

The 11 occasionally, immutable laws of advertising

 By [Damon Stapleton](#)

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I have been in advertising for twenty-five years and I swore I would never write a 'Ten rules of' article. So, I didn't. I wrote one with eleven laws instead. In my defence, I felt I had to because in the last eight weeks there have been an endless torrent of articles about how things will change, often written by people who have never had to make anything the public saw.

Mark Ritson coined the beautiful and very apt phrase 'change porn'. In advertising, we love anything that changes because it means opportunity and more money. However, if there is anything, I have learnt in my time in the business is that the important things don't change because they are true. And, some things that are new and are acclaimed as the answer to everything often are not. Anybody remember Vine? How about Google glasses or Pokemon Go? I can remember being in meetings where I was told they were going to be the answers to everything.



While writing this I found some fantastic quotes from Bill Bernbach the founder of DDB. I have used them liberally in this article because they prove that the important stuff really hasn't changed in 70 years. I also think they are a large dose of common sense. A cure our industry really needs right now.

Mr Bernbach said:

“ It took millions of years for man's instincts to develop. It will take millions more for them to even vary. It is fashionable to talk about changing man. A communicator must be concerned with unchanging man with his obsessive drive to survive, to be admired, to succeed, to love, to take care of his own. ”

So, if people don't change, what about making things for people? Has making really changed? We love the shiny and the

new but when it comes to making great work there are certain ingredients, attitudes and obstacles that will always be there. And, they are there because imperfect human beings are involved. A fact, that we really should discuss far more often than we do. People will always be the difference rather than technology or the process. So, here is my list of ingredients. My hard-earned recipe for survival. Things to think about. Things to avoid. Things that have always created great work and things that will always create great work. Enjoy.

1. Nobody cares about advertising.

This is a great first law because it does two things. It keeps egos in check. And I am talking about for both creatives and clients. Ego can do a number of things that are good and bad. It can keep an idea alive. It can kill one stone dead. It can also make the unimportant very important. In our world, ideas and advertising are everything. For the consumer, not so much. Actually, not at all. Remembering this stops the insanity and keeps you looking at what matters. The second thing this law does is makes creatives try harder. Because, if people don't care, we must make them care. This is something we should all remember. Often banality is seen as less of a risk than trying something 'creative'. I disagree. And, it is certainly a waste of money.

2. If no-one notices your advertising, everything else is academic.

Another brilliant and simple observation from Mr Bernbach. It is also the flip side of law number one. So, how do you get noticed? That leads to a lot of more questions. How much pain can you take? How much do your people go beyond what is required? How much do they want it? How deep are they prepared to dig to get an idea made? How much conflict are they willing to manage, with clients, internally, with the industry, to get an idea made with minimal compromises? Caring is not a choice. And it definitely is not always easy. However, it is the answer and the difference. It should always be your standard operating procedure. It is also how you get noticed.

3. Faith is not just a song by George Michael.

The process of making something new, fresh and exciting has a strange problem. If it is new, it hasn't been done. So, a large part of the process of making work that gets noticed is trying to eliminate risk. That gets you to a point. And then, there is a moment when you must take the risk. You must trust that it will all work. This is where a great relationship between a client and an agency is worth more than anything. You can have as many zoom calls as you like, if you don't have trust, the last step will not happen. The work will fall at the last hurdle.

4. Would you sit next to you at a dinner party?

This is one of my favourite lines from the very famous Economist campaign. To me, it says in the most elegant way that you could be in the right place at the right time but that is not enough. You cannot be boring. You must have something to offer for people to listen. Just staring at the consumer is called stalking and shouting the same thing over and over is called being unpleasant. A bit of charm, a story a little bit of wit is what is required to succeed at dinner parties. Advertising is no different. Seduction is an old-fashioned word. Perhaps, it is time for us to make it modern again.

5. You will never see a statue of a committee.

If there was ever a law in advertising, it would be the following sentence. The chance of an idea surviving is inversely proportional to how many people are in the room. There is a simple reason for that. More people, more suggestions and more considerations. Invariably, these suggestions are coming from what is important to each individual. That many perspectives just give you a laundry list of things to do, rather than an idea. Or, to put it another way you end up trying to find a needle by building a haystack.

6. Ideas are like goldfish. Easy to kill.

In Silicon Valley, there are companies that have a rule where you must talk an idea up for the first 5 minutes. You are not allowed to say why an idea won't work; you have to say why it will work. I have always said it is easy to have 100 ideas but

it's hard to care about one. Our business is the ideas business and that is part of the problem. We have lots of ideas so we don't really look after them as well as we could. We find one thing wrong with an idea and it's dead. There is no other business in the world that throws away literally millions of ideas away each year. Whoever figures out how to harvest all those banished ideas will make a lot of money.

7. Never put truffle oil in the microwave.

Quality is an actual thing that has value. We are obsessed with quantity over quality but ask yourself what you remember. The number of ads that ran or the impression they made? Cadbury Gorilla first ran 13 years ago. And we still remember it. What is that worth? Making something of quality matters. And I think it matters today more than ever. Quality is a massive factor for the products we sell. It should also be true for the communications we make about those products. Consumers can tell when you have cut corners.

8. You can't handle the truth.

The most powerful element in advertising is the truth. In my career it is funny just how many people have asked me to mask a bad product or a brand that genuinely had no promise. One of the great delusions in our business is thinking what is truly fantastic in our world is great in the real world. All a good ad does for a bad product is let more people know a bad product exists, far more quickly. Consumers know, trust me, consumers know. Find something true and tell people in an entertaining way will always be the answer.

9. Jargon. Latin for bullsh*t.

When people use big words, it is often because they are not saying anything. I have been in meetings that have gone on for hours because people have used complex language masking the fact there is no idea at the centre of the 100-page PowerPoint. Let's just all remember, if you look up the word pivot, it means turn. And content is just another word for stuff.

10. Focus on the picture, not the frame.

"Shit that arrives at the speed of light is still shit." One of my favourite quotes from the late great David Abbott. We spend huge amounts of time thinking about how something reaches you. The delivery mechanism. But do we spend as much time on what we are delivering? I have always felt advertising is a barter process. Give the consumer something entertaining or informative and they will give you something even more valuable. Their time. The truth is these days you need both the picture and the picture frame. But, a gallery of empty frames is going to sell very little.

11. Have fun underwater.

I always use this phrase with young creatives. It means if you can have fun under pressure you might make it. Because, that is where and how you find the great ideas. That place you find after fear. As things get faster, we have become enamoured with process and formulas. However, to paraphrase Leonard Cohen, it's the cracks that let the light in. You can't find fun on a balance sheet, but it is priceless. Fun lets you explore unconventional wisdom and what some call stupid ideas. And stupid often becomes genius when you add time. Fun and humour unlock new ways and ideas. Fun is the one ingredient that makes creativity happen. It is amazing how it puts people into a mindset where anything is possible. Ask yourself why you get better or different ideas from certain agencies. Why are some agencies so much better than other agencies if they have similar ingredients? The answer is not what the building looks like but how the building feels.

So, there they are, the creative laws of the universe. I guess the reason I called them occasionally immutable laws is that is how creative laws work. There will be moments where they are life and death. Where following them will be the difference between work being made or an idea dying. And the next day, they seem unimportant and you can't remember why you were worried. I guess creativity on a Monday is different to creativity on a Tuesday. That's creativity for you. It doesn't make sense until it does. Which is also why it is so valuable.

"Hell, there are no rules here – we're trying to accomplish something." – Thomas Edison

ABOUT DAMON STAPLETON

Damon is regional chief creative officer for DDB in New Zealand and Australia. Before that, ECD at Saatchi and Saatchi Australia, before that, group ECD of TBWA Hunt Lascaris and global ECD of Standard Bank. He has won over 500 awards internationally, including a D&AD Black Pencil, Cannes Grand Prix, Grand Clio, ADC Black Cube and most effective ad in the world by Warc 100. Damon is now regional chief creative officer for DDB in New Zealand and Australia...

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