

## Chapter Six

### *Herb, Hank, and Frank*

My successful tour on the Pepsi account with Tracy-Locke, eventually (not smoothly or naturally), led to a big job offer at BBDO/New York the sister agency of Tracy-Locke. Regional marketing at Tracy-Locke had given me the opportunity to roll my sleeves up in the cola wars in New York, New Jersey and even for a stint in Los Angeles where I was challenged to deliver “cross fertilization” of ideas. I had been successful in the (arguably) more competitive eastern markets like New Jersey and Philadelphia where stores tend to be smaller and shelf space was at a greater premium.

Now, BBDO wanted someone who had success dealing with the demanding Pepsico culture to lead Kids’ Marketing and New Product Development for its Pizza Hut Restaurant Chain. (Pepsico has since spun off their restaurant businesses.) I jumped at the opportunity but this was an ill-fated move for me from the beginning. For starters, New Yorkers know nothing about Pizza Hut pizza. They wouldn’t be caught dead in a Pizza Hut for fear their friends would think they’d lost their mind. New York is full of Pizza snobs. They buy pizza by the slice at Mom & Pop shops. Franchise pizza, never. These were the same people who were expected to create advertising for the chain. It’s not important to have a passion for the product you handle. However, complete disdain is not good either.

I was at BBDO long enough to be involved in a deal with Nickelodeon that would combine a long term media buy with a series of commercials featuring “Hank and Frank” in a series of funny TV spots. Hank and Frank were brothers who were trying to convince mom and dad to take them to Pizza Hut on Tuesday Night (Kids’ Night at Pizza Hut). The reasoning was sound enough. Get kids to drive purchases (family dining occasions) on a specific off-peak weeknight.

BBDO is an exciting place to work especially for art directors

and writers. It is the largest agency in America where “Creative is King.” Meaning: It’s a place where ideas are nurtured and supported above all else. The consequence of this philosophy is that clients must want blockbuster hits every time. And they must also be willing to pay for it. Phil Duesenberry lead the agency’s creative ranks and had become a star with Pepsico.

I’m writing this account more than 10 years after my experience at BBDO. I’m not sure to this day why I was cut from that team. It could be that an important client had “asked me off the business” (a brutal but very real and all too common career crisis in advertising). Or after a few short months the creative culture at BBDO didn’t see me as passionate enough. It could be that I was too anxious to catch the train home to my family in New Jersey at that stage in my life.

While at J. Walter Thompson, years earlier, I had a stint on another quick service restaurant concept, Burger King. The agency was working its way through a flop TV campaign featuring a Nerdy character called Herb who had never tasted a Burger King Whopper. The campaign got clobbered. McDonald’s was running hard-hitting product oriented advertising that generated product trial. I was scheduled to relocate to JWT in San Francisco and work out of the office there. The move was delayed several times pending management approvals. Because of my scheduled move I became aware of client problems in the Western part of the country which appeared to be systemic of an agency-client relationship growing stale. That’s when I managed to make a graceful exit to the Matchbox Toy account across town. That move was timely indeed.

I was slated to be among the 55+ employees to get the ax upon the announcement that Burger King was taking its \$200MM+ account elsewhere after nearly 8 years at J. Walter Thompson. (Beautiful timing, huh?)

So, in essence I have worked on two of the nation’s largest Quick Service Restaurant Chain accounts for a sum total of less than one year. What a business.

I left J. Walter Thompson in 1986 in the midst of the biggest account shift in advertising history to that point. I left BBDO in 1990 under a cloud I have difficulty explaining to this day. I've come to view the advertising business as a cruel game of musical chairs. You either lose your chair because you're not quick enough or someone pulls it out from under you. Or you simply become uncomfortable in your seat (for any number of reasons).

BBDO pulled my chair out from under me. I was dismissed from the biggest job I'd had to that point in my career. Losing your job in advertising is all too common. There are a million and one reasons you can lose your job. The easiest one to understand is due to account loss. (e.g. "We've just lost over \$200,000,000 in billings because Burger King wants to take its business elsewhere. We're gonna have to make some cuts".) The stated reason I lost my job at BBDO was: "Casting is critical." Imagine that.

BBDO apparently believes that account guys can be called up from central-casting and plugged in to manage a \$40 Million Dollar account. No kidding. That's what they told me. "Nothing personal Wes, but in this business casting is critical." They hired me to manage clients in a culture they assumed would be most similar to what I was used to from Pepsico. They did little or nothing to make me feel comfortable at BBDO. I was a bad fit. Next!

That really stung. I was living in New Jersey, home of the nation's highest automobile insurance rates, in a house in South Orange I couldn't afford, with responsibility for two kids and a wife. It was time to evaluate options and do some serious soul-searching. This was the first time I ever had to collect unemployment compensation. A humiliating yet necessary indignity. I knew I had to consider a revised career plan. I read *What Color is Your Parachute?* and *How to get a Better Job, Quicker*. I perused through dozens of other books on related topics. I paid a career counselor to help me sort out my skill-set and consider options outside of the advertising business. I was

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a prize fighter on the mat trying to get up for another round. I had to. And I refused to be defeated as a mis-cast advertising man.