
Chapter Eighteen

The Boatmen's Guy

I'm no business scholar, but I can tell you one thing, American Business is changing. Consolidation is a reality in almost every industry from fast food to aerospace. The big guys are getting bigger. It's really about survival. And it's bound to affect everyone who works for a living in this country.

In 1996, I moved from Miami to St. Louis to manage the Boatmen's Bank business for TBWA Chiat/Day. That opportunity was a great one for me. I was Account Director at one of the nation's premier creative agencies. The advertising for Boatmen's featured TV spots starring Thom Sharp as "The Boatmen's Guy." Using his folksy midwestern brand of humor to pitch everything from Home Loans to branch Grand Openings he helped make the bank seem approachable and friendly. If you lived in Missouri between 1990-1996 you probably encountered "The Boatmen's Guy" on TV from time to time. I was the last guy to manage that account.

Here's why:

On August 30-31 in 1996 The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal contained stories about NationsBank's intention of acquiring Boatmen's in a mega bank merger that would make NationsBank the 4th largest bank in the U.S. In spite of grass roots efforts lead by a KMOX Radio and The Everyday section of The St. Louis Post-Dispatch to "Save The Boatmen's Guy" it became quite clear that NationsBank had no room in their advertising templates for Thom Sharp's character or TBWA Chiat/Day's brand of advertising.

The New York Times on October 2, 1996 featured Hugh McColl Jr., the chairman of NationsBank in its Business Day section. Here's part of what they reported:

"Our goal has been to build a very strong national company," Mr. McColl said, "and that's been our goal for 25 years." First,

the bank built a strong presence in the Southeast, and when the regional interstate banking laws allowed it to expand nationwide - due in part by personal lobbying by Mr. McColl - it set its sights higher. Indeed, Mr. McColl was tempted by a merger offer with Bank-America Corporation a year ago, although that potential blockbuster of a deal foundered on the question of who would run what would have been the nation's first coast-to-coast banking institution”

The banking landscape continues to change to this day. Bank America and NationsBank eventually found a way to get hitched.

My position became moot. Boatmen's Bank was a vanishing entity. I became the new business guy. Another stint at agency rainmaker. It was great fun but precarious, as usual. No new business precipitation, no future. (It's a brutal deal but that's the way it usually works.)

New Business takes time and TBWA Chiat/Day, it seemed didn't have any more of it to spare on St. Louis. They decided to cut their loses and closed the St. Louis office. The announcement of the close became official in November of 1997. The office was a drain on the system that included offices in New York and Venice, California (where the real action is). TBWA Chiat/Day St. Louis was crippled by the Boatmen's account loss.

Here's how the St. Louis Business Journal reported it in its November 17-23 issue:

“TBWA Chiat/Day, the advertising agency best recognized for developing the “Boatmen's Guy” campaign, will close its St. Louis office Dec. 31. The agency, employing 36 locally, is shutting its doors to concentrate on the New York and Los Angeles markets and on larger clients, including Nissan and Taco Bell.”

A year later NationsBank and Bank of America's bank merger was well under way. And no-one at the Bank is sweating bullets over the fate of an advertising agency. Believe me.