WPP

# The Clipboard and the Copywriter

– and why the uncalculable can be of incalculable value

*Jeremy Bullmore*

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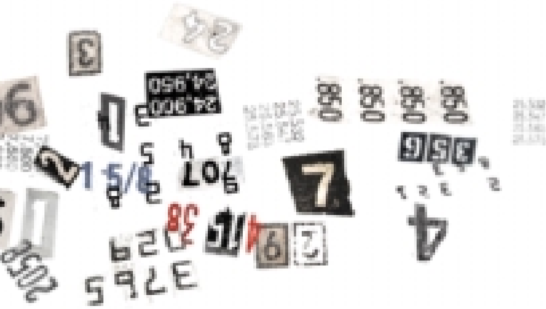

Many years ago, when cost accounting and efficiency experts were enjoying disproportionate popularity, a man with a clipboard interviewed an advertising agency copywriter.

“Tell me,” said the clipboard, pencil poised, “How long does it take to write a thirty-second commercial?”

The copywriter, a seasoned survivor of difficult client meetings, didn’t hesitate.

“Two hours and twenty-three minutes,” he replied.

The expert nodded, made a note and moved on. He later counted up the number of commercials written by the agency in the course of a year, multiplied the figure by two hours and twenty-three minutes, divided the total by the number of copywriters on the payroll: and concluded in his written report that 48 per cent of them were surplus to requirements.

He may well, of course, have been right – but if so, through chance rather than calculation.

The WPP Group annual report and accounts for the year 2000 contains approximately 7,500 numbers. They attempt to do far more than comply with the company's legal and fiduciary obligations. They strive to convey, with forensic accuracy, the anatomy of the business that its shareholders own; its scope; its competitive performance; its 80-plus component parts; and all this broken down by region and discipline.

It is absolutely no criticism of these figures, nor of those who painstakingly compiled and audited them, to say that, while they accurately quantify the bone-structure of the company, they fail almost completely to evoke its essential character.

Of course we need numbers. Without numbers, incoherence reigns, progress goes uncharted, comparisons become impossible and a company's value is literally incalculable. The danger of numbers is not that they exist but that we become mesmerised by them; that we come to believe that the importance of things is directly related to their susceptibility to measurement.

In his book *The Tyranny of Numbers*, David Boyle quotes the economist Robert Chambers:

"Quantification brings credibility. But figures and tables can deceive, and numbers construct their own realities. What can be measured and manipulated statistically is then not only seen as real; it comes to be seen as the only or the whole reality." And Chambers summed it all up like this:

"Economists have come to feel
What can't be measured isn't real.
The truth is always an amount –
Count numbers; only numbers count."

Coming to feel that only numbers count is seductive. Numbers seem so safe and scientific. Numbers protect us from making subjective judgments that may be open to challenge. Numbers are like security blankets. But in our heart of hearts, we already know that not everything that matters can be quantified: so we look for ways to measure the immeasurable. In certain competitive sports, judges ascribe a score to something called artistic excellence. You might as well mark a Monet out of ten.

We look, in other words – however uneasily – for ways to quantify quality. Today there are numbers being attached to ethical behaviour and corporate citizenship. It's probably better than ignoring them altogether, but the numbers are not true numbers, like the number of metres in a kilometre; they are metaphors disguised as measurement.

In our lives as citizens and consumers, we are far less reluctant to make judgments. When we choose a car, we may calculate the amount of baggage space we need, the future cost of fuel, our projected annual mileage, our disposable income; but crucially, and often critically, we also respond to style, design, personality and how they contribute to our own self-image: immeasurable factors, every one of them. Perhaps the most important decision we ever make is who we marry; but only if we prudently elect to marry for money does any element of quantification enter into our decision-making process.

The way we choose brands baffles many commentators. The whole of Naomi Klein's bestselling book *No Logo* is predicated on the assumption that brands are imposed on people by the brand owners. The first paragraph of her first chapter reads: "The astronomical growth in the wealth and cultural influence of multinational corporations over the last 15 years can arguably be traced back to a single, seemingly innocuous idea developed by management theorists in the mid-1980s: that successful corporations must primarily produce brands, as opposed to products." (That "seemingly innocuous" is a nice touch.)

But you can't, of course, produce a successful brand without producing a good product first. And a successful brand, of course, exists because people want it to exist. People differentiate between objects, people, animals instinctively and voluntarily – and rarely on a totally rational basis. People invented brand values in their own heads centuries before the first management theorist dared to try and classify them. Entities that can't be said to market themselves in any conventional sense are perceived by their supporters and detractors to have clear brand characteristics: newspapers, political parties, football teams, schools and universities.

The human brain performs an astonishing act of computing when it does something as apparently simple as choosing a brand of petfood. It takes into account the quantifiable: price, availability, pack size, ingredient list; and the totally immeasurable: style, character, familiarity and a wild projection of the animal's personality. When making brand choices, the human brain has no trouble at all in reconciling the measurable and the immeasurable, the rational and the irrational, quantity and quality. It understands that even price is not a simple matter of low=good, high=bad.

To the despair of rationalists, a high price may be seen as evidence of greater quality and therefore greater worth.

(When that very same brain is invited to explain to a researcher the reason for its choice, it should come as no surprise that the brain will favour the rational over the irrational, the quantifiable over the emotional. As we've noted before, numbers, with their beguiling precision, provide a much more respectable justification for behaviour than woolly old subjective affection.)

It may be doing her an injustice, but there seems to be a distinct note of disappointment in Naomi Klein's voice when she recounts the events of Marlboro Friday and its aftermath. According to Klein, the decision of Philip Morris to cut the price of its brand by 20% sent the pundits nuts – "announcing in frenzied unison that not only was Marlboro dead, all brand names were dead." Surely the day of the brand – of all brands – was over? Surely "the whole concept of branding had lost its currency"? "Study after study showed that baby boomers, blind to the alluring images of advertising and deaf to the empty promises of celebrity spokesperson, were breaking their lifelong brand loyalties and choosing to feed their families with private-label brands from the supermarket." After all, she reminds us, "Marlboro had always sold itself on the strength of its iconic image marketing, not on anything so prosaic as its price."

In fact, as it happened, not all the pundits were in unison. The saner ones knew perfectly well what consumers have always known: that value and price are not synonymous; that value is an individual and subjective equation, of which price is only part; and if price is perceived to outweigh desirability, then any sense of value goes into steep decline.

Even in times of recession, when the concept of value is most likely to tilt in favour of the rational, it is hard to find examples, in any developed market, where the brand leader by volume is also the cheapest.

Marlboro quite simply modified its recipe of appeals; and today prospers.

So we are faced with a bit of a conundrum. In our private lives as real people, choosing things and getting married and deciding which vacation to take, we confidently embrace both the functional and the emotional; that which we can measure and that which we can't.

But when we come to business – to the business of making money (quantifiable), gaining brand share (quantifiable), building margins (quantifiable), maximising shareholder value (quantifiable) – we seem to lose our nerve a bit.

As long ago as 1965, David Ogilvy wrote: “The majority of businessmen are incapable of original thought because they are unable to escape from the tyranny of reason.” Yet these same people, in their personal lives, shuck off the tyranny of reason on a daily basis.

In other words, it seems that those who buy brands have a more instinctive sense of worth and value than those who provide them: even when they’re the same people.

The reason, of course, is the inevitable business need to argue a case, to gain support, to attract investment from a finite source. We reach, because we have to, for numbers. And we really do have to. Imagine a business plan which read in full: “When I look at this design, my heart fills with wonder and my soul soars. Please grant me $2 billion to build a prototype.”

For WPP, for its companies and its competitors, numbers are just as necessary: yet their product – that which clients buy – is more often than not unquantifiable.

A thirty-second commercial may take two hours and twenty-three minutes to write; or three weeks; or half-an-hour. But there will be no correlation between its time of incubation and its value to client.

Nor, indeed, is it possible to put a tape measure on that value to client: either before its exposure or – with any precise certainty – even afterwards.

While it is true that some disciplines find it easier than others to put a reassuring figure on return on investment – direct marketing, for example, may find it easier than public relations – it is in the nature of marketing communications that they will, infuriatingly, remain activities requiring a departure from pure rationality to invent and the application of judgment and subjective instinct to approve and support.

The reason is simple. In the recipe of appeals that any brand offers, the rational ingredients will by and large come from the core product itself: from its performance, its price, its distribution. They will be invented and selected by a rational process. In contrast, the emotional ingredients will by and large come from its communications: its messages, its look, its design, its voice. And the invention of each of these demands, at least in part, an excursion into irrationality; into inspiration and creativity; into a field of fantasy where numbers have no place. Were it to be otherwise, they would fail in their appointed task to transform that core product into an object of even greater value to its users.

There is probably no other area of business life that makes such personal demands on business people as the purchase and evaluation of a brand's communications. Deprived of both measurement and precedent (if it's been done before it's probably no good), struggling to find words to describe the non-verbal, buffeted by the winds of passionate advocacy and vehement condemnation, only judgment serves.

We may long for the comfort of the clipboard; but we need the copywriter more. ■

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*No Logo*, Naomi Klein, Flamingo, 2000.

Designed and produced by
Addison Corporate Marketing
Illustrations by Richard Borge

**Jeremy Bullmore**

Jeremy Bullmore was born in 1929. He went from school to National Service, then to Oxford where he spent two years not reading English. His first job, in 1954, was as a trainee copywriter with J Walter Thompson in London, and he stayed with that agency until his retirement in 1987. He became successively copywriter, writer/producer, creative group head and head of television; then from 1964 to 1975, head of the creative department and from 1976 to 1987, chairman, London. He was a member of the J Walter Thompson worldwide board and, from 1981 to 1987, chairman of the Advertising Association.

Since 1988 Jeremy Bullmore has been a non-executive director of the Guardian Media Group and WPP Group. He has continued to write and speak regularly about advertising and marketing – he is a columnist for *Campaign*, *Market Leader* and *Management Today* – and is currently President of NABS. He was awarded a CBE in 1985.

He is married to Pamela, a garden designer and writer. They have three grown-up children and live in London and Wiltshire.

His book *Behind the Scenes in Advertising* was published in a new bumper edition in 1998. *Another Bad Day at the Office?* is to be published by Penguin in August 2001.

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Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide
*www.ogilvy.com*

J. Walter Thompson Company
*www.jwtworld.com*

Y&R Advertising[1]
*www.yandr.com*

Red Cell
*www.redcellnetwork.com*

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MindShare
*www.mindshareworld.com*

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*www.mediaedge.com*

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*www.mediainsight.com*

Maximize

Portland Outdoor
*www.portlandoutdoor.com*

The Media Partnership[2]

Tempus Group PLC[3]
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## Information & consultancy

### The Kantar Group:

Research International
*www.research-int.com*

Millward Brown
*www.millwardbrown.com*

Kantar Media Research
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RTC
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The Henley Centre*
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Management Ventures
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Première Group
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*www.prismteam.com*

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Clockwork Capital[2]
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DigiReels
*www.digireels.co.uk*

The Farm[2]
*www.farmpost.co.uk*

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*www.imaginet.com*

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*www.luminant.com*

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*www.mbcnet.com*

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*www.syzygy.net*

1 Member of Y&R Group
2 Associate
3 Minority investment
4 Joint venture
* Member of The Brand Union

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