



David Ogilvy

The most famous advertising man in the world

A speech at the University Club – New York

by Kenneth Roman

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David Ogilvy, who died in 1999 at the age of 88, described himself as a Scotsman. I asked my authority on things Scottish, how can Ogilvy be a Scot? He was born in England and grew up there. He had an Irish mother. His father was a Scot. “That’s all that counts,” was the reply.

Ogilvy was the most famous advertising man in the world. How do we know that? Because he **told** us so. He’d say, “I’m the most famous advertising man in the world. All the others are dead!”

By that, he put himself in the company of Bill Bernbach, Leo Burnett, Fax Cone, Albert Lasker, Ted Bates, Rosser Reeves and other giants of the business. The list changes, depending on the compiler. It **always** includes Ogilvy.

His competitors put him there. Ed Ney, who led Young & Rubicam, says: “He was bloody smart. Very competitive. He brought style to the business. Bernbach was OK , but David was the best of the best.”

In 1965, *Fortune* magazine asked “Is Ogilvy a Genius?” and concluded he might be. In 1975, *Time* called him “the most sought-after wizard in the advertising industry.”

Earlier this year, *Adweek* magazine asked people in the business “Which individuals – alive or dead – made you consider pursuing a career in advertising?” Ogilvy topped the list. When they surveyed students, the same answer. David made the business attractive – and thereby attracted bright people. His best-selling book *Confessions of an Advertising Man* is the only book on advertising most people have ever read. It was published in 1962, and has just been reissued in the U.K. (more than 40 years later). It influenced the views of many people about the business.

He was strikingly handsome. When he arrived in the U.S. , the writer Ruth Gordon described him as “the tall young man with the flaming red hair”. Rosser Reeves said, “In those days, David looked just like Lord Byron. Since he didn’t represent any competition, we all opened our doors to him and told him what we knew.” Would they be surprised!

His entry into the company of giants started with several (to use the *phrase du jour*) iconic campaigns.

- “The man in the Hathaway shirt” with his aristocratic eye patch.
- “The man from Schweppes is here” introduced Commander Whitehead, the elegant bearded Brit, bringing Schweppes (and “Schweppervesence”) to the U.S.
- Perhaps the most famous headline in the car business – “*At 60 miles an hour the loudest noise in this new Rolls-Royce comes from the electric clock*”.

- *“Pablo Casals is coming home – to Puerto Rico”*. Ogilvy said this campaign, which helped change the image of a country, was his proudest achievement.
- Perhaps his greatest sales success (for which he is less recognized) – *“Only Dove is one-quarter cleansing cream”*. With this positioning, still being used 50 years later, Dove now outsells every soap in the U.S. and around the world.

Ogilvy’s advertising broke new ground and was talked about.

He took the concept of brand image from the academic world and injected it into the lexicon of advertising. In 1955 he told the 4A’s – the American Association of Advertising Agencies: “Every advertisement should be thought of as a contribution to the complex symbol which is the brand image.”

He taught the concept of quality. Quality expressed in visual taste and literate copy, and expressed in the credo: “Always give your product a first-class ticket through life.”

He made the business more professional – in the use of research to test ads and in building a body of knowledge about what works in advertising.

He changed the economics of advertising in being the first to work for fees instead of media commissions (many of his competitors regarded him as a traitor).

He was the first consumerist, and preached: “The consumer is not a moron, she is your wife. Never write an advertisement you would not want your own family to read. You would not tell lies to your wife. Don’t tell them to mine.”

He was one of the chief architects of a new kind of international advertising agency and one of the first to see the benefits of global brands.

He trumpeted the virtues of direct marketing before others, and took as his own the battle cry of the direct marketers – “We Sell. Or Else.”

He built a major agency and institutionalized its values so deeply that, unlike most others created by a charismatic founder, it prospered after his retirement, survived a hostile takeover, and is still one of the most respected agencies today.

Where did all this come from?

This is not a total Horatio Alger story. Ogilvy came from a reasonably distinguished family (he was related to Rebecca West) and was educated in a Scottish “public” school (private to us).

His success, however, did not come from any academic training. He was tossed out of Oxford for not studying. He became a chef at the Hotel Majestic in Paris. He sold Aga cooking stoves (“the most expensive and best cooking stove”) door to door in Scotland, and was so successful the company asked him to write a sales manual for others.

The manual included tips like these:

“The Aga is the only cooker in the world with a guaranteed maximum fuel consumption. It is guaranteed to burn less than four [British] pounds worth of fuel a year. Stress the fact that no cook can make her Aga burn more fuel than this, however stupid, extravagant or careless she may be, or however much she may cook. If more fuel is consumed, it is being stolen, and the police should be

called in immediately..."

He was 25 years old at the time.

Partly because of this manual and partly through his brother Francis, who worked there, he got a job as a trainee at Mather & Crowther in London. In 1938, he persuaded the firm to send him to the U.S. to study American advertising techniques. At the end of a year, he delivered his findings to his associates in London and announced he was resigning to come to America .

He went to work with George Gallup's Audience Research Institute in Princeton, saying it was "the luckiest break of my life." He learned about research and made research central to his philosophy of creating advertising. During what he called "The Hitler War", he worked in British Intelligence for Sir William Stephenson – you may recall the book *A Man Called Intrepid*. After the war, he bought a tobacco farm in the Amish country in Pennsylvania, grew a beard and learned to love their "simpler ways". He was not cut out to be a farmer.

In 1952, at the age of 38, having barely worked in advertising, he opened his own agency. He billed himself as Research Director. "Madison Avenue thought I was nuts," he said. "What could this Scotsman know about the business?" And where did he learn it?

Many of us have tried to understand the secret of Ogilvy's success. I believe it starts with his inquiring mind.

He was a student of the business. He said he had read every book on advertising. He particularly admired Claude Hopkins and recommended his book *Scientific Advertising* to everyone. Hopkins, he said, "is to advertising what Escoffier is to cooking". He studied the direct mail writer John Caples, and urged others to do so.

He listened. Ogilvy was a world-class listener, and asked questions of every person who came his way. Even sitting next to him at a dinner table could be unsettling. People expected the famous man to pontificate. He didn't. He interrogated. One lady told me that by the end of dinner, he knew more about her than did her mother.

He soaked up every experience.

His principles of management came in part from his experience in a French kitchen – standards of hard work, discipline, and excellence. He put those principles into a house advertisement, "How to run an advertising agency". Ten years after the ad ran, reprints were still being requested by clients.

Selling cooking stoves to Scottish housewives solidified beliefs about the purpose of advertising. As he later wrote, "No sale, no commission. No commission, no eat. That made an impression on me."

From Gallup, he learned about testing ads and the concept of factor analysis – identifying factors that predict why one advertisement might score better than another.

Ogilvy delivered his ideas with a unique and powerful writing style. "I believe in the dogma of brevity," said Ogilvy. One agency colleague describes his writing as coming at people in short pistol shots.

Instead of descriptive adverbs, he searched for the **perfect** (usually memorable) word – what he called "the burr of singularity". As in *Confessions of an Advertising Man* . Or "We won't hire nepots or spouses". Bullet-like writing that went straight to the target, with no padding to soften the impact.

He collected and repeated memorable truths like:

“Search the parks in all the cities, you won’t find statues of any committees.”

Or:

“Pay peanuts, and you get monkeys.”

David was a force. Once he had decided on something, he would mention it with a mild comment. Then he’d follow it with a memo or letter, send others to push the idea, mail clippings of articles – a tidal wave of communications. One day I told Bill Phillips I had received five missives from David. He said he got 15.

In conversation, if he agreed with what you were saying, he’d nod. If he disagreed, nothing. He’d just go back to his office and write a memo – often terrible, sometimes vicious. A coward in person, he could be a bully behind a typewriter.

To understand David, you had to understand he was an actor. He had an actor’s sense of center stage and knew how to steal a scene. He used drama to make his points – and dressed for his parts. There was a theatrical delivery to his English public school accent.

When he began to make his mark on Madison Avenue, *Fortune* described him:

“At fifty-three, Ogilvy is a remarkable young-looking man, with wavy, dark-blond hair (cut rather long), blue eyes, and a fair complexion, who might easily be mistaken for a successful British actor. He smokes a pipe, his speech is that of an English gentleman, and he wears tweed to the office, where he is served tea every afternoon by a maid named Bridey Murphy. His vests have lapels.”

On state occasions, he would don (there is no other word) a royal blue velvet vest of vaguely ecclesiastical derivation.

In later years, he wore a dark blue double-breasted blazer. When delivering a speech, after his introduction, he would take off his blazer and pointedly drop it on the floor – exposing the bright red lining and red braces. (Not suspenders, which in England are lady’s garters.) A speech consultant who considered him such a showman said that if he came to her for help, she’d say, **go home!**

He was driven around New York in a Rolls-Royce, before there were many around. He sometimes wore a cape. It was quite a show.

He charmed his clients. When he saw Helena Rubinstein – Madame Rubinstein, as she was called – getting out of a car near a puddle, he ran across the street to lay down his jacket for her to walk on.

The drama was used for effect – and to make a point.

When he felt creative awards were diverting copywriters from the true purpose of advertising, he launched his own award – for sales. The David Ogilvy Award was established to recognize the agency campaign which did most to improve a client’s sales or reputation. A small red plaque and \$10,000 cash to the winner was accompanied by this admonition to others:

“If you, my fellow copywriters or art directors, want to win the award, devote your genius to making the cash register ring.”

When he wanted to emphasize the importance of hiring better people, he gave each director a set of Russian nesting dolls. Inside the largest doll was a smaller one, then a smaller one, and so on. Around

the smallest doll, he had placed a slip of paper that said:

“If we hire people who are smaller than we are, we will become a company of dwarfs. If we hire people who are larger than we are, we’ll become a company of giants.”

“Hire people who are better than you,” he said, “and pay them more if necessary. That’s how we’ll build a great agency.”

As a memo, this would have been forgotten. Nobody forgot the Russian Dolls. I remember leaving a meeting with a new hire who clearly was not going to make it, hearing someone mutter “Russian Dolls”.

He cultivated and flaunted his eccentricities (not all of them attractive).

Like getting up and walking out of a meeting when he was restless or bored. Like pretending to forget names. A creative director he didn’t like affected what we called Dr. Zhivago shirts; they reminded David of a barber’s shirt, so he’d ask, “How’s the barber?”

Restaurants were the worst. He’d go to a fine French restaurant and order corn flakes. If service was slow, he’d bang his silverware on the table and exclaim, “I want my food! I want my food!” He was known to spoon a mouthful of marmalade at breakfast or a spoonful of a creamy salad dressing at lunch. You didn’t soon forget a meal with David.

He loved the ladies. If you wanted to find him in a crowd of people, his partner Julie Fine says, look for a young beautiful lady and there he’d be. In the cafeteria, he would take his tray and sit down next to the prettiest girl in the room.

When the agency grew and acquired other agencies with different names (and different philosophies), he railed against the concept and sent memos titled “The True Church”. At one meeting, I raised the possibility of a different name other than Ogilvy & Mather for the parent company, to give these new agencies a neutral identity. He rose up. “It’s a terrible mistake to change a company’s name.” Then, slamming his fist on the table, “I will fight it with every ounce of my breath. But, if you do it, you don’t need Mather.” (So, The Ogilvy Group.)

He had a great sense of humor, loved jokes (but told only one – over and over), and believed creative enterprises worked best if the people who worked there were having *fun*. He pointed to great research laboratories where the scientists constantly played practical jokes on each other.

I’ve been asked to speculate about what Ogilvy would say about today’s ads, and was told I could hedge and say that we really don’t know what he’d think. Anyone who worked with David would say, Baloney! We know **exactly** what he’d think.

The Ogilvy advertising philosophy rested on four pillars.

- **Research** – “Look before you leap” was his starting point.
- **Professional discipline** – “I prefer the discipline of knowledge to the chaos of ignorance.” He codified knowledge into slide and film presentations he called Magic Lanterns. He instituted training programs. One of his memos made this case: “Great hospitals do two things. They look after patients, and they teach young doctors. We look after clients, and we teach young advertising people.”
- **Creative brilliance**, which he characterized as BIG IDEAS (and always wrote those in capital letters). “Unless your advertising is based on a BIG IDEA, it will pass like a ship in the night”, he preached – again and again.
- **Results for clients**, as in The David Ogilvy Award.

How would today's advertising stack up?

Like a lot of us, he would not understand a good deal of it. Some because it deals with products we don't understand. Ogilvy had no interest in technology. Some because it is talking to a younger audience – most beer commercials, for example. He would see car advertising as undifferentiated, not creating any unique image.

He would applaud a lot of current advertising for its inventiveness in delivering a message. He'd probably like the quacking duck for Aflac, because this mnemonic device has put the company on the map and is a great sales success.

He wrote a lot of travel ads and was personally involved with campaigns promoting Britain, France and Puerto Rico, and he'd like a lot of advertising in this category.

While he would have nothing to do with technology, he might admire the way IBM translates technology into consumer benefits.

But much of what we see today he would have deplored because it is self-indulgent, wastes a client's money and forgets the purpose of advertising – to sell a product or service. He would be puzzled by what the advertising is trying to say, sometimes even what product is being advertised.

"Who is approving this junk called advertising?" he asked DeWitt Helm, then president of the Association of National Advertisers in 1991, before firing another salvo at an ANA conference. "Have the clients gone crazy?"

He accepted that advertising had to attract attention ("You can't save souls in an empty church") but not at the expense of selling a client's product. He was unimpressed with the creative revolution that first emerged in the 1970s and put off by its flashy techniques with no evident payoff in sales, and delivered his message in interviews and speeches – "There is a disease called entertainment that is infecting our business." The disease was spread, in his view, by awards given at creative contests.

His crusade against awards didn't work. But clients heard his message. Campbell Soup set up a David Ogilvy Award for effective advertising for their brands – with Ogilvy as the judge, confident that he would be so objective the award could go to other Campbell agencies (it did).

In 1975, he retired as Chairman and started spending more time at his home in France – Chateau de Touffou, parts of which were built in the 12th century. "This place was 300 years old when Columbus was born," he'd boast. He'd ask, "Would you like to see the dungeon?"

He never lost interest in the business and continued to bombard friends and colleagues with letters and memos. He watched over careers of young agency people, hosted conferences of creative directors, visited foreign offices (he was most comfortable with former parts of the British Empire, like India and South Africa). He met with clients, received awards for lifetime achievement, and reveled in his celebrity.

After he died in 1999, there was a memorial service at Avery Fisher Hall. 13 years earlier, he had written a memo to Jock Elliott, titled "My Death". It said in part:

"I don't want the ceremony to take place unless it is built around the following music, which would be expensive.

"The Hallelujah Chorus, with professional chorus and big orchestra

“Rule Britannia – 3 verses.

“The audience to leave the auditorium to the happy strains of a high jig.”

Before the service, directors from around the world gathered for lunch and traded David stories. One of my favorites came from Hans Lange, managing director of the agency in Germany. Since he took over that post very suddenly as a young man, the agency asked David to spend some time in Frankfurt guiding him. He agreed and was given an office next to Hans.

An inveterate smoker – of pipes, cigars, and cigarettes (yet refusing to take a cigarette account on principle), Ogilvy was known for not carrying any of these but bumming them off others. After a few days, Hans noticed cigars were disappearing from the box behind his desk. He left a note in the box: “David, if you want a cigar, let me know and I’ll get you some.” The next day, he found this reply in the box: “Hans, it wasn’t me.”

David Ogilvy was an outsized personality who left a mark.

- He contributed several brilliant campaigns to the business – plus a lot more.
- He popularized the concept of brand image.
- He created an agency that still stands, with his name on it.
- He wrote a best-selling book that made the business attractive and made him famous.
- He trumpeted the virtues of research, global brands, direct marketing – and advertising that **sells**.
- He embodied values of professionalism, civilization, and good taste.
- He walked with giant steps.

Ed Ney reminded me of the story about Ogilvy and Grey competing for the Greyhound account (a large one at that time). David and Herb Strauss of Grey took the train to San Francisco – why they didn’t take a bus is another question. By the second day on the train, they couldn’t stand the suspense and agreed to show each other their campaigns. When it came time for the presentation, David asked to go on first. He said “I’ve seen his work. I know my work. He deserves to get your account.” And left the meeting. As Ed says, a very classy guy.

If David were writing a talk like this, he would send it around to his partners with a note saying “Please improve.” So I’ll close this by saying the same. Please improve. If you have any David stories or any questions, let’s hear them now.

Considered "the Father of Advertising", David Ogilvy is hailed as a genius by his clients and a marvelous boss by his staff. The Scotsman dropped out of Oxford and worked as a chef in Paris, a door-to-door salesman in Scotland and a researcher at Dr. Gallup's Audience Research Institute. He eventually founded and built up one of the world's most famous advertising agencies, known today as Ogilvy & Mather, which has 450 offices around the world. Go Premium and get the best of Blinkist. Upgrade to Premium now and get unlimited access to the Blinkist library. Read or listen to key insights fr