

You Are What You Sell

As New York ad agencies compete to reinvent brands, many are finding that they first have to reinvent themselves | *By Tom Roston* |

You could practically hear the giant sucking sound funneling downtown when, earlier this year, Sweet’N Low announced that it was switching advertising agencies, signing with Mother, a shop resembling less a hawk of corporate products and more an agitprop collective of entrepreneurial street artists.

Sweet’N Low’s recent ad campaigns felt painfully outdated—it had been represented by Pedone for more than two decades—featuring 20th-century relics such as the Pink Panther and Regis Philbin. Instead, Mother “moved” the brand’s parent company, Cumberland, with a pitch that “was purely emotional,” says Cumberland CEO Steven Eisenstadt. “The other agencies we were considering were way too rational in their approach.”

Mother created fanciful illustrations of the sweetener packets with bugs, birds and anthropomorphized taste buds rendered in soothing pinks that “recall the sweetness of the brand,” says creative director Michael Ian Kaye. “Lovely, happy, sweet stuff.”

Sitting in the firm’s open loft office, the unshaven, closely cropped Kaye looks like a French sailor on leave as

he slouches in his striped T-shirt on a couch near executive creative director Linus Karlsson. Several such meeting nooks, consisting of sofas and comfortable chairs, are peopled with sharp-looking creative types in intense discussion. About a dozen bikes—the transit mode of choice for the outer-borough staff—are parked behind Kaye, while in front of him lies a vast sprawl of desk space haphazardly dotted with computers. Amid the uncluttered work areas (employees rotate seating every three months to encourage a sense of community) there are piles of clients’ products—bags of Sour Patch candies and cases of Stella Artois beer. This must be what design students dream of while pursuing their MFAs.

“We are an advertising agency, but at the end of the day ads are not important,” says Karlsson, one of the Bond Street agency’s founding partners, who asserts he’s more interested in enriching the lives of his 100-strong staff than in making them rich. The 42-year-old Swede speaks of hiring people for their “big hearts” and simplifies Mother’s mission—which ranges from having its own wholesome hot dog restaurant to creating a fan experience during the Lady Gaga tour—with a prosaic summation: “We do stuff.”

Advertising sure ain’t what it used to be.

Nor is it what we see on AMC’s hit show *Mad Men*, which has romanticized the life and style of the 1960s ad man—from Don Draper’s luck with the ladies to his ability to wow clients with the Big Idea. Mother’s Sweet’N Low concept was the result of hard work done by professionals, says 45-year-old Kaye, “not from a doodle on a napkin.”

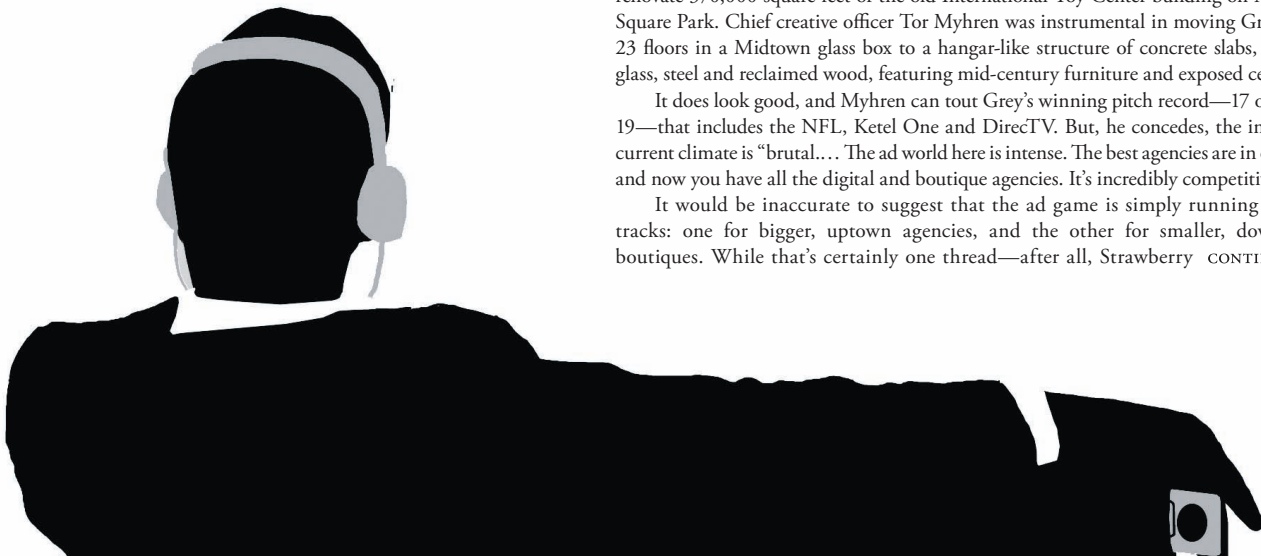
The field is no longer centered around Madison Avenue (only a handful of firms, such as Young & Rubicam and TBWA, remain there) nor run by men in gray flannel suits. Massive, conglomerate-owned agencies such as BBDO, JWT and McCann Erickson still dominate the estimated \$500 billion worldwide industry. But the dawn of new media has uncovered a constellation of small shops that are redefining what it means to sell ads.

The new guard foregoes the narcissism of heralding their founders’ names, instead taking on monikers that sound more like Amsterdam coffee houses (Strawberry Frog, Deep Focus). Their websites are tastefully lo-fi, and their offices tend to have open layouts that “foster a culture of sharing,” says Droga5’s head of strategy, Jonny Bauer.

Grey Advertising took this concept and blew it up large, spending \$120 million to renovate 370,000 square feet of the old International Toy Center building on Madison Square Park. Chief creative officer Tor Myhren was instrumental in moving Grey from 23 floors in a Midtown glass box to a hangar-like structure of concrete slabs, floating glass, steel and reclaimed wood, featuring mid-century furniture and exposed ceilings.

It does look good, and Myhren can tout Grey’s winning pitch record—17 of its last 19—that includes the NFL, Ketel One and DirecTV. But, he concedes, the industry’s current climate is “brutal... The ad world here is intense. The best agencies are in one city, and now you have all the digital and boutique agencies. It’s incredibly competitive.”

It would be inaccurate to suggest that the ad game is simply running on two tracks: one for bigger, uptown agencies, and the other for smaller, downtown boutiques. While that’s certainly one thread—after all, Strawberry **CONTINUED...**



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BRIGHT IDEAS
Clockwise from left: Grey's top creatives, led by Tor Myhren (center); Tom Webster from Mother, and his colleague Andrew Deitchman.

What is an ad these days, anyway? It can be a 30-second spot broadcast during the Super Bowl, a low-tech Google link or a rooftop party at Coachella. But if ads can be anything, that begs the question: What is the role of an ad agency?

... CONTINUED Frog's walls are adorned with the words **IN A WORLD OF DINOSAURS, IT'S GOOD TO BE A FROG**—there's more going on here.

More accurately, the ad world has splintered into a million tiny pieces, and everyone is trying to pick up what they can—whether it's Droga5 and Amalgamated's early innovations in viral marketing, or the various digital agencies like Razorfish, Digitas and Brooklyn's Big Spaceship claiming their slivers of the interactive space. "It's hard to be on the forefront," Kaye admits. "Because there are so many forefronts now."

"It's a race to the middle," Myhren says. "You have what are typically called traditional agencies, which have experience in building brands. And then there are digital agencies, which are experts at the online tools of communication. Everyone wants to be somewhere between the two."

Target's recent transformation of the Standard Hotel into a lighting and fashion extravaganza represents the new thinking of advertising: People can attend the event *and* watch it streamed online for a viral effect. What is an ad these days, anyway? It can be a 30-second spot broadcast during the Super Bowl, a low-tech Google link or a rooftop party at Coachella. But if ads can be anything, that begs the question: What is the role of an ad agency?

"You've got land-grabs going on all over the place," says Sophie Kelly of Strawberry Frog, which prides itself on creating cultural movements. "It is no longer good enough to market on the basis of a product's superiority point. You've got to find a belief that a brand can own in a credible way, so people can feel a sense of shared value."

She might as well be talking about the agencies themselves. Many are soul-searching as they try to find their niche in the new marketplace, often preferring not to be tethered to the products they're ostensibly selling.

"To me, the brands are just vehicles to something more powerful," says Strawberry Frog's Kevin McKeon. "Some companies are about '40 percent less fat,' but luckily we're not. We are more culture-in than brand-out."

These days, ad men and women spend a fair amount of time cooking up ideas that grab people without any products in sight. For instance, Myhren created the "race switch" poster that depicted a Caucasian-looking Barack Obama and an African-American-looking John McCain. It was sent out virally, with no media dollars spent, and viewed by 37 million people.

Alas, despite all this creativity and open thinking, advertising is still a business, and it's one that is notoriously unhappy at its core. "A lot of the

best creatives I've worked with are total malcontents," Myhren says. "But you probably need some of that internal tension to create."

Remember Albert Brooks's miserable character in *Lost in America*? He worked in advertising. In the real world, so did Alex Bogusky, the wonder kid whose Burger King, Volkswagen and Microsoft ads helped to make Colorado-based firm Crispin Porter + Bogusky the "agency of the decade," according to *Advertising Age*. This year, at 46, Bogusky denounced the soullessness of the industry and dropped out of the game entirely. (Though *Fast Company* recently published an in-depth profile suggesting that Bogusky's departure might be a cynical attempt at rebranding.)

If you dig deep enough, you tend to find that advertising executives have something up their sleeves or in their drawers—a book or a screenplay they're working on, a T-shirt that reads **DON'T SUCK CORPORATE COCK** (true story) or, in Myhren's case, a feature-length documentary about lacrosse. Some scribble notes to themselves about the mixed-up world they work in, such as the following passage by one ad man who prefers to remain anonymous:

"In any given boardroom, you could be sitting next to one of the most inspired creative minds or one of the most unambitious boobs. And either one could be the person who holds the ultimate decision-making power over your fragile idea. I've worked with people so brilliant, they made me wonder why they lowered themselves by applying their talent to selling a new, lighter, crispier snack; and I've worked with people so clueless, they made me wonder how they even managed to con someone into giving them a job."

Still, while malaise lingers, it has decreased thanks to the changes in the industry and the workplace. For one, Sweet'N Low's Eisenstadt couldn't see it in the people at Mother, whom he calls, "just lovely—and just so cool."

"Advertising is evolving. People are thinking differently," Droga5's Bauer says. "It's a mind-set. And it's not geographical."

In fact, Mother is moving to bigger offices in Hell's Kitchen (near Ogilvy & Mather's new digs). They're taking their "we do stuff" ethos with them and leaving behind the old ways of the industry—which means no account people ("no one should represent another person's point of view," says Karlsson) and no three-martini lunches with clients.

But they *must* occasionally tie one on. What's their drink of choice?

"Beer," Kaye says, and adds with a laugh, "Stella Artois!"

Then he sings, "nicely sweetened with Sweet'N Low," with just the sort of laid-back cool and irony that sells both products effortlessly. **M**