

Better than myself

My fanciful and disorganized handbook of creative survival

Stefano Maria Palombi
Edition 01/2011

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01-

All connected

Intuition sensibility passion.

02-

Lessons

Forget Cannes, the only true lessons in copywriting I ever had I got while at the soccer stadium, by participating in demonstrations, or from reading the graffiti on the walls of a prison cell. My teachers were there, on the bleachers at the Curva Sud or in Regina Coeli prison. And not at the Palais du Festival.

03-

Work

It is forbidden to speak this word, which is capable of nipping any inspiration at the bud. Behave like a lover and not like an employee.

04-

Genius

Every time you get a brilliant idea, a hundred of them will give you a hundred reasonable reasons to drop it.

05-

A sense of reward

Has never been the result of praise or success. The most beautiful moment has always been in the work itself, which wasn't work.

06-

Fast and absurd

Ever since I started to work as a creative director, the rhythm has been fast, absurd. And so I too have become fast and absurd.

07-

The club

For years, I was the only one in the agency without a computer on my desk. I wandered around Saatchi like a man out of the stone age. With a magic marker in my hand instead of a club.

08-

To improve

Never stop improving upon the ad you have made, even after they have approved it, even when it seems time has run out and your art director wrenches the notebook with the titles on it out of your hands.

09-

The grand farewell

Thinking about resigning has always made me feel good. Thus, a couple of times a year, every year, I began preparations for the grand farewell.

10-

Never

Never go fishing for compliments.

11-

Then they get used to it

Don't let clients see too much of you.

At first, they are excited and listen to you, then they get used to it, and finally they get bored.

At that point, you either put on a fake moustache and beard, or you find yourself another client.

12-

The puppet

I have always tried to avoid going on television to play the dummy. And I have always refused to answer the questions of journalists who asked me about Berlusconi's tie or D'Alema's boat. I chose other ways to ruin myself. This Manual, for example.

13-

Many don't know

Whenever I see or hear or read the "gurus" of Italian advertising talking nonsense about the most varied topics, Brecht's words always come back to my mind: "many are unaware that they are being led by the enemy."

14-

Inspiration

Sometimes, days of work, nights spent half awake, notebooks full of sketches and senseless sentences. At times, already in the very moment you are briefed; at others, only a few hours before a decisive presentation: an angel passes and whispers something into your ear.

15-

Never no.2

Have never composed a title on a computer.

16-

Ideas

are everywhere concealed.

17-

Ready to shoot

Next to my bed, on the bedside table, between the picture of John Fante and that of my children, a notebook and a magic marker are ready to shoot.

18-

Your ideas

If one morning you wake up feeling in great shape, with some good ideas passing through your head, give a quick glance at the trade newspapers and your ideas will vanish in a flash.

19-

The agenda

During the only lunch in my life I wished had never ended, Federico Fellini told us how his imagination fed upon periods of brazen-faced inactivity. He spoke and I could think only of my agenda, of the pages in my agenda...

20-

Obliterate

Some years ago in London, to get people to purchase a ticket, they had written inside the busses: “Do you want your heart to stop at every bus stop”? In our busses, instead, the sign reads: “Passengers are requested to obtain a valid ticket and to cancel it in the special machine, violators will be fined according to article xx paragraph 2 comma 27”. In other words, they dialogue. We impose, or are imposed upon.

21-

It may happen

that you get an idea and the client vetoes it. Then, after a little while, you will see it again, exactly in the same form and being used in a 100-million dollar international campaign.

22-

A lot of wankers

Italian creative directors:
some would make sparks fly
in a more developed market;
at the same time, a lot of
wankers are allowed to keep
their jobs precisely because
the market doesn't demand
that one be good.

23-

When I can

come up with a good
title, that title becomes a
photograph.

24-

Impostor!

All the rare times I accepted to hold a university seminar, I feared finding myself face to face with one of my old professors who, upon seeing me, stood up and yelled: «Palombi! What are you doing here? Arrest him, he's an impostor!».

25-

Question:

«Hard or soft social campaigns?»

Answer: «Hard campaigns and soft campaigns.»

26-

Ideas

are like children.

It's not enough to have them,
you have to make them grow.

27-

Unemployed

Before going to work for
Saatchi & Saatchi, the part I
had played with the greatest
regularity and success was
undoubtedly that of the
unemployed person.

And precisely all the useless
activities that had filled up my
days back then have turned
out to be gold.

28-

Life as a couple:

I began in a monogamous regime, first with Grazia Cecconi and then with Fabio Ferri; later, I had a veritable harem, four or five art directors with whom I was collaborating on just as many projects; finally, I ended up living in the solitude of a monastic life: my creative work for the Catholic Church being, in fact, only the result of a collaboration with myself.

29-

The theory of the match:

The theory of the match: be luminous, even at the cost of burning quickly.

30-

The theory of the actor:

act with your entire self even when there is only a single spectator in front of you.

31-

**The theory of the
condemned person:**

think of every ad as if it were your last.

32-

The theory of my son

Chicco: this cream is so good that I don't like it.

33-

Life and work

If I think about these years, from the first ad to the last campaign, I think about my life.

Every title, every photo, every shot brings me back to what I was at the time.

I have never split anything up, life and work have been a single thing.

So, sometimes I feel as if I have done nothing but work and, at other times, as if I have never worked at all.

34-

Fernando Pessoa said:

«Put what you are into even the slightest things that you do». Amen.

35-

Emotions

The entire “useless” world of emotions, into which I had lulled myself while I was unemployed, was now my only strength. When I understood that I would have been able to allow it to live in my campaigns, I fell in love with this line of “work”, which has become my life in the true sense of the word. So I began to write headlines as if they were secret love notes or angry graffiti on a bathroom wall.

I was stunned. I didn't have to mimic the campaigns others had already done, I didn't have to lose myself in empty word games, I didn't have to be an advertising man.

36-

Of lost causes

This is what I wanted to become, a copywriter of lost causes.

37-

Fearless

To move forward without shame, without a safety net, without being afraid of putting myself too much on the line.

If I had not been the first one to become excited, how could I expect others to be so?

38-

Technique, know-how,

have saved me many times,
but only a few times have
they led me by the hand
towards the “campaign that
remains”.

39-

A campaign,

whatever it may be, can hold
you inside it. There, this naive
and presumptuous thought is
what I think.

40-

A missionary

And creative thought
becomes an adventure.

Because one feels like a
missionary who is walking
alone in the jungle, towards
unknown indios.

41-

It's a wave

I turn about myself, I repeat a spot's titles or text out loud or, rather, I recite them.

Music, of course. Without it it's impossible.

Everything that I do, read, listen to, see, touch, smell, feel, suffer, enjoy, cry about, laugh at, speak, embrace, break, kiss, am.

Everything is summoned up whenever I sit in front of a blank piece of paper. Like a Dervish spinning around on himself in an exasperated

propitiatory dance, like an exorcist, I turn, turn in search of the moment, of the entrance to the forest of inspiration. Often, it is well into the night that he arrives, it is he that opens the way, that shows the path. The favorite son of a thousand attempts, he is the title. The others will follow, now I can write even twenty of them. And I write them almost as if I were in a trance. It is a wave and I let it carry me.

42-

Outside

So, with time and amid one thousand adventures, the crew has become what the creative department used to be for me; missionaries, indios, and lost African tribes are my new clients; forests, deserts, and favelas, my office with a view onto the world.

43-

It is a virtuous circle

The rigor, the methodologies, the logic, the experience, all that I learnt while working for the agency's great profit clients, I have transposed onto non-profit clients.

44-

The passion,

the emotion, the courage,
the experimentation, all that I
developed while working with
non-profit clients, I brought
over there, to the clients for
profit.

45-

Do not be afraid

of adversity.

The greater the difficulty,
the greater the creativity.

Think of Spain after Franco,
of ex-Yugoslavia, of Argentina
and Brazil after the military
dictatorships, of South Africa.
Think of our cinema in the
aftermath of the war.

46-

N.B.

It is the work that must resemble you. Not viceversa.

47-

Moral:

I wanted to be better than myself.

Better than myself

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