Levenson decided to help. “Get it? Shoe...sail. Shoe...*sail!* It’s an idea!” Bernbach answered, “Yes, Bob, but it’s a *bad* idea.” In these terms, we see that the greatness of some ad people may not be in their ability to make connections (because, after all, unconnected ideas are everywhere). It may be more in their ability to discern which connections are the most powerful and arresting among all the connections that are available.

If unconnected ideas are so plentiful, why do we have such difficulty finding and linking them? I think it’s because we’re sitting here, taut with distress, not quite knowing how to make it happen. But there are established processes for coming up with ideas, and we have nothing to lose by using

them. The immediate result will be more ideas, and even if they're not great ideas, you will discover that the increased quantity of ideas quickly leads to increased quality as well.

For me, the single best process was outlined in the 1940s by an ad guy named James Webb Young. His book, *A Technique for Producing Ideas*, is still available today. It spans just 48 pages in what looks to be 14-point type, but it represents the best twelve bucks you will ever spend on your career. In *A Technique*, Young gives us a consistent, five-step process for coming up with ideas, and in so doing, takes away the intimidation we so often feel when facing a blank page. The five steps are these:

1. Gather the idea's raw materials – those would be specific facts about the product, plus knowledge about life and people in general.
2. Chew on those materials.
3. "Drop the whole subject and put the problem out of your mind as completely as you can."
4. "Out of nowhere, the Idea will appear."
5. "Take your little newborn idea out into the world of reality."

All of us understand the first two steps. We're also familiar with the fifth step, because it typically results in our being sent back to do more work. The strange and mystical part, the part requiring the leap of faith, is the part between steps 3 and 4. But no matter how paralyzed we feel creatively, we

all know we've had that experience, that moment when a cool thought has come to us out of absolutely nowhere. You might chalk it up to neurochemistry or you might see it as coming from God, but it really doesn't matter. We don't have to know or understand the source to benefit from it.

Let's talk about another process for idea generation. This process isn't specific to advertising, but it can work very well for what we do. It's called SCAMPER, and it is attributed to a writer named Bob Eberle. SCAMPER is an acronym in which each letter suggests at least one exercise we should try when facing any creative challenge. SCAMPER stands for:

substitute

simplify

combine

adapt

modify

put to other uses

eliminate

exaggerate

rearrange

reverse

I'm now going to go through these actions one by one, and show some examples to illustrate how each technique can express itself in advertising.

## SUBSTITUTE


How can simple substitution lead to a better ad? Start by thinking of a scene that expresses something completely expected or clichéd about the thing you're trying to sell. At the School of Visual Arts, for example, they're in the business of training people to be spontaneously creative. Of course, it's an old cliché that spontaneous creativity often gets expressed on paper napkins. But by substituting the expected paper napkin with lined writing paper, the school was able to freshen the cliché and make the deeper point that creativity can be learned (agency: KNARF, New York):



Substitution also provided the core idea behind a childproofing campaign from john st. in Toronto. Here, the headline “Kids see things differently” is paid off with a shot featuring licorice where you’d expect to see an electrical cord.



Substitution can also be used with words, as we see in this anonymous student ad:



If at first you don't succeed,  
you're not a subscriber.

The Economist

Again, start with the most mundane sentence that applies to your product or service, and then start playing (agency: CHI and Partners, London):



Headlines starting with “Objects in the rear view mirror...” are as common as flea market copies of *Frampton Comes Alive!* on vinyl. But if your substitution is as smart as the one above, I think you can still get away with it.

## SIMPLIFY

Simplifying is actually complicated, because it demands that you pare away every consideration that’s extraneous to your core message. And when you’ve spent days or weeks or months thinking about a brand, its core message can easily be lost. But the Green Party kept it front and centre, resisting the telling of a million stories about the environment in favour of telling the most meaningful one of all (agency: Special, Auckland):



Simplicity has always been the hallmark of advertising for *The Economist*. Here, showing nothing but little plastic Monopoly hotels, Ogilvy & Mather, Singapore says everything it needs to about an *Economist* reader's prospects for success:



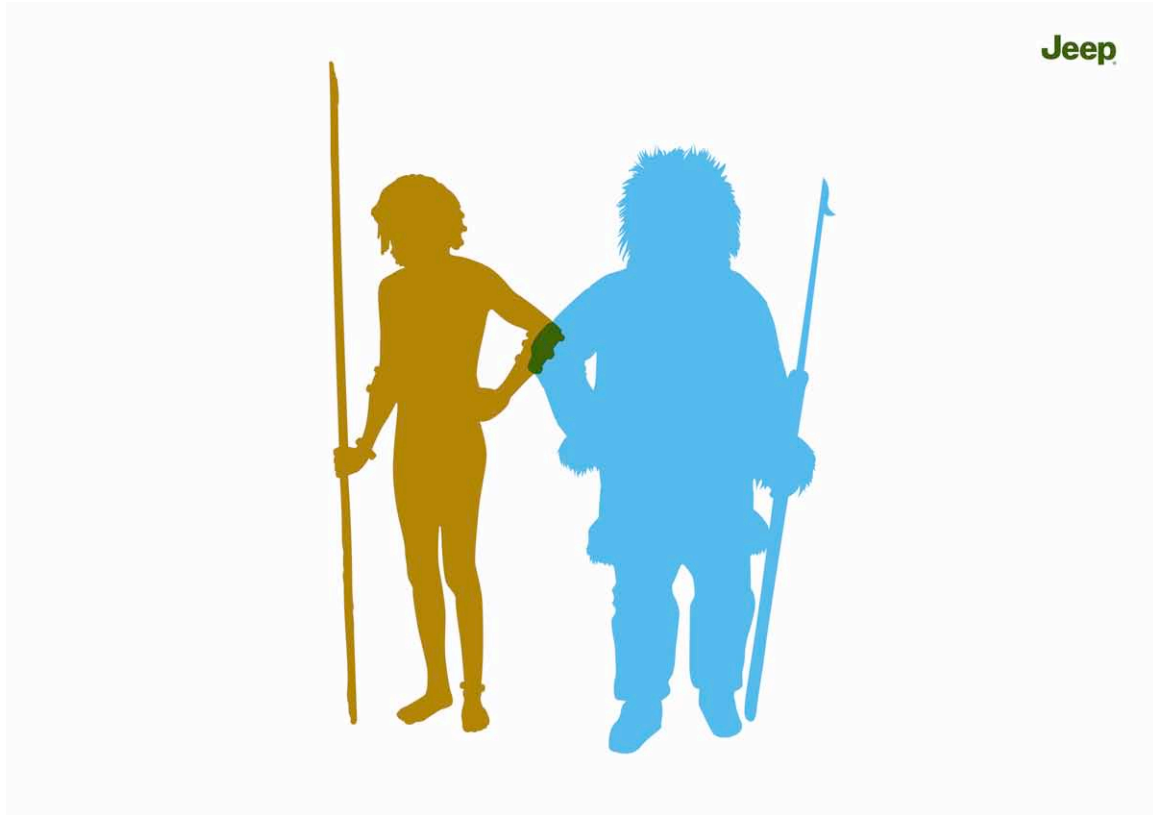


## COMBINE

Combinations can be expressed in words (as we saw in “Substitute,” above), but it’s the visual mashups that have really dominated the way ad people think in the past fifteen years or so. Sometimes, these combinations can also be great examples of simplification, as we see in this poster for a lung cancer organization (agency: CHI and Partners, London):



Some combinations aren’t necessarily simple, but they still tell their story with exquisite efficiency. This ad shows Jeep as literally fitting perfectly with any extreme in environment (agency: BBDO Proximity, Malaysia):



## ADAPT

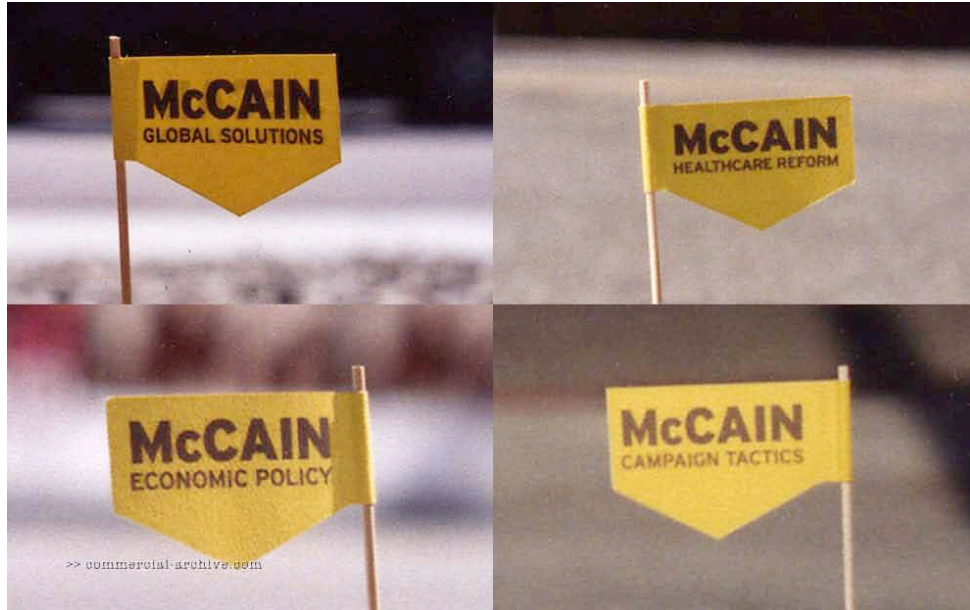
We've seen examples already of words or images that were altered to adapt to the purposes of the ad. You should also look for ways to adapt your idea to the properties of whatever medium you're using. A Swedish reality show called "I'd Do Anything For Money" ran this ad in a magazine's centre spread, using the

actual staple as part of its visual (agency: Le Bureau, Stockholm):



An example of adaptation that is simultaneously cruel and hilarious may be found in this anti-McCain campaign from the last U.S. presidential election. Small flags condemned McCain's various policies, with media provided at no cost by local dogs (agency: Granite Pass, Topanga, California):





## MODIFY

Sometimes, the clearest delivery of a message comes from just slightly altering the expected form of its presentation. Hence, a perforated business card for a divorce lawyer (agency: john st., Toronto):



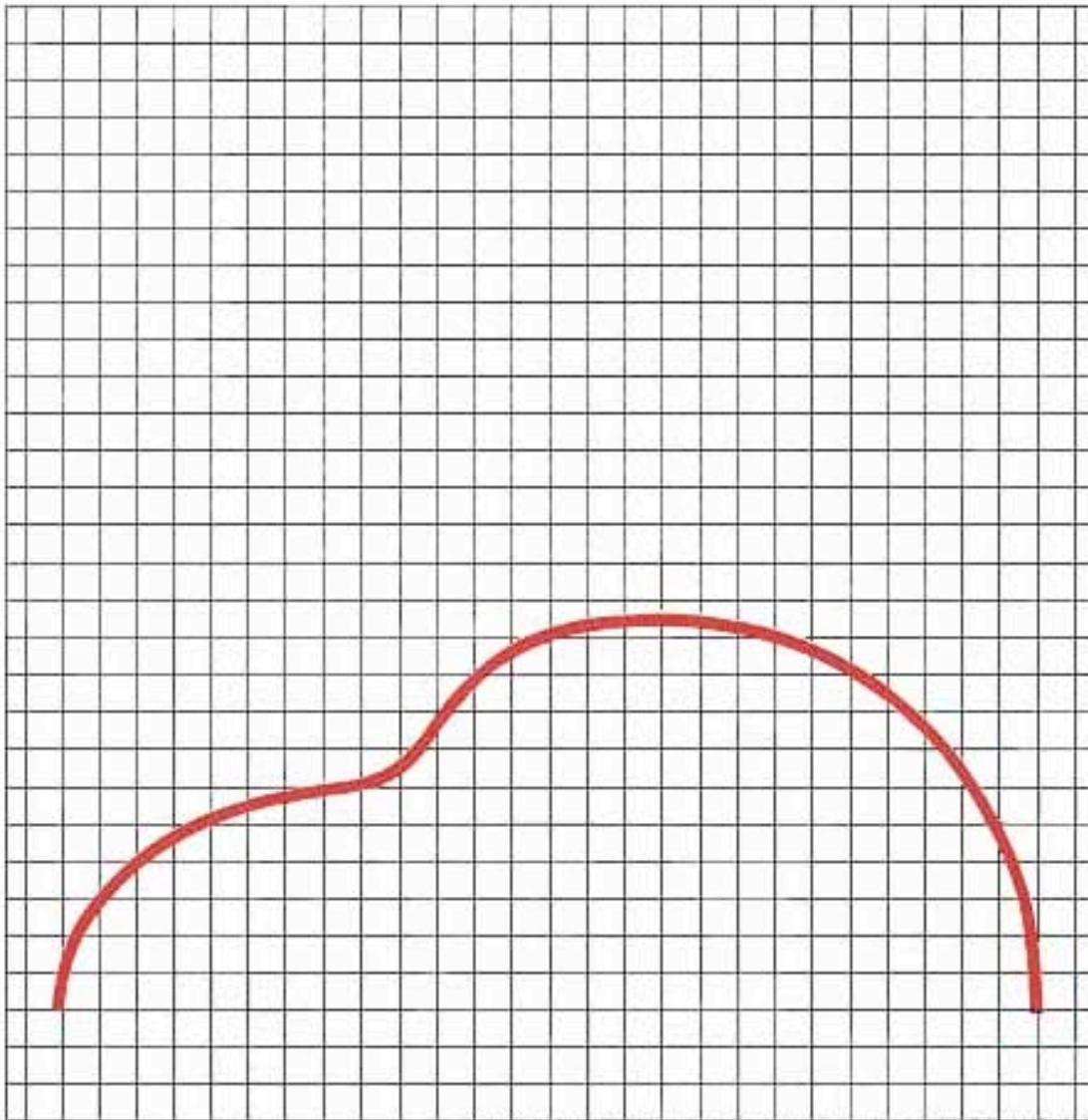
By offering to share its billboard space with others, a low-priced beer demonstrated its commitment to keeping costs down (agency: Leo Burnett, Toronto).





## PUT TO ANOTHER USE

What happens if you do something unexpected with your product or your medium or an everyday object? Many years ago, Volkswagen found a way to make the shape of their car say something about thrift in tough economic times (agency: Doyle Dane Bernbach, New York):



## Is the economy trying to tell you something?

If you've hesitated about buying a new car because of the economy, maybe you should look into the economy of buying a new Volkswagen.

To begin with, while the average new car sells for about \$3185, a new VW sells

for only \$1839\*.

That saves you about \$1300.

Then, while the average car costs 10.9 cents a mile to run, a Volkswagen costs only 5 cents.

That saves you about another \$700

every year for 12,000 miles you drive.

And in just one year, it can bring your total savings to \$2000.

In two years, \$2700.

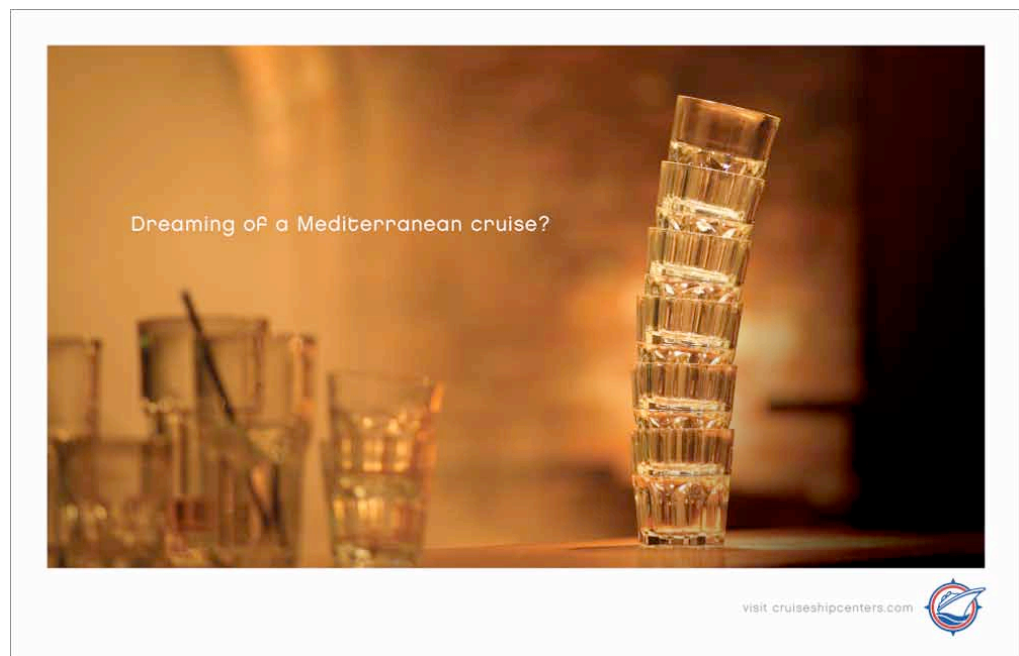
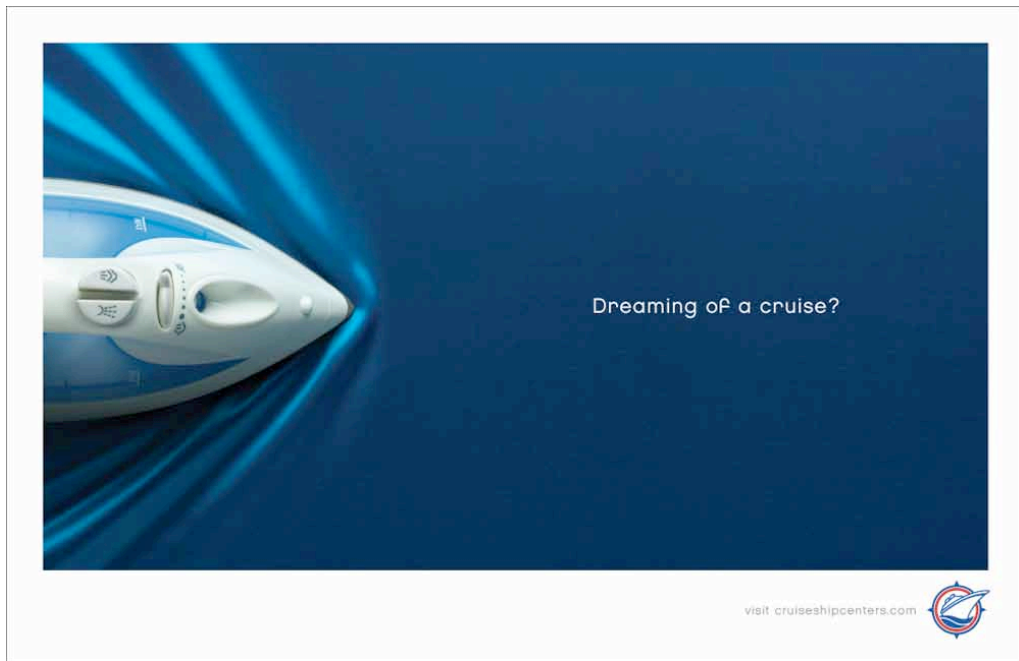
In three, \$3400.

Happy days are here again.

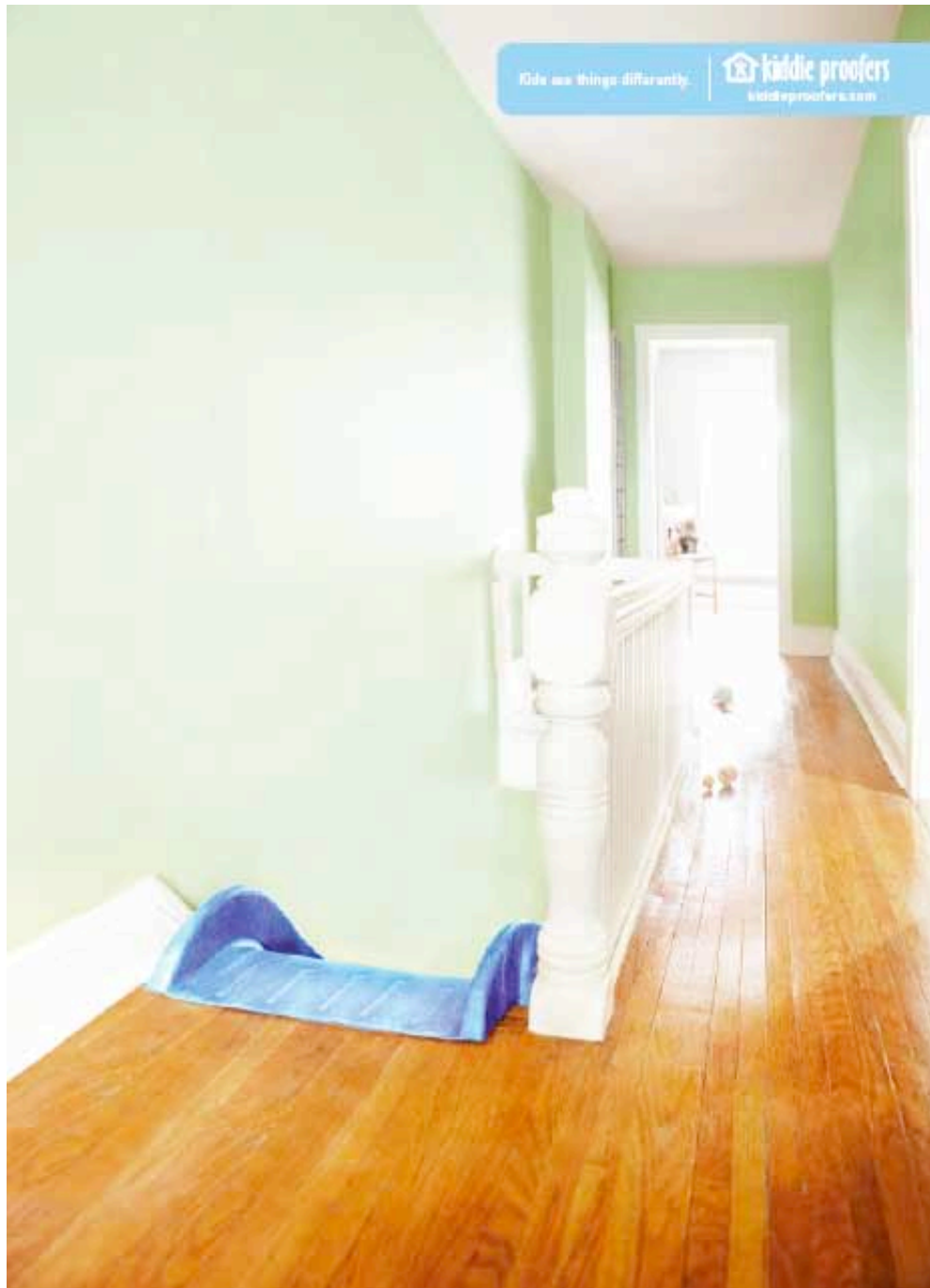




A cruise line was able to show housework as an opportunity to fantasize (agency: Grey Northwest, Vancouver):



And in its childproofing campaign, again, Toronto's john st. made the point that kids quite naturally put things to other uses:



## ELIMINATE

Looking for things you can eliminate is always part of getting to a good ad. Car ads typically show the vehicle, for example, but your message might actually be stronger without it. This ad (from DraftFCB Argentina) is ostensibly about a Mini driver-training course, but the real point of the ad is the small size and nimbleness of the Mini itself:



Sometimes, the absence of something can be what carries your idea. This wordless poster was done for a Canadian literacy organization. When the red

button was pushed, a recorded voice explained that the poster had no words because millions of Canadians would be unable to read them (agency: TAXI, Toronto).



## EXAGGERATE

Think of what your product or service does. Then, ask yourself what might happen if that feature were outrageously exaggerated. That appears to have been the approach taken by DDB New Zealand in their work for Durex Play lubricant:



>> [commercial-archive.com](http://commercial-archive.com)

durex play lubricant

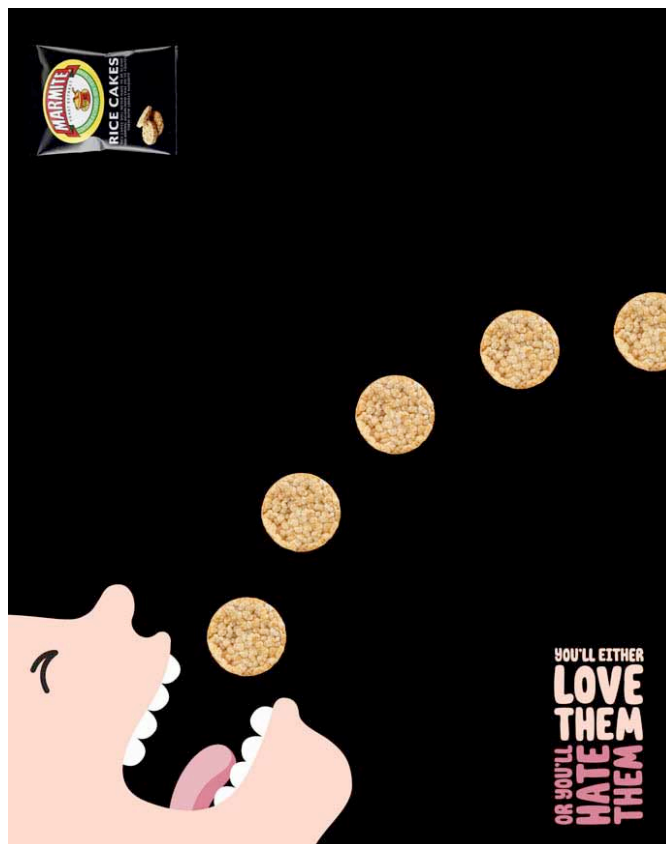


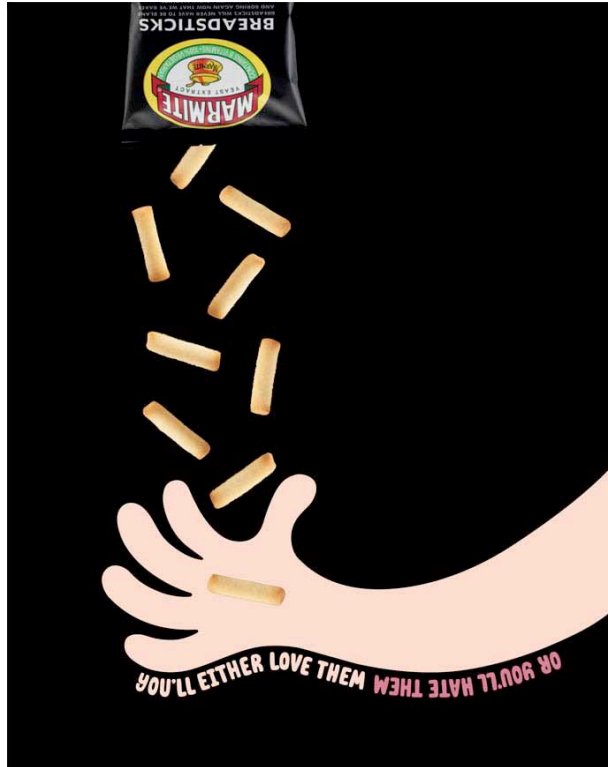
>> [commercial-archive.com](http://commercial-archive.com)

durex play lubricant

## REVERSE or REARRANGE

Turning something on its head or sideways or scrambling it will definitely make it a little more interesting to look at. The challenge then is how to make that visual disruption part of a relevant idea about your product or service. DDB London did it brilliantly by embracing the love-it-or-hate-it nature of Marmite. By turning these ads upside down or sideways, the reader gets a completely different message about the product:







And the notion of rearranging makes perfect sense when you're talking about Scrabble, as we see in these great ads from JWT Santiago:



SCAMPER is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to ideas about ideas. If you Google “idea generation techniques,” you’ll see what I mean. But if you want the advice of someone who understands the particular anguish of the advertising person, I recommend Tom Monahan’s excellent book, *The Do-It-Yourself Lobotomy*. Tom was formerly one of our industry’s top creative directors. Today, he’s a full-time consultant on creativity. In *Lobotomy*, Tom offers techniques that you might find more practical than going through all the steps in SCAMPER. Plus, some of his techniques can be used in conjunction with SCAMPER or any other method.

A technique that’s easy for anyone to use is the one Tom calls 100-MPH Thinking. It involves sitting down (alone or with a partner; it doesn’t matter) and jamming out as many ideas as you possibly can in a set period of time. Quantity is everything here, and the technique specifically forbids judging anything as good or bad at this early stage. Judging your output is the only bad idea here, because it either discourages you or it lulls you into thinking that you’ve landed on something good and can therefore stop working.

180° Thinking is another great technique from *Lobotomy*. It challenges us to look for things that are counterintuitive, for things that will initially seem just plain wrong. Take upside-down shampoo bottles, for example. They make perfect sense because they mean less waste and less struggle when you get to the last of your shampoo. Anyone reading this probably grew up with them, but I remember the first time I saw one. I stared at the drug store

shelf and went, “Whoa.” The idea was that different, that unexpected. You can apply the technique to advertising, too. When Volkswagen exhorted us to “Think small,” when Avis proudly announced that they were No. 2 in the car rental business, they were practising 180° Thinking. And when Budweiser thought to turn its bottle cap upside down, it created an icon of breathtaking power and simplicity (agency: Downtown Partners DDB).



The final *Lobotomy* technique I'll mention here (but by no means the final technique discussed in the book) is that of Intergalactic Thinking. It involves borrowing inspiration from a field as distant as possible from the one

in which we would logically work. Fashion designers are masters of Intergalactic Thinking, which is why trends in fashion can have people looking like combat soldiers or prison inmates or porn stars. If you scroll back through the ads in this article, you'll see that many of them get their power by using imagery that is at least a little foreign to whatever is being discussed in the ad.

There are bits of advice that are timeless and discussed in pretty much any idea-generation technique: You should never look for The One Idea, and you should never stop at the first good idea. You should also force yourself to work within the confines of your brief, no matter how restrictive it is. I often see junior creatives disregard those limitations, and it always messes them up. Archeologists rope off one square metre at a time. That way, whatever they're exploring gets explored deeply. You should do the same. As Leonardo da Vinci said, "Small rooms discipline the mind; large rooms distract it."

There are some other things I can tell you about idea generation. They probably appear in lots of books, but I tripped and fell on them all by myself. For starters, if you're a writer who's stuck for ideas, try writing your body copy first. It will free you from worrying about the larger task at hand, and your body copy might trigger a thought that you would have otherwise missed. (By the way, this exercise helps even if you're planning an ad with no copy at all.) Another bit of advice: Never hold ideas in reserve. I'm embarrassed to say that I tried this a few times, thinking that it would help me if I got sent back by

either my creative director or the client. It always made things worse, and I learned the hard way to give as much as I could every time out.

This last point leads to the single most important thing I can tell you about ideas. It's an attitudinal thing, a trick of the mind. Ideas are the currency of our business, and so it's tempting to think of them as rare and precious and deserving of protection. This is a fatal mistake, and it reflects an underlying dread that you simply can't produce as many ideas as you need. But if you give in to that dread, if you start treating ideas as if they were Faberge eggs or Ming vases, they will eventually become just as rare. Western psychology would describe this as a self-fulfilling prophecy; New Age types would call it the product of negative energy. But it doesn't matter why it happens. It just does. So the next time you sit down to work, tell yourself that there are at least ten million good solutions to the problem at hand. Tell yourself that you'd better have a lot of paper ready, because when the ideas start coming, you'll be scribbling like crazy to keep up with the flow. You might not believe this consciously, but your unconscious mind is a lot more trusting, so keep sending the message. And when you turn off your computer at the end of the day, be able to say truthfully that you have nothing left in the tank. If you can start thinking of ideas as being endless and everywhere, I promise you more of them will come your way.