

## **Little Better Yellow Different In Gumbo America**

As advertising struggles in its latest crisis, David Lubars, BBDO's new creative director, has a new, improved 99<sup>44</sup>/<sub>100</sub> percent pure strategy for saving it.

BY MARK GIMEIN

*"This is America!  
This is America!  
Those people we showed,  
It's a gumbo America!"*

The new creative director of the most prestigious big advertising agency in America is yelling into the telephone, making a case for one of his ads. No, not yelling. Keening is more like it, like a Beat poet who has somehow been trapped for years in button-downs and khakis, pretending to be an executive, and has suddenly been released. He didn't plan this. He had called planning to talk about new media and old media and how half of America will have broadband by 2006 ("That's a fact, not some futuristic bullshit") and how the ad agencies that didn't get it risked "getting flushed down the twentieth-century toilet."



David Lubars  
at BBDO  
in New York.

But somehow, the big theory has fallen by the wayside and we have gotten to talking about a commercial by Fallon, the Minneapolis agency Lubars has just come from. It stars a guy wearing a sweat-stained undershirt under his torn, checkered Pendleton, sitting in a Barcalounger. The spot is supposed to promote Citibank's identity-protection program; the guy in the Barcalounger has had his identity stolen. He is sprawled on the Barcalounger, holding a beer, but his voice is that of a Long Island teen queen who just spent \$1,500 of his money on a leather bustier. But the commercial is not really about identity theft. It is about the guy on the Barcalounger. Advertising's great comic characters—Wendy's Clara Peller or FedEx's fast-talking John Moschitta—are some of the great grotesques of the century. And the guy in the Barcalounger is one of the great grotesques of advertising, a big belch of a comic character. Like all great funny commercials, it's counterintuitive. It shows a person who's ugly, funny, and dumb, whose identity (like most of ours) is not really even worth stealing, and asks the viewer to identify with him.

So now David Lubars is trying to dissect how it is that a commercial can do that, and what comes out is, *This is gumbo America*. "It's not just telling the truth about the product," Lubars explains, "but showing an understanding of how things really are, not some glossed-up whatever."

The reason that David Lubars found himself answering questions about truth and "the way things really are" is that in June, BBDO North America—an agency that Michael Patti, himself a former BBDOer and now creative director of Y&R, calls "the most American of ad agencies"—announced that at the end of the summer, Lubars would take over as BBDO's creative director and chairman. Pepsi, General Electric, FedEx: BBDO's client roster is a list of many of the great prestige accounts in the ad world, big advertisers with a history of high-profile, award-winning commercials.

Lubars is taking the job at a moment when advertising is in the midst of one of its periodic creative perturbations. Just as years ago advertisers realized that banging audiences over and over with a catchy tagline had its limits ("Ring Around the Collar"—the famous BBDO campaign for Wisk—never brought the detergent anywhere near its main competitor, Tide), ad agencies are currently overwhelmed with the suspicion that the language of contemporary ads—the catchy tagline, the celebrity put in a funny situation, the twist ending, even the TV commercial itself—doesn't work like it used to. Ad-agency executives saw numbers that claimed to show that young beer-and-car-buying men were deserting television for the pleasures of PlayStation and online porn. They looked at Google, a company that became the star of the Internet while selling "ads" that consisted of nothing but three lines of text. They all got TiVo, and started talking about how they could TiVo the shows and TiVo past the commercials. And they sighed over the teenage kids, who just didn't seem to care anymore about perfectly good, clever, glossy TV commercials. "How am I sup-

posed to communicate with someone who is used to writing 'I wnt2cu?'" asks noted adman Jerry Della Femina.

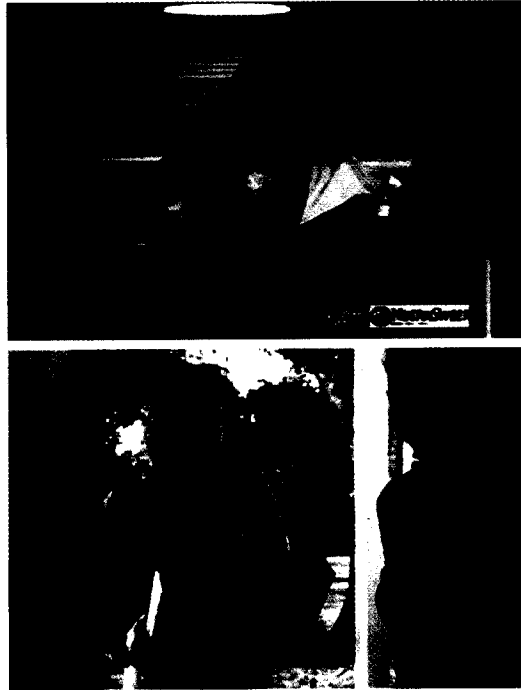
And indeed, if this is a transformative moment in advertising, arguably nobody has more at risk than BBDO. The history of BBDO is more or less the history of American advertising. The product of a 1928 merger between the George Batten agency and Barton, Durstine & Osborn, BBDO—as with USX, the letters technically no longer stand for anything at all, but simply refer in a stylized way to a storied history—was one of the first big agencies to be located on Madison Avenue, and one of the few big agencies to survive not only the "Ring Around the Collar" age of sledgehammer advertising but all the creative upheavals that came before and after. Longtime BBDO chairman Phil Dusenberry came up with "We bring good things to life" and the Pepsi Generation, the campaign that was the first to tell us not only what we should want but who we should want to be.

Dusenberry retired in 2002, and suddenly it was pretty evident that BBDO's work for its biggest clients was feeling old again. The Pepsi ads that used to sell youth were selling nostalgia. The new generation—today's new generation, not the "New Generation" of 1970-something—didn't need to see Britney Spears putting on period outfits to promote Pepsi. Since when was Pepsi about nostalgia? They didn't get the joke when they saw a middle-aged Peter Fonda rocking out to "Born to Be Wild." Or, worse, and more likely, they didn't recognize Peter Fonda.

Dusenberry stood both for a style of doing business and a style of making commercials. He was neatly pressed, conservative (Dusenberry had worked on Reagan's reelection campaign). For public consumption, BBDO's motto—who has a motto anymore?—was "The work, the work, the work." Inside, though, Dusenberry was credited with less lofty slogans: "If you don't come in on Sunday, don't bother to come in on Monday." Or, "BBDO: bring it back and do it over." Under Dusenberry, BBDO had more polished,

glossier commercials, more big-name stars (Britney Spears, Derek Jeter, Cindy Crawford) than anybody else. It bought more ads during the Super Bowl. (Advertising on the Super Bowl "says you've arrived," Dusenberry and his longtime lieutenant, Ted Sann, wrote in the introduction to a coffee-table book about Super Bowl commercials.)

Dusenberry left BBDO's creative department in Sann's hands. Cultured, reserved, one of the few intellectuals in the ad business, Sann was a talented admaker who'd been instrumental in twenty years of Pepsi advertising. He was also one of the last true believers in the celebrity-driven commercial. Sann lasted two years. This May, Allen Rosenshine, the longtime chief executive of BBDO Worldwide (the international company that owns BBDO North America), stepped aside for Andrew Robertson, a 43-year-old Englishman with a yen for big-think theory and a habit of firing off masses of statistics about the evolving State of the Media. The first thing that Robertson did was fire Ted Sann, an event that was greeted by the business press with a combi-



BBDO's ads often featured celebrities, like Michael J. Fox in the Diet Pepsi advertisement "Apt. 10G" (1987); more than other agencies, BBDO viewed the Super Bowl as its most crucial venue. "Desert Island," for FedEx, first aired during the 2003 Super Bowl.

nation of shock and bloodlust.

Among the possible choices to head a big New York agency, Lubars had a number of compelling qualifications. After rising through jobs at Chiat/Day in Los Angeles and the Providence shop Leonard/Monahan (briefly called Leonard Monahan Lubars & Kelly), Lubars had taken the top job at BBDO's small West Coast office in the mid-nineties. Though he had already built up a relationship with Rosenshine, Lubars left BBDO to take the top creative job at Fallon Worldwide, a midsize agency that, like a number of similar ad agencies (San Francisco's Goodby, Silverstein, or Wieden + Kennedy, Nike's Portland shop) whose names tend to be prefaced with the words *creative*, *nimble*, and, most of all, *award-winning*, had carved out a niche for itself as a go-to place for clients looking for more innovative fare than the bigger New York or Chicago agencies could deliver. The off-kilter ads that Fallon made under Lubars—such as the Citibank spots—were the opposite of BBDO's slick extravaganzas.

Lubars's new-media credentials were also impeccable. Every news report made a point of talking up a special award, the Titanium Lion, given to Fallon at the Cannes advertising festival in 2003, for a series of short films made by bona fide Hollywood directors (Guy Ritchie, John Woo, John Frankenheimer) to promote BMW cars—movies that were distributed over the Internet. BBDO presented Lubars to the world as the guy who was going to lead the New York agency into the brave new scary beautiful world of TV-Internet-telephone-plus-all-the-other-appliances-we-haven't-yet-thought-of “convergence.” Within the advertising world, Lubars was well regarded by his peers. “To be a creative director requires creativity, leadership, and vision,” says Gerry Graf, a senior BBDO creative director who left last year to take the top creative job at Chiat/Day. “[Lubars] has all of those.”

IN THE MIDDLE OF JULY, I met David Lubars in Minneapolis. At the time, he was shuttling between New York, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles, essentially working for both Fallon and BBDO simultaneously. I already had some idea of what to expect. Lubars had called me just after returning from this year's Cannes awards. He was as earnest an adman as you'd ever want to meet. Though he has worked on any number of funny commercials, he is not funny in conversation. He can sound, on the contrary, like he is reminding himself to make small talk because he's been told that making jokes early on will facilitate communication later. (“How was Cannes, David?” “Terrible. Twenty hours of meetings. I. Was so busy. That. I forgot. To look at the beach. To see. If there were any topless women.”)

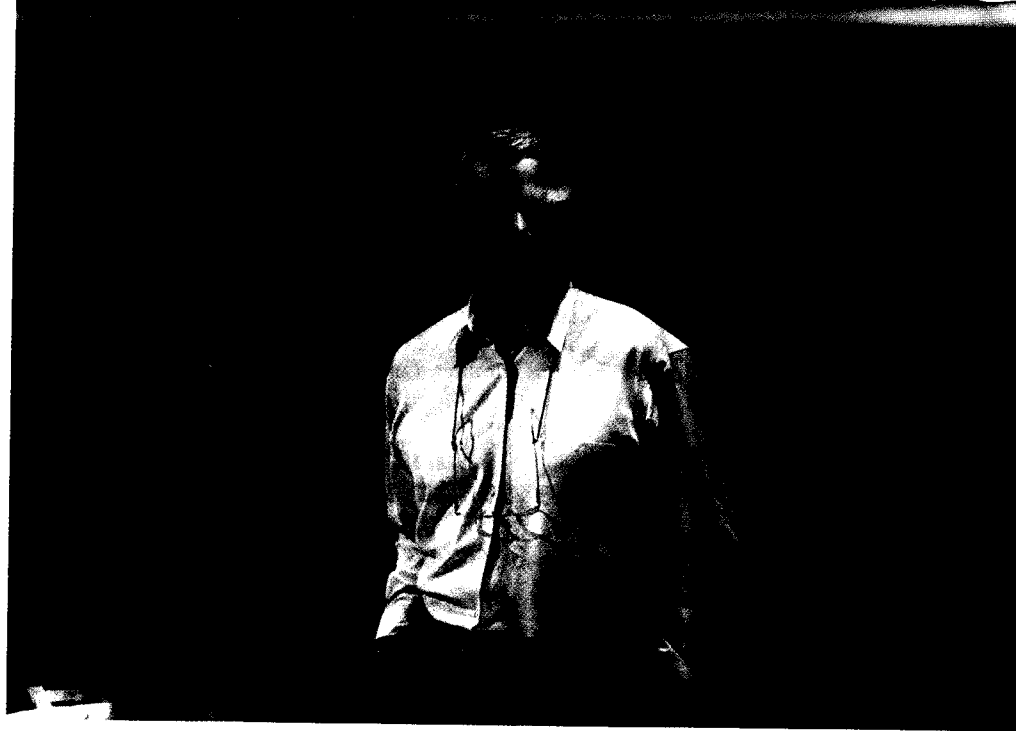
In person, Lubars is tall enough that he slouches to compensate, making him always seem ready to burst out of the limited space

**“When I see you  
calling Dusenberry or Miesmer,  
I wonder where you're going.  
They don't know  
about this stuff. This is what I'm  
coming to teach them.”**

he is taking up. The cocked eyebrows that can make his face look sinister or skeptical in publicity stills make it expressive up close. He gets impatient easily; making a cell-phone call from an airplane sitting on the runway, he sounds just about ready to demand that the crew let him off right then and there. The impatience, and also a compelling intensity, come out when he is talking—as he often is—about how the rest of the ad industry doesn't get it. He refers to his general distractedness as “my ADD” and swallows bunches of multicolored vitamins, as if ordinary food were not quite enough to sustain the Lubars pace.

Lubars insists that he does not think of himself as “the savior” of the ad industry, but does it in a way that tends to reinforce the idea that's exactly what he is. “People ask,” announces Lubars, “‘Who's going to be the savior of this tired old industry?’ To me, it doesn't need a savior.” When he really gets going, there is a swagger to his language. He will talk up the wonders of new media while slamming the idea that, Internet or no Internet, TiVo or not, everything has changed so completely that a smart advertising guy can't make it all right. “Technology experts were all saying, ‘We're the new marketing and these old bloated gasbag traditional TV agencies are going to go away,’” Lubars recalls. “I said to myself, ‘I don't like this, and I don't believe it.’ There's been 100-plus years of marketing knowledge. There's a craft to it, there's an art to it. You can't just learn how to do it because you're on the Internet. But what they're doing on the Internet, I can learn that.”

One word that is big in Lubars's vocabulary is *shill*. It gets turned into the noun *shilliness*, the adjective *shilly*, and a host of separate verb forms—to *shill*, to *be shilled*, to *shill at*. There is no greater term of contempt to Lubars. Shilliness encompasses a whole host of possible practical and moral failings in advertising—to be untrue, strident, hackneyed, unconvincing, obvious. “Remember the thing in *Wayne's World*,” Lubars asks me, “where the guy says, ‘All this commercialism, I can't stand it, it's giving me a headache,’ and



Retired BBDO chairman Phil Dusenberry in his office.