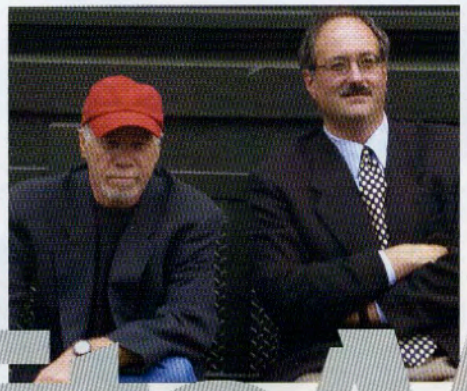
Truth in advertising can be a dangerous thing.

By Warren Berger



DeVitoVerdi

Over the past twelve years, this creative-driven New York ad agency, independently owned and run by the partners Sal DeVito and Ellis Verdi, has tended to produce ads that don't sugarcoat their messages or soften their sharp edges. There's often a candor and a street-smart tone to the agency's work that has enabled it to stand out, win awards and attract clients. But it has also occasionally stirred controversy, drawn angry letters, sparked a protest or two, and provoked the wrath of a certain big-city mayor named Rudy.

"We certainly don't set out to make anybody mad or start a controversy," insists Ellis Verdi, who runs the business side of the agency. "We try to do advertising that has a strong point of view and gets to the heart of the issue. When you do that, sometimes you're going to hit a nerve."

DeVito/Verdi has been doing that ever since 1991, when one of the agency's first clients, a discount New York clothing store named Daffy's, asked for help in spreading word of its low prices. The agency responded with a series of now-classic ads that basically told New Yorkers they'd be crazy to pay too much for clothes. One ad showed a picture of a straitjacket: "If you're paying over $400 for a dress shirt," the headline read, "may we suggest a jacket to go with it?" The ad was all in good fun, of course, and was relevant to Daffy's marketing objective—but nonetheless, the agency soon found itself being picketed by a mental health advocacy group that objected to the straitjacket imagery. Both DeVito and Verdi were surprised, though not discouraged; as Daffy's sales took off, they knew that they'd touched the right kind of nerve.

That was just the beginning of a series of small controversies that seemed to flare up periodically throughout the 1990s as the agency kept growing and taking on new marketing challenges. The problems with Mayor Rudolph Giuliani occurred in the midst of Giuliani's tempestuous reign (well before his heroic 9/11 moment), at a time when the mayor was known not only for his policy successes, but also for his tendency to trumpet

Comments by Sal DeVito who was creative director on all projects shown.

This page: Sal DeVito and Ellis Verdi.

Right: "Originally this print ad was done for The American Civil Liberties Union. They didn't buy it. So the creatives sent the ad to the National Congress of American Indians. The rest is history." Susanne Macarelli, art director; Erhan Erdem, writer; Robert Ammirati, photographer.

Pro-Choice Public Education Project print ad. "When you take away a woman's right to choose, she's left to take matters into her own hands. There were three ads in this campaign, all equally disturbing. The photography was deliberately cold, stark and honest." Chris Turner, art director; Scott Kaplan, writer; Christopher Wray McCann, photographer.

"Keeper Springs is the only bottled water that donates all of its profits to protecting our rivers. But, we weren't sure if the client was going to mind our taking a shot at politicians. He didn't mind. In fact, he loved it. By the way, our client was Robert Kennedy, Jr." Suzanne Macarelli, art director; David Brenner, writer.

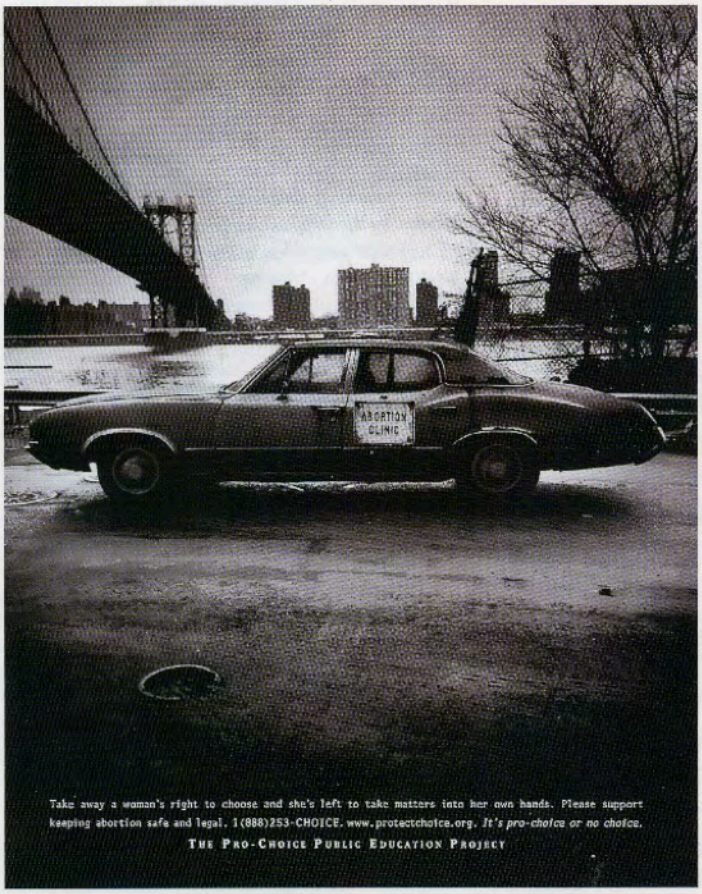
NEW YORK JEWS

SAN FRANCISCO CHINAMEN

CLEVELAND INDIANS

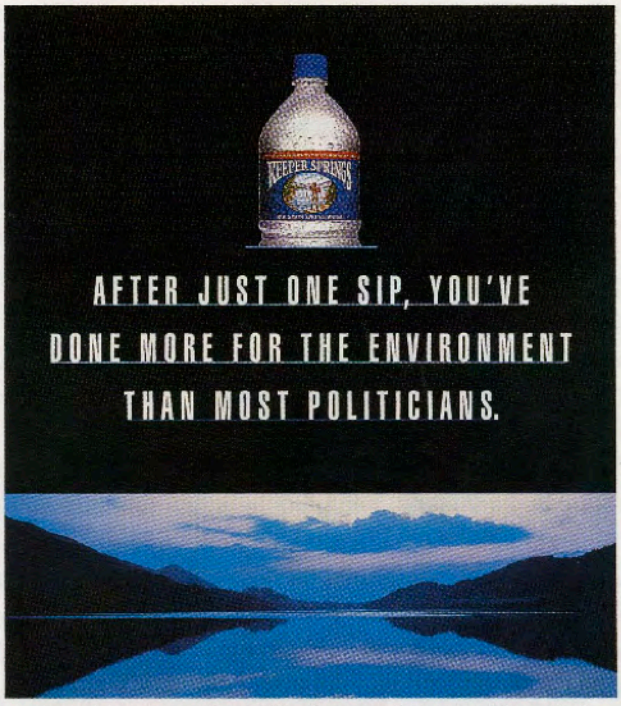
No race, creed or religion should endure the ridicule faced by Native Americans today. Please help us put an end to this mockery and racism, by visiting www.ncai.org or calling (202)466-7767.

NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS



Take away a woman's right to choose and she's left to take matters into her own hands. Please support keeping abortion safe and legal. 1(888)253-CHOICE. www.protectchoice.org. *It's pro-choice or no choice.*

THE PRO-CHOICE PUBLIC EDUCATION PROJECT



AFTER JUST ONE SIP, YOU'VE DONE MORE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT THAN MOST POLITICIANS.

Introducing a bottled water that's not just good for you, but good for our lakes, rivers and oceans. That's because all the profits from your purchase of Keeper Springs go directly to cleaning up your local waterways. When you think about it, water doesn't get any purer than that. Visit us at www.keepersprings.com.

ALL OF OUR PROFITS GO TO CLEANING AMERICA'S WATERWAYS

KEEPER SPRINGS

DeVito/Verdi

them. And so when DeVito/Verdi was asked to create an ad promoting *New York* magazine, the agency came up with this headline: "Possibly the only good thing in New York Rudy hasn't taken credit for." This did not go over well at City Hall and soon the ad was removed from the sides of buses, which in turn sparked a lawsuit and a First Amendment debate. In the end, it was determined that DeVito/Verdi did, indeed, have the right to poke fun at the Mayor on the sides of his own buses.

Around this same time, a fledgling magazine called *Timeout New York*, a guide to city dining and entertainment, came to DeVito/Verdi seeking a campaign that would get attention and explain what the magazine was about. The agency responded with ads that did both. "Our magazine is a lot like the average New Yorker," one headline read. "It'll tell you where you can go and what you can do with yourself." Another ad in the campaign, posted on a billboard, announced: "Welcome to New York. Now get out." The combination of the Daffy's campaign, the Giuliani incident and the *Timeout* ads seemed to confirm what people had begun to suspect about DeVito/Verdi—no doubt about it, they were wise guys.

To some extent, it's true. There's a brutal honesty to DeVito/Verdi advertising that is characteristic of New York City itself, so it should come as no surprise that both DeVito and Verdi are homegrown products. Verdi grew up in Manhattan and spent the early part of his career at the New York office of Grey Advertising; DeVito was a Brooklyn boy who became an art director at various New York agencies. It was Verdi who decided to start an independent shop, initially working out of his one-room East-Side apartment, with no clients and a creative partner named John Follis. "I was just picking up the phone and cold-calling, a hundred calls a day," Verdi says. As he slowly began to lure in clients, he placed another important call—to DeVito, who'd recently left the agency Levine Huntley Schmidt & Beaver and was looking for a new opportunity. DeVito and Verdi meshed immediately, Follis subsequently departed. And from then on, the agency kept writing the kind of headlines that make headlines.

But lost in some of the noise surrounding DeVito/Verdi has been the larger truth about the agency and its founders. Just as there is more to New Yorkers than mere brashness, there's more to DeVito/Verdi than provocative headlines. Verdi is an astute businessman who is steeped in marketing principles and very focused on business results. DeVito is a classically-trained art director who in his off-hours teaches at New York's School of Visual Arts, where he stresses the fundamentals of highly-conceptual advertising. In short, there's a lot of depth and substance behind the "wise guys" (and by the way, both men are soft-spoken and polite).

"We have this reputation for being brash and having a New York attitude," says DeVito. "And we have taken that tone with some of our New York clients, because it made sense for them. But if you look at all our work, you see a range. Some of it is funny, but some of it is very emotional."

Illustrating DeVito's point is the agency's work for various social organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union and Pro-Choice Education Project. There are no wisecracking jokes in these ads, but they're still apt to cause a stir. Consider the DeVito/Verdi ACLU ad that juxtaposes the faces of Martin Luther King and Charles Manson, beneath a headline noting that a person who looks like King is far more likely to be pulled over by police than one who looks like Manson. Or there is the Pro-Choice ad showing a bunch of faceless men in suits, with

This page: Radio commercial for the National Thoroughbred Racing Association. "This campaign was first presented to the client as TV commercials. They suggested it would make a better radio campaign. We hate to admit it, but they were right."

"Walk The Dog" :40
Anncr.: And they're off. Out of the gate it's "Get up Early" and "Walk the Dog." Here comes "Do the Laundry" and "Wash the Dishes." Out of nowhere comes "Call From Mom" followed by "Nagging" and "Guilt Trip." It's "Nagging," it's "Guilt Trip." It's "Guilt Trip," it's "Nagging," and "Nagging" is relentless. But wait, it looks like "Walk the Dog" has a little left in him. Now it's "Walk the Dog" followed by "Watch TV." It's "Watch TV" all alone. But here comes "Take a Nap." Wait a minute, I don't believe it, it's "Call From Mom," she just won't go away. And in the end it's "Another Boring Saturday."
SFX: Starting bell. Starting gate opens.
Anncr.: For a better time, go to the track. National Thoroughbred Racing. We bet you love it.

Anthony DeCarolis/Brad Emmett, art directors; Erik Fahrenkopf/Lee Seidenberg, writers; Barbara Michelson, agency producer; Joe Barone, producer; McHale Barone, production company.

Right: Television spot for Ad Council.

"Main Street, USA" :30
(Open on shot of a residential street, U.S.A.)
SFX: Ambient sound.
(Clouds passing, breeze blowing. Street is still)
Anncr. (VO): On September 11th, terrorists tried to change America forever.
(Picture fades to black. Fade up on the same street, on another day. Every house is adorned with American flags)
Anncr. (VO): Well, they succeeded.
SFX: Flags flapping, breeze blowing, dog barking, birds chirping.
(Cut to Ad Council logo)
Super: Freedom. Appreciate it. Cherish it. Protect it.

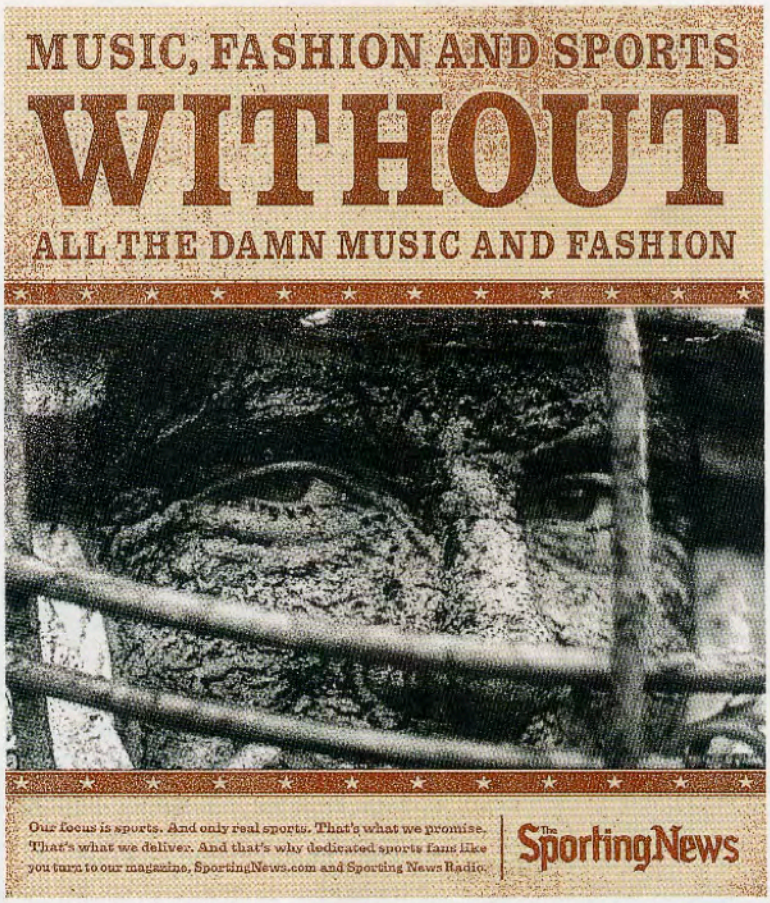
Brad Emmett/Lee Seidenberg, art directors/writers; Barbara Michelson, agency producer; Bob Giraldi, director; Jerry Fried, editor.

eCampus.com print ad. "When you're broke, you look at things differently. Ketchup becomes tomato sauce, a trash bag becomes luggage, and, in our TV spot for eCampus.com, a goldfish became lunch." Susanne Macarelli, art director; Erhan Erden, writer; Robert Ammirati, photographer.

Print ad. "*Sporting News* has been around since 1896 and is printed on a newsprint stock. This influenced the look of the ads. We positioned *Sporting News* as a no bullshit sports magazine. No figure skating. No badminton. No swimsuit edition. (Sorry about that.)" Mike Danko/Jim Wood, art directors; Pierre Lipton/Eric Schutte, writers.

FREEDOM.
APPRECIATE IT. CHERISH IT. PROTECT IT.
Ad Council

mom and dad
ATM
When you're broke, you look at things in a whole new way.
So for textbooks and stuff, hit ecampus.com. You'll save up to 50%. And shipping's always free.
eCampus.com
Textbooks & Stuff Cheap.


MUSIC, FASHION AND SPORTS
WITHOUT
ALL THE DAMN MUSIC AND FASHION
Our focus is sports. And only real sports. That's what we promise. That's what we deliver. And that's why dedicated sports fans like you turn to our magazine, SportingNews.com and Sporting News Radio.
The SportingNews

DeVito/Verdi

Right: "For Eyes is a store that sells designer eyewear for less. We used stock photos to show how bad someone can look in the wrong pair of glasses. Except in the ad that read, 'Nerds are made not born.', where we used a childhood photo of an account person. He wasn't too happy about it." Barbara Eibel, art director; Mark Teringo, writer.

American Civil Liberties Union print ad. "At the time this ad ran, 80% of those stopped and searched in Florida were black and Hispanic, while they constituted only 5% of all drivers. The visual, we hoped, would help some people see just how wrong this really is." Sal DeVito/ Barbara Eibel, art directors; Sal DeVito, writer; Robert Ammirati, photographer.

Print ad for Weatherproof. "Even a jacket as versatile, comfortable and durable as Weatherproof still has its limits. And, in case you were wondering, we did not shoot this photograph. It was stock." Susanne Macarelli, art director; Joel Tractenberg, writer.

the headline: "77% of anti-abortion leaders are men. 100% of them will never be pregnant."

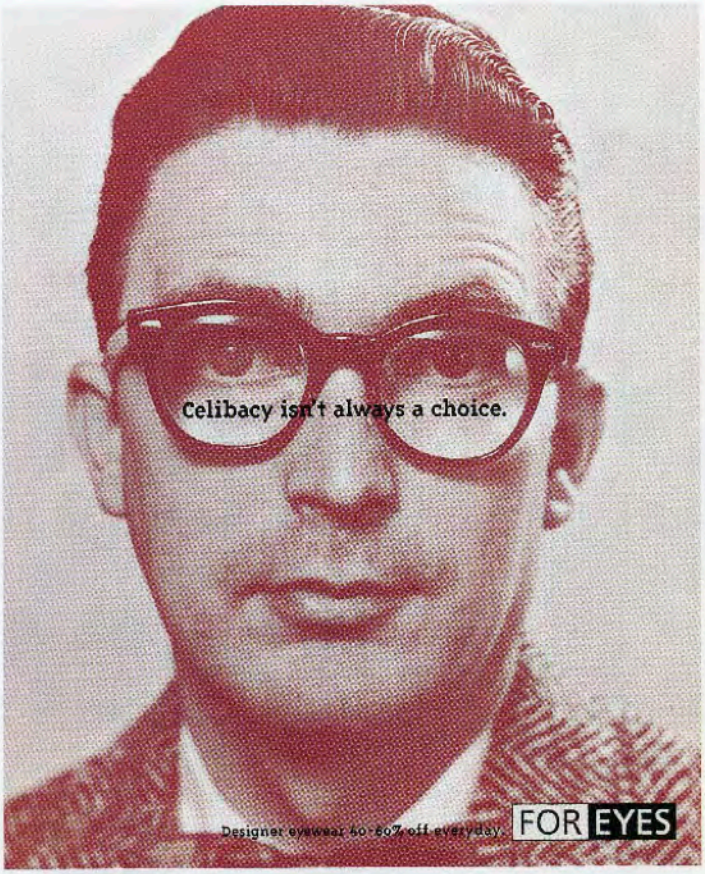
The agency has a history of taking on hot-button social issues in its advertising, something most agencies avoid for fear of alienating clients. When asked about this, Verdi says: "I've been led to some extent by my interests in certain issues. But it's not as if the agency has a single viewpoint or philosophy—we don't take sides." Indeed, the agency recently worked with the Ad Council on the Bush Administration's 'Freedom' campaign, a post-9/11 series of ads promoting an appreciation of American liberty; one haunting DeVito/Verdi commercial depicted what it would be like to live in an America where people must check over their shoulders and lower their voices before they can gripe about the government.

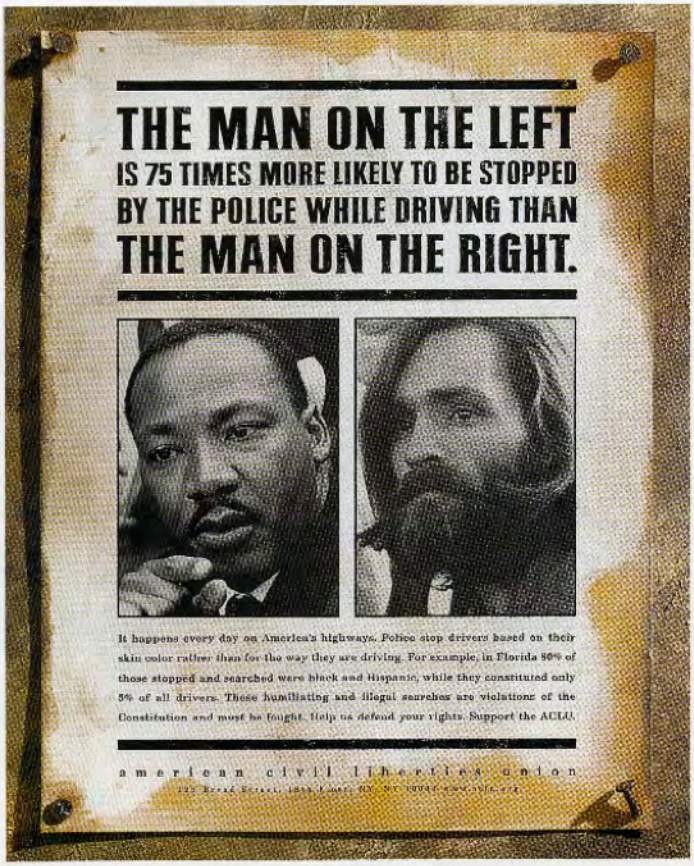
It's unclear whether the provocative nature of some of the agency's work has been a boon or an obstacle in attracting clients. The fact is, some clients like to draw attention with their ads, while others are wary of doing anything that might make anyone uncomfortable; DeVito/Verdi tends to do better with the former group than the latter. Still, as the agency has grown—today, DeVito/ Verdi employs about 80 people and media billings amount to roughly $170 million a year—its client roster has expanded into a diverse group that includes large national brands like Canon and Universal (the agency works on Universal's Motown music label), as well as small-to-midsized companies like Grey Goose vodka, the Hotwire travel Web site, Court TV and Jackson-Hewitt tax preparation. There are local New York clients like Mount Sinai Hospital, but there's also a Midwestern superstore chain, Meijer.

It's hard to generalize about the work being done for these different entities, except to say that all of it is rooted in solid strategy (the agency tries to distill each client's marketing needs down to one distinct message based on the brand's strengths), all of it is intended to generate measurable business results and all of it is designed to get noticed. Which means that some of it, inevitably, tends to get a few people riled up.

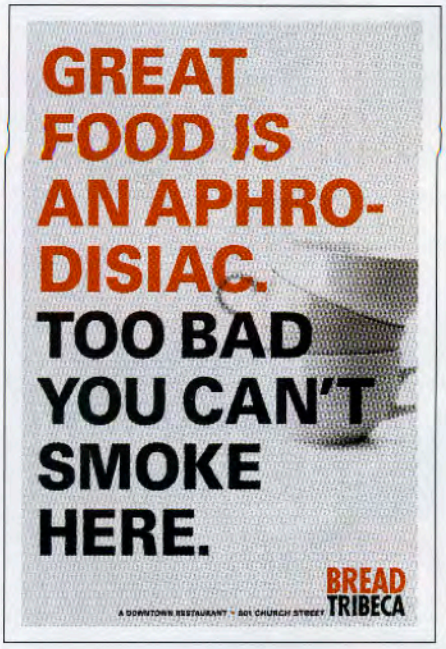
Even in the case of a rather lighthearted campaign for Meijer stores, DeVito/Verdi manages to inject touches of blunt candor. One commercial shows a bunch of children acting overjoyed when their mother brings home new school supplies bought at Meijer. ("Oh a ruler—now I can measure things!" screams one gleeful child). In the midst of the ersatz scene, type scrolls over the screen: "This is a dramatization. Your kids will never get this excited about school supplies. So why pay more than you have to?" The Meijer's campaign has been a big success, but it has also brought a smattering of letters from some that are uncomfortable with the ads. Similarly, the agency's campaign for Mount Sinai Hospital is a positive testament to all the hospital's wonderful achievements, but is couched in headlines that challenge the reader: "If you can go into the city to see a show," one ad reads, "you can go into the city to save your life."

If that slightly "in-your-face" tone alienates a few sensitive souls, DeVito has come to accept this as part of his agency's fate. "Once," he says "we did an ad that showed a fruitcake being thrown out, and we got letters from somebody who makes fruitcakes, seeking an apology. I couldn't believe it—a fruitcake!" He has concluded that, "You never can tell what will get somebody upset. But the important thing, I think, is to make sure they notice the ad in the first place."■

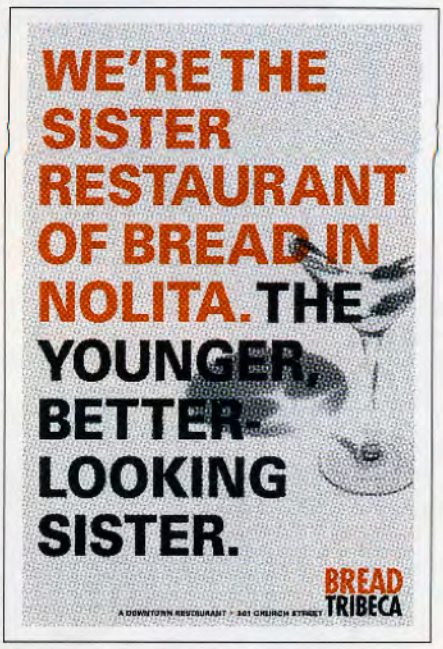

Celibacy isn't always a choice.
Designer eyewear 40-60% off everyday.
FOR EYES

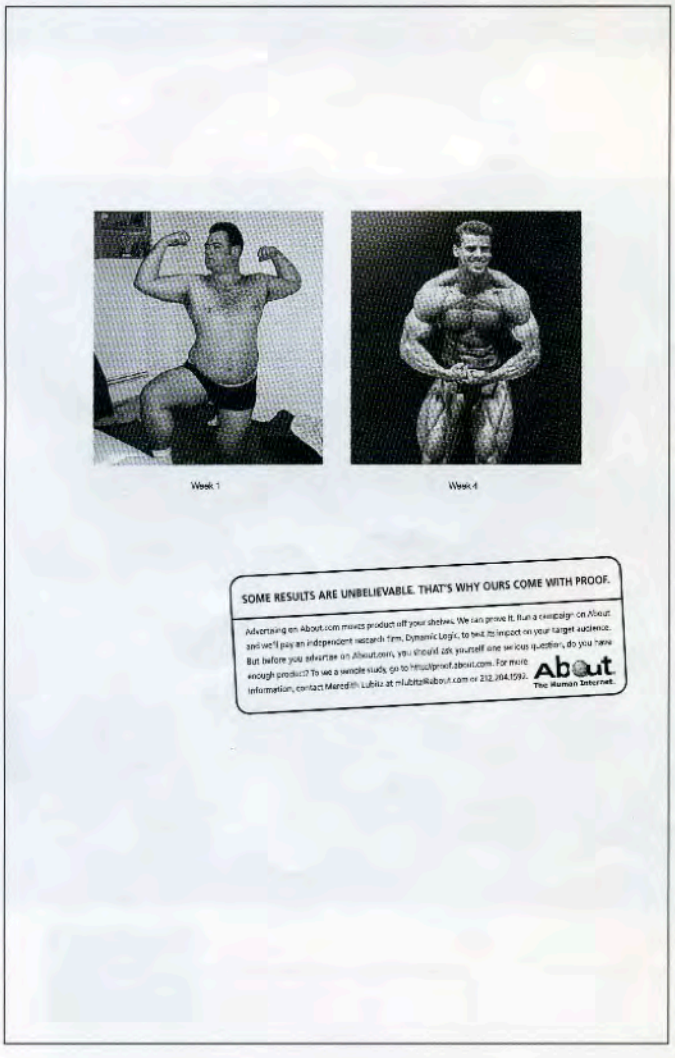

THE MAN ON THE LEFT
IS 75 TIMES MORE LIKELY TO BE STOPPED BY THE POLICE WHILE DRIVING THAN
THE MAN ON THE RIGHT.
It happens every day on America's highways. Police stop drivers based on their skin color rather than for the way they are driving. For example, in Florida 80% of those stopped and searched were black and Hispanic, while they constituted only 5% of all drivers. These humiliating and illegal searches are violations of the Constitution and must be fought. Help us defend your rights. Support the ACLU.
american civil liberties union

WORKS AS A RAINCOAT,
WINDBREAKER,
AND IF NEED BE,
RUNNING JACKET.
A Weatherproof® jacket gives you the protection you need to stay warm and dry in any kind of weather. Well, almost any.
Weatherproof. Don't take the name too seriously.
WEATHERPROOF


GREAT FOOD IS AN APHRO-DISIAC.
TOO BAD YOU CAN'T SMOKE HERE.
BREAD TRIBECA
A DOWNTOWN RESTAURANT • 301 CHURCH STREET

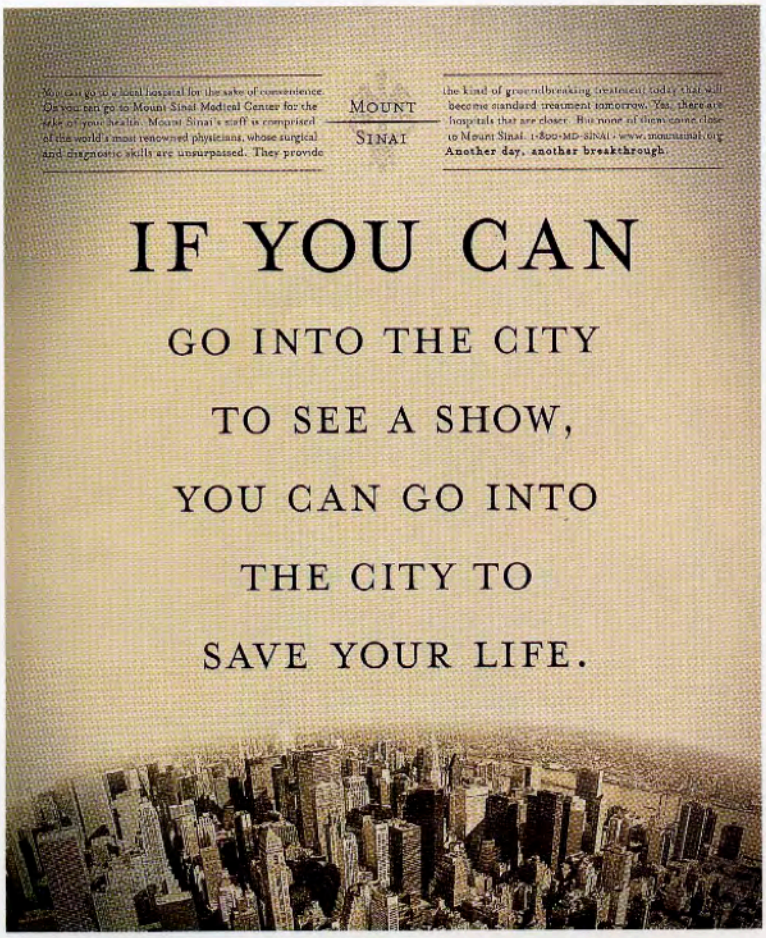
SO GOOD, PATRONS HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO REFUSE AFTER-DINNER MINTS.
BREAD TRIBECA
A DOWNTOWN RESTAURANT • 301 CHURCH STREET

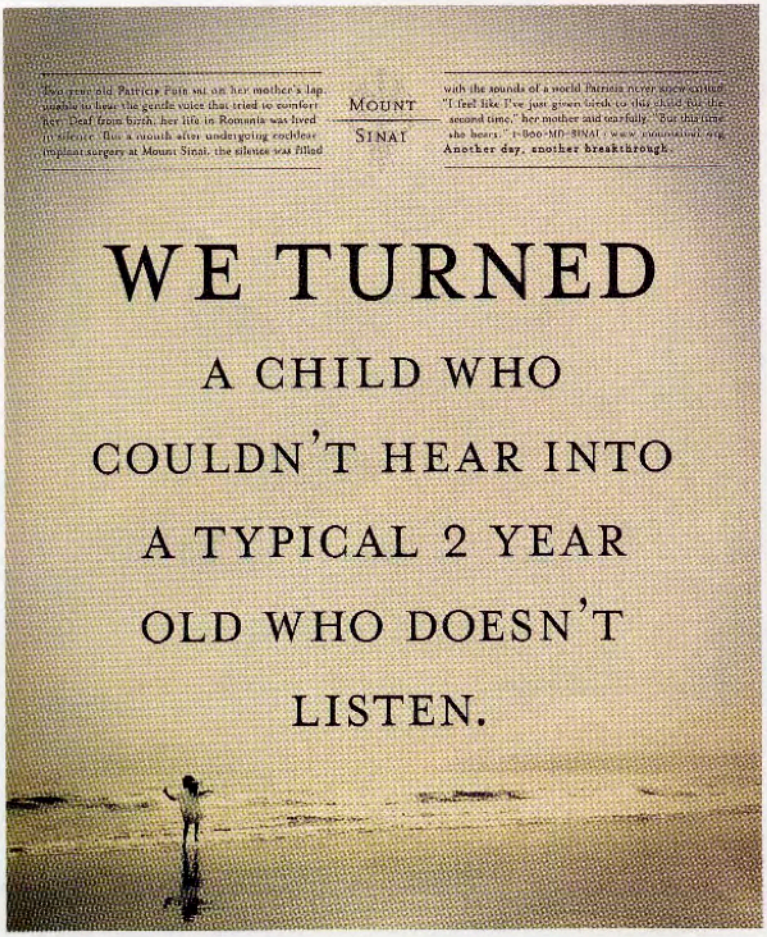

WE'RE THE SISTER RESTAURANT OF BREAD IN NOLITA. THE YOUNGER, BETTER-LOOKING SISTER.
BREAD TRIBECA
A DOWNTOWN RESTAURANT • 301 CHURCH STREET


Week 1
Week 4
SOME RESULTS ARE UNBELIEVABLE. THAT'S WHY OURS COME WITH PROOF.
Advertising on About.com moves product off your shelves. We can prove it. Run a campaign on About and we'll pay an independent research firm, Dynamic Logic, to test its impact on your target audience. But before you advertise on About.com, you should ask yourself one serious question, do you have enough product? To see a sample study, go to mludproof.about.com. For more information, contact Meredith Lubliu at mlubliu@about.com or 212.204.1592.
About
The Human Internet.

It Takes An Even Tougher Man To Make A Kosher Chicken.
No chicken goes through more inspections than a kosher chicken.
And no kosher chicken goes through more inspections than an Empire.
EMPIRE KOSHER CHICKEN

DeVito/Verdi





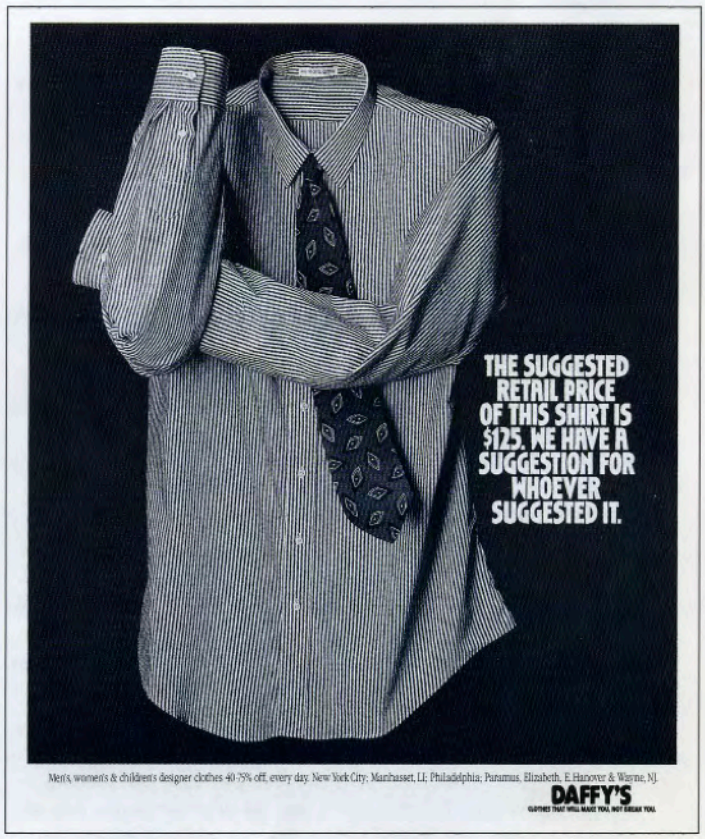
Left: Series of three ads for Bread Tribeca. "This campaign was written to announce the opening of Bob Giraldi and Luigi Comandatore's new restaurant, Bread Tribeca. The three ads were posted throughout downtown NYC. For reservations call (212) 334-8282. Try the sardine sandwich." Jim Wood, art director; John Clement/Daniel Giachetti, writers.

"DeVito/Verdi has had its doors open for twelve years. We're happy to say this is the only before-and-after ad we've ever done." Lee Seidenberg, writer; Jim Wood, photographer; DeVito Verdi/Jim Wood, ad agencies; About.com, client.

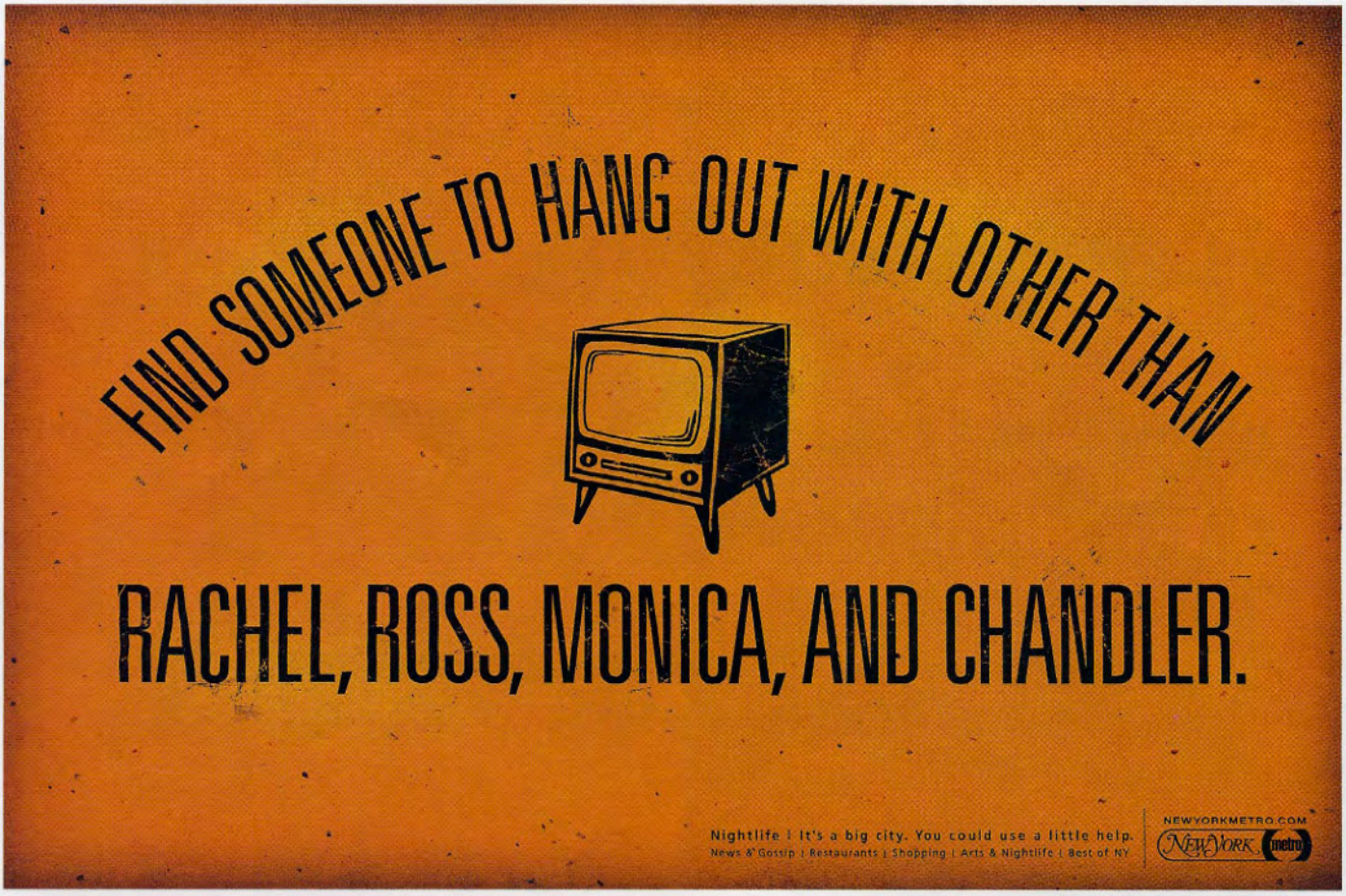
"When we showed this ad to the client, one of the rabbis in the room said, 'You can never put Moses in an ad.' My partner, Ellis Verdi, was relentless," says Sal DeVito. "After about a month the rabbi finally said yes. But, to this day, he still hasn't forgiven us." Sal DeVito, art director; Abi Aron Spencer/Rob Carducci, writers; Empire Kosher Chicken, client.

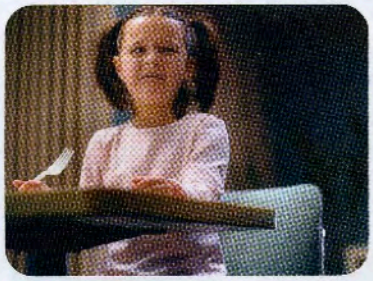
This page: Two Mount Sinai print ads. "We discovered that people from Long Island and New Jersey were choosing local hospitals out of convenience, rather than the hospital's qualifications. Yet, these same people would go into New York City for reasons that were far less important than their good health. This ad was meant to be a wake-up call for these people."

"Mount Sinai is a hospital that's been around for over 150 years. They've pioneered breakthroughs in medical procedures that are used by hospitals everywhere. And yet, their advertising lacked the image they deserved. So, we decided to use one of their many success stories as our first ad." Brad Emmett/Jim Wood, art directors; Brad Emmett/Wayne Winfield, writers.


THE SUGGESTED RETAIL PRICE OF THIS SHIRT IS $125. WE HAVE A SUGGESTION FOR WHOEVER SUGGESTED IT.
Men's, women's & children's designer clothes 40-75% off, every day. New York City: Manhasset, LI; Philadelphia; Paramus, Elizabeth, E.Hanover & Wayne, NJ.
DAFFY'S

$16
$68
DAFFY'S


FIND SOMEONE TO HANG OUT WITH OTHER THAN
RACHEL, ROSS, MONICA, AND CHANDLER.
Nightlife | It's a big city. You could use a little help.
News & Gossip | Restaurants | Shopping | Arts & Nightlife | Best of NY
NEWYORKMETRO.COM
New York metro



DeVito/Verdi

Left: Print ads for Daffy's. "We'd like to thank New York City cab drivers for the inspiration behind this ad." Sal DeVito, art director; David Bromberg/Audrey DeVries, writers; Cailor Resnick, photographer.

"After doing 35 Daffy's ads that all had headlines, I challenged the creative team to do a few ads that had no headline, just visuals. The neckties was one solution. The other was a side-by-side comparison of two mannequins wearing identical dresses. One dress cost much less. The higher-priced mannequin was missing an arm and a leg. I think the creatives rose to the occasion." Abi Aron Spencer/Aaron Eiseman, art directors.

Ad for New York Metro. "Can you believe Rachel and Ross had a baby?" Anthony DeCarolis/Brad Emmett, art directors; Brad Emmett/Pierre Lipton, writers.

This page: Meijer television commercial.

"Spinach" :30
(Open on a young girl sitting alone at a table in a nondescript room and a man standing nearby taking notes)
Tester: OK, Abby, please take a bite of the national brand spinach.
(Girl takes a bite off a plate on the table. She scrunches up her face and looks back at man)
Girl: Eccch.
Tester: Good.
(Tester removes the plate and puts a new plate of spinach on the table)
Tester: Now take a bite of the Meijer brand spinach.
(Girl takes a bite of spinach and has an identical reaction. She squirms in her chair)
Girl: Eccch.
Tester: Good.
Super: Meijer brand. The only difference you'll notice is the price.
(Cut to Meijer logo)
Super: Meijer. Higher standards. Lower prices.
Anncr. (VO): Meijer. Higher standards. Lower prices.

John Clement/Brad Emmett, art directors; Daniel Giachetti/Lee Seidenberg, writers; Barbara Michelson, agency producer; Jeffrey Fleisig, director; Jerry Fried, editor.

Mount Sinai radio spot. "This spot was based on one of the many success stories that happen at Mount Sinai everyday. The execution emphasized the importance of choosing the right hospital. There's nothing stronger than the truth."

"Skiing" :60
Anncr. 1: Christopher Bates had a terrible skiing accident.
Anncr. 2: Christopher Bates had a terrible skiing accident.
Anncr. 1: He survived, but his left leg was severely damaged.
Anncr. 2: He survived, but his left leg was severely damaged.
Anncr. 1: Virtually all the muscle was lost.
Anncr. 2: Virtually all the muscle was lost.
Anncr. 1: Doctors told him he would never ski or walk again.
Anncr. 2: Doctors at Mount Sinai used microvascular techniques to reconstruct his leg.
Anncr. 1: His life had suddenly lost its meaning.
Anncr. 2: He gradually regained the use of his leg.
Anncr. 1: He suffered from severe depression.
Anncr. 2: He started to walk and exercise.
Anncr. 1: Christopher thinks about skiing all the time.
Anncr. 2: Christopher skis all the time.
Anncr. 3: Which hospital you choose can make all the difference in the world. Mount Sinai.
Another day. Another breakthrough.
For more information call 1-800-MD-SINAI.

Brad Emmett, art director; Wayne Winfield, writer; Barbara Michelson, agency producer; Joe Barone, producer; McHale Barone, production company.