

Upgrading the Quality of Advertising

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I have been in advertising all of my professional life. But there was a time when I seriously considered leaving advertising altogether. I recall this very vividly because the decision to stay played a significant role in my life.

In 1966, I had been in advertising for eight years and I was quite confused in my career. I was ready to pack and move on to something else, convinced that this was not the profession I wanted to pursue. I found emptiness in what I was doing.

1. MEETING JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ

I had got to a crossroad in my career, and felt that the only way to solve it was to leave the profession; then something very strange happened. I met a colleague who started to talk to me about Opus Dei. All he could in fact do was talk about the Work. In fact it got to the point that I asked him if he had no other conversation, other than the Work. Apparently he didn't.

His enthusiasm and perseverance wore me down. So one day I decided to go and meet this priest friend of his whom he constantly talked about. That first meeting left a deep impression on me. I found myself going back for more and more chats. We talked about many things. I told him about my profession. I told him about my doubts, about my hesitation to continue in advertising. He did not tell me what to do. He just listened. Asked a few questions here and there. We chatted a little more. He listened.

After a time it became clear to me that this man was not going to draw me a road map when it came to my professional work. The road map he was slowly drawing was for my spiritual life. I found out much to my surprise that all legitimate professions could be sanctified; even the advertising profession. It all depended on me!

That revelation made a tremendous impact on me. If I decided to stay in advertising it would be my decision. He wouldn't interfere. This was a decision I and I alone would have to make. Oddly enough when I realized this I looked at my entire profession in a different light. I no longer found it empty. I realized that I could — by doing my work well — turn it into prayer and help many people.

2. THE VALUE OF PUBLIC OPINION

I also got acquainted with the writings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá and learned from others about the affection he had for people in mass media. Although I must admit that to pinpoint where specifically in Blessed Josemaría's published works he expresses his favor for mass communication, is something I have been unable to do. Hopefully someone was able to point to me specific instances when he referred specifically to media. I do recall though that in a very brief personal encounter with him in Rome one year before he went to heaven, he told me how importance a role my vocation could have because it was directly related to public opinion!

Looking back at his life, what does set him apart from others who have been preaching about sanctifying one's life, is that he was a man who was well aware of contemporary trends and cultural and social changes. He was a man of the 21st Century. He recognized the value of communication and was himself a very good communicator, as we see in the films of his 'get-togethers'. Before others realized the value of film, he reluctantly allowed himself to be filmed so people all over the world could view his 'get-togethers'. He wanted us to get a good cultural and professional education, to be coherent Christians. For this, he constantly would push us to study to increase our professional prestige. He understood the world so well. He believed that we who are involved in media have a multiplier effect and what we do could influence so many people positively. And yet in his wisdom he did not want Opus Dei, as an institution to invest a cent in media related activities, since he always wanted that it would be the media professionals themselves acting with their example, freedom, and responsibility, who would make decisions in this field, without his having to give them professional advise.

Blessed Josemaría had a valuable message for us media practitioners: to me I interpreted it as follows. Each and everyone of us have a personal responsibility for the things we do. We should at all times defend the dignity of the person, and because we have the power of changing public opinion we should be very conscious of this power, and use it wisely and judiciously at all times. We cannot for one moment abuse this power.

He was a great lover of the truth and felt that ignorance was one of the biggest obstacles to overcome. As media practitioners we have to use the power we have to help eradicate ignorance. Ensuring for instance that the truth is always told: that the consumer is given the full truth. In instances when we feel that the truth is being compromised we have to speak out.

3. ADVERTISING CAREER INSPIRED BY ESCRIVÁ

With Blessed Josemaría as my guide I continued with the profession and last year, was retired by the advertising agency I had worked for continuously for 42 years.

How did Blessed Josemaría Escrivá influence my career in Advertising? For one thing he laid the foundation from which I operated. He opened my eyes to some simple and clear criteria to rely on in my day-to-day work. Remember what he once said that we are one big family each drawing from the same cauldron?

Perhaps I can best describe this by going into particular instances, which to me were inspired by Blessed Josemaría's teachings although I did not realize it at the time.

I recall a particular incident many years ago. It was during one of our regular Management Committee meetings. My boss brought up the topic of new business, and how important new business is for an advertising agency. It was a year where new business was absolutely essential to ensure operating in the black. Then he dropped the bombshell.

We were being offered by USAID to handle their campaign for Family Planning! The Philippine population was supposedly growing far too fast and whatever progress we would make economically, according to the pill-pushers, was quickly offset by the 'galloping' population increase. The simple solution was to curtail population growth.

At that time the proposition appeared logical to all those in the room. Fortunately I had been exposed to some lectures at the Center of Research and Communication, and this issue was exhaustively discussed. It was clear to me that I

had to oppose our taking on this new account, no matter how important it would be for our bottom line.

To say that I couldn't accept it because of religious convictions would have been respected, and management would not have assigned me to this new account. In other words, the Agency would have taken on the business anyway. I knew I had to oppose it but I needed a good argument to convince my boss and my colleagues in the Management Committee.

I didn't know then what hit me, I found myself using the only argument my boss would not dare go against. I told him that we had many very solid clients in our roster of accounts. And should the wives of some of these clients find out we were promoting family planning they would certainly take it against the Agency. This could in fact mean a loss of some of our existing business. Besides could we ill afford the negative publicity we would get or the backlash from some of the Catholics women's groups?

The argument appeared to have struck a cord. My boss immediately agreed and the subject was never discussed again.

A few months after this incident, a lady journalist who was writing on the advertising industry came to interview me and was very interested to talk about our refusal to go after the family planning account. I couldn't use the same arguments with her as I did with my boss, so I decided to use the economic arguments I learned at CRC. After explaining to her that population growth was not the answer to our country's ills, I told her that I rejected the business because I felt it unethical to take on an account based on a wrong premise. If population control was not a problem, why should we go out and use advertising to promote population control as a solution. If the client wanted to take the funds to promote health or good work ethics we would go out of our way to pitch for the business, after all J. Walter Thompson was a very ethical company.

She understood the argument perfectly. A few months later she was once again knocking at our doors not for an interview, but for a job. She had discussed with her husband going back to advertising. Her husband had, some years before, objected to her being in the business because he felt it was shallow, unethical, and frivolous. She pointed to us as the company she would be comfortable working for and used the arguments I told her for not accepting the new business prospect to convince her husband that she had found an agency that was serious about maintaining a high degree of integrity. As it turned out we got a great person joining our ranks and she stayed with us for fifteen years.

4. UPGRADING THE QUALITY OF ADVERTISING

We walked away from some easy money and ended up with good solid talent. Another lesson I learned was that there are no secrets in advertising. What is discussed in the confines of one's conference room finds itself in the market place. In a business that attracts a great bunch of raw talent you get the occasional individual who feels that the only way to catch attention is to appeal to man's baser appetites. In order to put a check on this, we initiated in the Agency a Review Board, or a Quality Control panel. Not an original idea, and since we had dismal success at convening review boards we decide to inject some fun and in the process give it meaning and value. Recognition by ones peers!

We soon noticed that most of the work produced by the Agency was being presented to the Review Board. The presentation to one's peers idea apparently worked. We set some very clear and concise guidelines to ensure that what we were presenting to our clients was good hard-selling advertising. In order to bring fun into the exercise we would ask the reviewing panel to grade the work. Anything over a 9.25 average we would reward with an ice cream for the presenting group. The beauty of the exercise is that the agency was producing superior advertising and winning the occasional award on the side, this motivated the creative people to generate high-level concept work and have left behind the cheap advertising techniques usually employed to attract attention.

The Review Board concept was a success story. What we were doing as regards the Review Board, got to be known by our peers in the industry, undoubtedly learned from some of our clients who gave the concept their full approval and support. Our clients would go as far as verify if the ads had gone through the Review Board.

During the Martial Law years in the 70s, when the Advertising Industry Association in the Philippines faced the prospect of the Military Censor evaluating ads, we made representations with the government and asked them if we would be allowed to police ourselves. They agreed. We drew a list of criteria very similar to the rules we use in our Review Board. This passed their approval and we were able to do our own censorship. We are proud to say that advertisements made in the Philippines are the best in Asia (no obscenity, no distorted values. When an offensive ad is released, the mechanisms are in place in the industry to remove them). We are also proud of the fact that Philippine ads have won and continue winning International Awards.

More than one Asian country has asked us for our rules to adapt them in their respective countries. They readily see the value of self-policing, in effect getting away from the clutches of government interference.

The longer I stayed with the Advertising Industry the clearer it became that criteria was something that was very much appreciated. So when I became Chairman of the Ad Board, I was able to impart to my fellow parishioners that we could in fact influence Media for the good. We in fact boycotted a television show that was trying to gain ratings or viewership via risqué skits and showing too much flesh. When the TV producer started to feel it in his pocket book he quickly reformatted his show. More importantly others saw we meant business and very quickly edited their shows accordingly.

5. UNSUNG HEROES IN ADVERTISING

It's an industry filled with rogues and with gems, just as any industry. You have, the charlatans, the glib-talkers, the superficial "Hollywood Man in a Grey Flannel Suit type", but you also have the solid, hard-working, deep-thinking, real professionals. The gems among the fakes I call them. To disabuse minds about the not-so-good reputation that some of my colleagues may have injected into the industry, I decided to write about the solid citizens we have in the industry. The book is entitled "Movers and Shakers in the History of Philippine Advertising". In a profession that has more than its share of rogues, it's good to feature the gems, the unsung heroes. The experience has been personally very rewarding. I have got to know individuals really well by doing their biographical sketches.

One fellow, a very good friend of mine who died last year, fits the title unsung hero to a Tee. He was deeply inspired by the teachings of Blessed Josemaría. In fact as I am writing this I remind a phrase Blessed Josemaría often stressed: "Drowning evil in an abundance of good is proper to our spirit". That's exactly what that friend of mine did!

He played a very strong role assisting the Archbishop of Manila in reviving the 'Catholic Mass Media Awards' (CMMMA). Today the CMMMA has been elevated to an accolade that stands for everything that is good and wholesome in the field of entertainment. The Catholic Mass Media Award is given every year to the Best Advertisement, The Best TV & Radio Programs, the best newspaper and so on.

Now whilst this is a very worthwhile project it takes time. Time to view and listen to the material. Last October as Chairman for Television I must have spent at least six entire days viewing TV programs. From the sublime to the ridiculous, as the saying goes. But as they say in Spanish, "Vale la pena"... "It is worth the pain".

After the People Power revolution of 1986, the newly appointed Chairman of the Development Bank of the Philippines then, a good friend of mine, faced

the task of getting the bank back on its feet. It had been through twenty years of mismanagement and mis-appropriations. Aside from the financial aspects, there were the non-financial aspects, like an officers corps and staff that were demoralized, divided into factions, and whose culture was more political than professional.

His solution for this non-fictional aspect was to use advertising and mass media. He worked with a team of great advertising professionals inspired by the teachings of Blessed Josemaría. They understood fully the extent of the problem and came up with advertisements highlighting integrity, professionalism, teamwork, and competence. The ads as you will soon see were done very professionally. They presented Philippine Values. They used the language local people use, when discussing certain noble traits such as ‘delicadeza’, and ‘palabra de honor’. They wanted to address these advertisements to the officers and employees of the bank, but in order to reach them, they pitched them to the general public through the mass media.

They hit two birds with one stone. The general public received the ads very well and reacted positively. More importantly, the officers and employees of the bank felt they had to live those virtues and abide by those values they were advertising for them to become genuine representatives of the new Development Bank of the Philippines.

In *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*, he said, “You can contribute a lot to promote among your co-workers the love of noble ideals, the desire to improve on personal selfishness, the sensitivity towards collective tasks, the fraternity”.

6. CONCERN FOR MEDIA PROFESSIONALS

As I had already mentioned, Blessed Josemaría believed in the great potential of media professionals to positively influence public opinion and culture. He was thus very keen on giving priority to the Christian and professional formation of media practitioners.

To this end, me and my colleagues in the industry have been very much involved in setting up and assisting the Institute of Communications in the University of Asia and the Pacific. The University’s Integrated Marketing Communication course is very quickly earning a first class reputation in the Philippines. Some of the finest professionals in the industry are teaching in this course. The course, which has the International Advertising Association approval, also has strong ties with Northwestern University in Chicago and the University of Navarre in Pamplona. More important, the students are exposed to the spirit and

teachings of Blessed Josemaría in this University, giving ever-brighter hopes to the future of the advertising industry in the country.

In an industry froth with frivolity, it is important to send these students forewarned of what they will meet along the way so they can discern the shaft from the grain.

The fifth year students are placed in advertising agencies and are subjected to loads that a young newly hired advertising executive would be subjected.

They stay with their respective agencies five days of the week. On the sixth day they are required to spend a day at the University. I have them for the first three hours. We carefully review their week. They are asked to tell their colleagues about experiences during the week. Their fellow students then pitch in with advice if someone has had any difficulty. I also ask the guest lecturer, whom I occasionally invite from the industry, to participate with advice. Whenever I see something is right, I point this out and explain why. Individuals that I feel need more guidance I tend to talk to separately.

In asking for feedback at the end of the course this has been highlighted as a strong point.

The top advertising agencies that we have chosen to take in our students are very happy with our graduates, grabbing them as soon as they complete their studies. So far we have got 96% of these graduates to receive offers after graduation by the very agencies that have had them as interns.

In conclusion. I want to take this opportunity to personally thank Blessed Josemaría for being so fort-right and direct in the way he communicated. He was never short in calling a spade a shovel.

For us in Mass Communications it will well behoove us to try and imitate his directness. And more important to try and continue his teaching to those in Mass Communications! As Josemaría Escrivá realized, those in Mass communications have a great capacity to spread a lot of good, and eradicate ignorance, evil's best ally!