

Elizabeth Howard

'Whatever Happened to Madison Avenue? Advertising in the '90s'

*By Martin Mayer,
Little, Brown and Co.
(Boston, Toronto,
London), 1991.
U.S. \$22.95.*

Madison Avenue. Reminisce and the words conjure up *the adman*, wearing a gray flannel suit, wing-tip shoes and a Cartier tank watch, savoring a steak and sipping a dry martini. Meanwhile, back at the agency, a creative team is working late into the night writing a slogan and designing the visuals that will become the cornerstone of a brilliant campaign.

If this image seems out of date with Madison Avenue, circa 1991, it is. Madison Avenue, while still the sobriquet of the industry, is a shadow of its former self. The "why" is the question Martin Mayer examines in "Whatever Happened to Madison Avenue? Advertising in the '90s."

Mayer, the prolific New York author, was commissioned by the American Association of Advertising Agencies to write this book because he knows the business. In 1958 he published "Madison Avenue: U.S.A." (Harper & Brothers, New York), a book he describes as a "reporter's book on advertising." Mayer conducted more than "400 interviews and spent over a year of research" in his effort to identify and chronicle the pulse of the industry.

The mid-'50s were the zenith of advertising. The post-war economy was booming and television was creating new possibilities for selling goods that were

readily available at the shopping centers being constructed all across the U.S. An effective advertising campaign created brand identity and added value to a product, giving one product a competitive advantage over another. Additionally, a symbiotic relationship developed between the client and advertising mavens, who suggested ways to improve a product by changing its color or adding a new ingredient. Advertising was a glamor field and attracted, as Mayer notes, the best and the brightest.

Time, economic cycles and technology have changed the world. The global marketplace is cluttered with products, the sophisticated consumer is bombarded with images and effective selling means reaching the individual in a highly segmented effort. Mayer quotes Laurel Cutler of the ad firm FCB Leber Katz in "Whatever Happened ..." as commenting: "Mass marketing has been dead for 10

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years. Technology now makes it possible to market to one person at time — or to a small number of people motivated by the same hot button."

"Whatever Happened to Madison Avenue?" begins with an overview of the industry in which Mayer briefly outlines the points made in "Madison Avenue: U.S.A." The book continues with a look at specific campaigns: the Apple campaign organized by Chiat/Day; the positioning (and market loss) of Colgate products, and, the ups and downs of other recognizable campaigns for well-known brands.

Mayer covers all of the reasons advertising is changing: maturing markets and the proliferation of products; direct

mail and in-store promotions; the role of distribution; consumer-driven societal trends; and, of course, the fact that the major agencies are now part of international communication conglomerates, run by numbers crunchers, concerned with short-term profits. Clearly, Madison Avenue has changed.

What is fascinating about both of these books (and a re-read of "Madison Avenue: U.S.A." is strongly recommended) is the

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difficulty in defining advertising — and its role in the marketplace. In the last chapter of "Madison Avenue: U.S.A.," Mayer writes: "There is no general theory of what advertising is, or how it works."

One of Mayer's concluding comments in "Whatever Happened" is: "In 1991, and perhaps for some time thereafter, money will be scarce and as a result, the demand for imagination may rise." And Mayer muses: Will young investment bankers who are disenchanted with Wall Street think about moving back to Madison Avenue? An interesting thought — perhaps this isn't the nadir of an industry, it's the swing in a cycle!

"Whatever Happened to Madison Avenue?" was published in January 1991, before the dissolution of the Soviet empire, which is opening opportunities to promote new products, build brand identity and add value to mature products. With the rapidity of change these days, one expects Martin Mayer will be commissioned to publish another book on the industry — but it will not be 33 years in the future.

Elizabeth Howard is the principal of Elizabeth Howard & Company, a New York-based marketing communications firm.