

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 99⁴⁴/₁₀₀ 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.

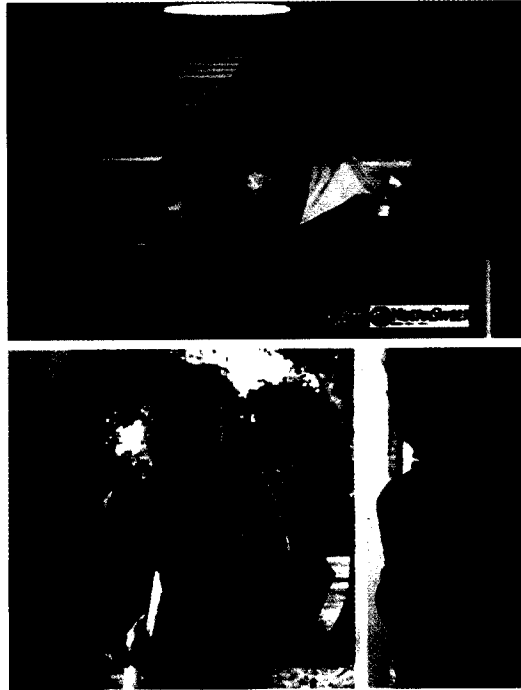
And indeed, if this is a transformative moment in advertising, arguably nobody has more at risk than BBDO. The history of BBDO is more or less the history of American advertising. The product of a 1928 merger between the George Batten agency and Barton, Durstine & Osborn, BBDO—as with USX, the letters 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.”)

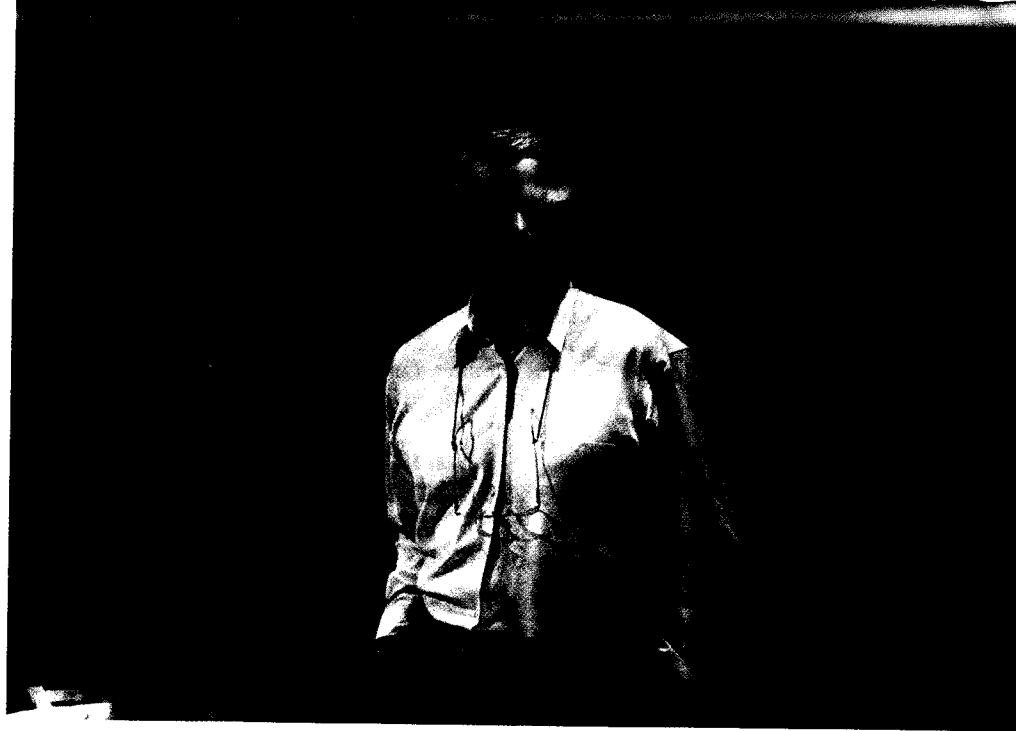
In person, Lubars is tall enough that he slouches to compensate, making him always seem ready to burst out of the limited space

**“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.

he's wearing a Reebok hat and jacket? And the other guy goes, 'Here, try this—Nuprin: little, better, yellow, different.'” Lubars sees his project—sees the project of advertising—as getting beyond little-better-yellow-different. Lubars leans in to make his point: “I’m saying, give the audience something real. Something that’s really entertaining and cool. Something I wouldn’t mind doing for ten minutes of my private life.”

Inside ad-agency executive suites, the notion that those ten minutes of private life are an increasingly valuable commodity has become the central, deeply worrying tenet of the conventional wisdom. Sitting in his office this summer, Lubars’s new boss, Andrew Robertson, preternaturally tan and exuding the kind of boisterous confidence you used to find in dot-com mini-moguls, fired off statistics at me in a practiced and effective routine: Number of channels in the average American home was 14, now 91. Pounds of junk mail every year was 180, now 340. And the amount of time spent with all media has gone up from 60 hours a week to . . . 60 hours a week. The great fear of advertisers is not simply that their audiences want to see ads in some new form. It is that they don’t relate to ads at all. “There’s nothing scarce now about the media. What is scarce now,” says Robertson, “is attention. Consumer attention.”

The Problem of Consumer Attention—the question, that is, of how you get consumers to give you 30 seconds of time, a minute, or even ten minutes in a world of expanding choices and fifteen-second cuts—is the obsessive concern of ad agencies today. The dangers on the horizon—technology, the proliferation of media, the hot new creative agencies in places like Miami—multiplied like the *Indians* coming over the hill. Stories of the rare ad that breaks through the clutter—the more oddball the better—are passed around like Harvard Business School case studies. Had I looked at *Subservientchicken.com*, Burger King’s Website plugging “chicken your way,” Robertson asked me. He looked at me with surprise and some pity when I told him I hadn’t. “Well, the most important thing about it,” Robertson told me, “is that 100 million people have spent seven and a half minutes each on it.”

In fact, the number of people who’ve looked at *Subservientchicken.com* is closer to 11 million than 100 million, which only emphasizes the desperation the ad industry feels to find something—anything—new. And that’s where Lubars’s promise comes in. Lubars sometimes refers to the audience as “victims” of advertising. If the problem with advertising, the old advertising, the advertising that played to a captive audience, is that it shills, that it sells too hard, in David Lubars’s world the way to get past consumer indifference is to stop selling. It is not to make advertising but to make entertainment that happens to sell stuff. “The audience is very sophisticated,” he says. “They like marketing, and they’re willing to play the game. But they’re willing to play the game right. ‘Truth. Don’t bullshit me.’”

In the most successful ads from Lubars’s tenure at Fallon, the sales pitch can feel snuck in. Often you will not know what is being advertised until the end: Only in the last seconds of the identity-theft commercials do you see the Citibank name. Other commercials look like public-service announcements. And then, of course, there are the BMW films. In Minneapolis, Lubars told me that the BMW films were about “reversing the polarity” of advertising. It is one of the big Lubars themes—if the advertising doesn’t reach the audience, let the audience come to the advertising. On the one hand, they take the age-old approach taken by ad agencies that want to prove their creative

chops—hire a big name director, make a mooo-viiiee, not just a commercial. And on the other, of course, they do it online, giving top brass the ability to reassure the clients that they are indeed in this great new world. So they satisfy both the right-brain half of the advertising mind that wants to be taken seriously for the “creative” work and the left-brain half that talks about consumers and technology and marketing communications.

In Lubars’s world the commercial is one extended anecdote, the pitch almost an afterthought. Nothing in the Citibank identity-theft commercials gives away what is being sold until the Citibank logo comes on in the last seconds of the ad. Ads like

that essentially invite the audience into a world that has its own logic. They are a chance to entertain or “to show how things really are.” They don’t shill. And so they give voice, in some sense, to every ad guy who has hated his job and every television watcher who has ducked out to

get some chips during the commercials.

“Selling stuff is not my job,” Lubars told me in New York. “My job is to create a lifelong partnership between brand and consumer. It’s like a marriage. You get married, you make this promise to each other, and then you help each other for the rest of your lives. You do things for each other. My job is to be the connective tissue in that marriage.”

That is the ultimate David Lubars promise. The ad agency’s job isn’t to nag us to buy products but to act as the broker between our trust and the Brand Promise. It’s advertising that, to take a page from another Citibank ad that Fallon made, says *thank you*. It’s a lovely vision: morning again in the advertising world.

When Lubars and I discussed where to meet in New York, he told me that he had grown up in Brooklyn; I suggested that we meet there. His press guy countered with the Brooklyn Diner, a theme restaurant on 57th Street and Seventh Avenue. You don’t have to be a big-deal French philosopher to notice that the substitution of Brooklyn Diner for Brooklyn reflects some deep-seated simulation-versus-reality issues.

THIS SUMMER, I sat at Michael’s, the midtown restaurant that is the unofficial club of New York’s media elite and their consiglieri, with Phil Dusenberry. Dusenberry was one of the key figures in the transformation of advertising from what he describes as “the three-martini lunch and eighteen holes of golf and making the clients feel comfortable” to a “big-time creative” endeavor. Inside the little BBDO universe, the talk was of whether Dusenberry had known what was going down with Ted Sann, but Dusenberry himself was more willing to talk about the big-picture history of advertising than the daily play-by-play. He had resigned himself to the idea that the adman’s creative life was finite. “If you want to talk to young people,” Dusenberry told me, “you need young people working on the account.” He had arrived in the Town Car that whisks him between appointments; he was working, he told me, on a documentary of Ronald Reagan’s funeral.

And yet it was on the old subjects of manipulation and persuasion—the brand, the brand, the brand—that Dusenberry remained almost weirdly eloquent. There we were at Michael’s, a place set up in such a way that you can see just about everybody from every table, and Phil Dusenberry, small, well kept, elfin in a blue polo shirt, sat declaiming over his bacon and eggs with his hand over his heart. “Every great advertising campaign has at the heart of it the true essence, the true substance that makes a promise to the consumer, that makes you want to have this brand,” Dusenberry said. “It makes you feel something about the brand.”

Lubars said that what he was trying to do in advertising was like what the Beatles did with Sgt. Pepper.

Something good, so that when you're in the supermarket going down that endless aisle of endless products, you're reaching for one of them mainly because its advertising has reached you on an emotional level. You don't think about it intellectually. You don't think, 'Is this 5 percent better or 10 percent whiter?' You're reaching for it because it made you feel something in here." He raises his hand to his heart. "It made you feel something good."

Some days earlier, Lubars had called to quiz me about other people I was interviewing. He'd heard that I had called Phil Dusenberry and BBDO New York vice-chairman Charlie Miesmer. This struck Lubars as a waste, or at least a misuse, of time. In Lubars's view, the story—the real story—was about the future of the media. "When I see you're calling Phil Dusenberry, or Charlie Miesmer, I wonder where you're going," Lubars told me. "They don't know about this stuff. This is what I'm coming to teach them."

It's easy to see the ascendancy of David Lubars at BBDO in exactly these terms: new versus old. Many observers have even mistaken it for the battle of creative Light against musty Darkness. Fallon, the agency that BBDO recruited Lubars from, looks the way an ad agency is supposed to look, the way it looks in *Fast Company*. There is a small indoor basketball court and, in one office, a mini shooting gallery with Osama bin Laden targets. (Red rock-'em-sock-'em America meets Blue funky-ad-agency America.) Instead of cubicles, there are "curvicles," and the whole place is creative in that no-right-angles kind of way, complete with gewgaws like foosball tables and binoculars affording an expansive view of the beautiful, jagged landscape of Minneapolis's abandoned factory districts. Everybody looks simultaneously creative and athletic, and generally appears capable not only of writing but of appearing in a commercial for upscale youth-oriented products.

BBDO, on the other hand, looks, as Gerry Graf puts it, like an insurance company. Its corporate structure is almost comically opaque; BBDO North America is part of a worldwide ad-agency holding company called BBDO Worldwide, which is the biggest part of a still bigger holding company called (cue ominous music) Omnicom. No longer located on Madison Avenue, it is now headquartered instead in the UBS building on Sixth Avenue, a place whose one whimsical touch is a set of slightly creepy 40-foot-tall nutcrackers that guard the entrance at Christmastime. BBDO's industry reputation for vicious intra-office politics is so widespread that BBDO executives feel compelled to offer unprompted denials—which actually manage to reinforce it. "You've heard that we have a reputation as being contentious and competitive," says Charlie Miesmer, who has worked at BBDO for 35 years and is close to Ted Sann. "That's because we're hard on people who come here with big reputations and don't live up to them."

But in one key sense, the similarities between the 68-year-old Dusenberry and the 45-year-old Lubars—a guy who urges you to listen to the Brian Jonestown Massacre ("Keeping music evil," according to the BJM's Website)—are greater than the differences.

Lubars himself often casts the difference between him and other senior advertising execs in generational terms. "They're 65, they don't need to figure out this new world. I'm 45, I can't afford not to." And yet both Lubars and Dusenberry represent the great conviction of American advertising, that certainty in the elusive Brand Essence—that great striving for reality and sensitivity and authenticity that makes Heineken proclaim that it is "true" and Coke throw up cinéma vérité spots telling you it is "real."

Consider two recent Fallon ads. The first, nominated for an Emmy (yes, there is an Emmy for advertising), is wordless. It consists of a charming if saccharine cartoon showing a man dressing up in a suit and getting on a plane for a job interview, worrying about his mismatched shoes. At the end, the United Airlines logo appears on the screen. It's a campaign that Lubars loves. "It's beautiful, it's emotional, it's sentimental," he says. "That won't win awards, but I love that campaign."

The second is for Subway restaurants. Subway's newest spokesperson, the 12-year-old, formerly overweight Cody, is filmed in soft focus, talking about how much it sucked to be fat. "When my brother would have friends over, I'd stay up in my room," Cody says, "afraid they'd call me fat or something. I'm Cody. I'm 12 years old." More scenes of Cody running around trees and creeks. Finally the message, as Jared Fogle, Subway's weight-loss-marvel spokesperson, comes onscreen clutching a pair of his own huge pre-weight-loss pants. Voice-over: "More

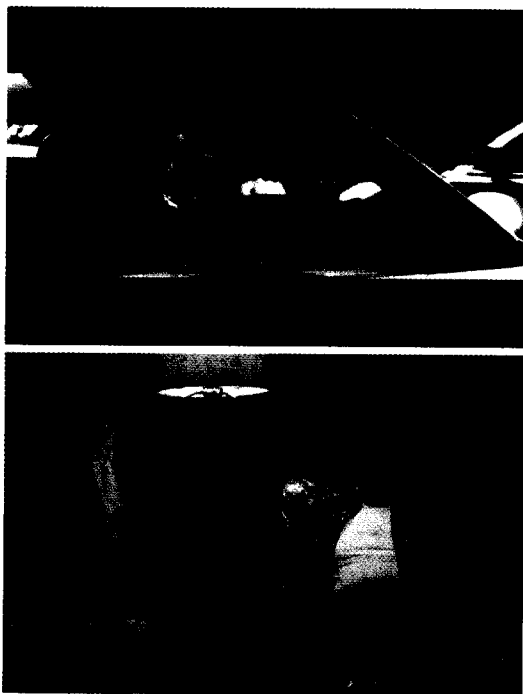
than anything, we want your children to live long and healthy lives."

Really? What about selling chicken-teriyaki sandwiches? It's as if the business of Subway is selling sandwiches but the essence of Subway is caring about your children. The business of United is flying planes and staying out of bankruptcy, but the essence of United is caring about your stupid job interview. "My job," says Lubars, "is to bring out the magic and power of the brand." The magic, the power of the soda, the insurance plan, the sleek silver car (surely that has a spirit!), the . . . the animating spirit of the branded beverage?!

THE HOTTEST AD agency in the country right now is probably Crispin Porter Bogusky, a Miami outfit that does work for Ikea, Burger King, and BMW's Mini—and, as it happens, is the agency that put together *Subservientchicken.com*. Now, in the ad world, "hottest" means a number of things. Crispin Porter's reputation rests in part on the sheer craziness of its ads. There is a certain school of advertising—

BBDO's own commercial for Pepsi Twist, for example—where the humor depends on a last bit that "undermines" expectations. It has, so to speak, a punch line. But one of the things that makes CPB's commercials so popular with cognoscenti is that the whole commercial is the punch line. The Burger King commercial starts with the guy sniffing his attractive co-worker's discarded Whopper wrapper and devolves from there.

But there's another thing about Crispin Porter's ads that makes them stand out. They do not pretend to (continued on page 101)



Fallon's work during Lubar's reign made a point of not looking like advertising. Above, a still from one of the short films for BMW (2002); below, a still from the recent Citibank identity-protection series.