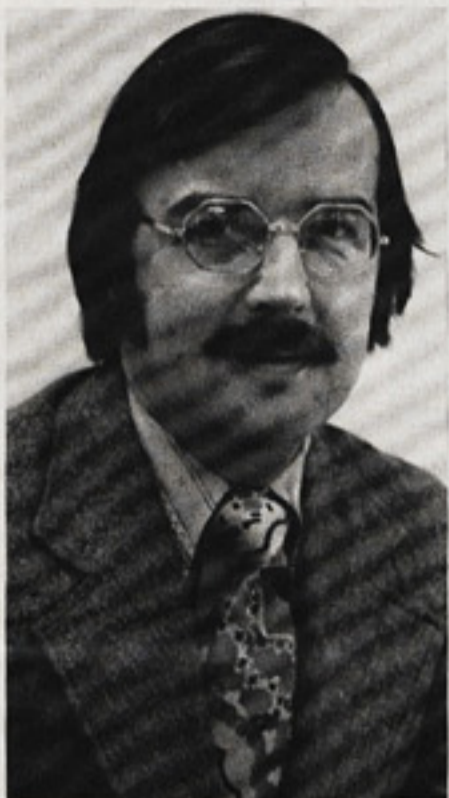


Advertising Age Features



CONFESSION OF A CREATIVE CHIEF: 'I SQUEEZED THE CHARMIN'

Now it can be told. The culprit who created the 'Please don't squeeze the Charmin' spots emerges from anonymity after eight years of guilt (while P&G's cash register pings).

BY JOHN V. CHERVOKAS
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Jerry Della Femina, whose tasteful typewriter gave us "From the People Who Brought You Pearl Harbor," wrote in *Marketing/Communications* (December, '71): "I am not, by nature, a violent person. But if I ever get a chance to meet the man who did those God-awful terribly bad 'Don't Squeeze The Charmin' toilet tissue commercials—and he turns out to be small—I think I just may slug him."

Jerry, I'm just six foot, and depending on whether it's just before or just after a holiday, I weigh anywhere between 180 and 195 lbs. The last time anyone slugged me was back in the third grade when Domenic Renzi (hey, why is it that Italians are always looking to belt me around?) knocked me for a loop behind the Callahan School in Norwood, Mass. Since then I've avoided violent confrontations by talking or walking.

This one I'm going to try to write my way out of.

Flashback to somewhere in the spring of '64. I'm 27 and a writer at Benton & Bowles. I'm reporting to a redheaded group head named Fi Fifield, who's reporting to a redheaded creative supervisor named Jim Haines, who's reporting to creative director Al Goldman. I forget if Al even had hair.

Most Hated TV Spot—How It Happened

Now, with that kind of corporate layer cake it's very hard to "own" a piece of work. I mean, it's tough to create a campaign, or a commercial for that matter, and be pointed out as the person solely responsible for its being. But I, me, besides Johnny Unitas, the only other defiant Lithuanian in America, in a cluttered little cubicle at 666 Fifth Ave. back in '64, gave the world the idea that there's a toilet paper worth squeezing. And the funny thing is that no one in eight years has tried to claim the concept as his very own. Strange? Not so strange when you listen to and read the things folks have said about the campaign's heretofore anonymous author.

It happened this way.
The Charmin Paper Co. was a Green Bay mill that Procter & Gamble bought



Like squeezing melons, squeeze "soft" Charmin? Grocers would flip. So tell 'em DON'T.

back in 1957. The optimists at P&G (there's a redundancy for you—everyone's an optimist at P&G, and they have every right to be) saw an opportunity to do battle with Scott and Kimberly-Clark and other paper powers. At the time, the Green Bay mill was cranking out Charmin, a one-ply tissue, and White Cloud, a two-ply product.

When I got on the business, Charmin was being sold in a limited area of the Midwest, more or less. And that's all. Only there. My Massachusetts Mama never heard of Charmin, and until recently never saw the advertising her son had created. She kind of wishes she still hadn't.

The limited market of Charmin back in the mid-'60s is understandable. One mill just can't seem to produce enough rolls of toilet paper to service America, and competing with Scott Paper is like trying to go one on one on Kareem Jabbar. But even with those negatives when I began to work on Charmin, it wasn't doing too badly in its market.

Before my time at B&B, Bill Tyler [AA columnist] was director of creative

services. It was Bill who suggested to Procter that since everyone in TP land was saying their tissue was soft, Charmin would do well to say soft in a different way. Say it's . . . it's . . . "gentle," for instance. And so, faster than you can say, "Donde es el cuarto para caballeros?" Charmin became the "gentle bathroom tissue." Gentle, animated characters skittered across your old DuMont telling the Charmin story. Gentle little kids, gentle jugglers, gentle dogcatchers, gentle fat ladies.

World Wasn't Begging for It

It just so happened that Charmin's animated shrimps recall-tested very well. Viewers even remembered that the cartoon kids said Charmin was gentle because "they fluff it and buff it and brush it." Okay, Della Femina, if you think squeezing toilet paper is obscene, imagine fluffing it and buffing it and brushing it.

But then, like every product everywhere, every so often Charmin went and "new and improved" itself. Charmin became even gentler. The boys back at the

mill came up with something called the CPB process, which rearranged the fibers in every sheet that came onto the roller and spread the fibers out more evenly, and that, ladies and gentlemen of the viewing audience, makes Charmin gentler than ever. Now how do you go about advertising that not very significant improvement without sounding like Professor Irwin Corey? As I recall, at the time, the world was not begging, pleading, praying for a better toilet paper.

The agency tried to tell the Charmin-is-gentler story with the same cutesy-pie animated babes who had so much success in the commercials telling the Charmin-is-gentle story.

Bomb-o!

People who looked at the commercials made a snap judgment in the first five seconds that yes, it's a Charmin commercial, but tune out. They wouldn't pay any more attention to the rest of the commercial, which looked like every Charmin commercial they had ever seen. Had they listened, however, they would have heard the radically new message of how Charmin isn't merely gentle . . . it's gentler now. But no. They didn't listen. In fact, one commercial where a cartoon town crier was shouting the message was remembered by only 2% of the people watching—probably a couple of American history buffs aghast that a classic colonial figure was touting toilet paper.

Squeeze a Banana?

"Let's try something totally different. Let's even get away from animation." That was the direction given me by my redheaded superiors. And we did fool around with some serious stuff. Stuff like beautiful women of the world talking about Charmin's gentle fragrance. Have you noticed? The core of a roll of Charmin is scented. Really!

Scent may be too ephemeral—how about a funny demonstration of softness? Just what are the standards of softness?

Soft as a feather. No, it makes you think of tickling.

Soft as a baby's behind. Not bad, but too restrictive.

Soft as silk. Overpromise.
Now how do you go about measuring

"WHO AND WHAT KIND OF A DING-A-LING CONCEIVED THE BOOB NOTION THAT THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT SQUEEZING A ROLL OF TOILET PAPER THAT TURNS PEOPLE ON?"

something like softness?

Fall on a pillow.
Hug a pillow.
Squeeze a . . .
Squeeze a what?
Shades of Louis Prima! Squeeze a banana?

No, not a banana.
But what does mom do in the supermarket?

She squeezes the melons. And the tomatoes. And the bread.

To see if they're soft.
Then . . . Then . . . Why not use the same test for Charmin?

Squeeze the Charmin.
Crazy advice? Supermarket managers will flip their corks.

Okay then, let's tell them not to squeeze the Charmin. Yes. Obsession. Fad. It becomes the rage to squeeze the Charmin because it's irresistibly soft. And the supermarket owner protests.

Breakthrough? No One Said So

It was that easy. In an hour and a half, America's most universally despised advertising campaign was created.

Variety, Sept. 29, 1971: "Who and what kind of a ding-a-ling conceived the boob notion that there's something about squeezing a roll of toilet paper that turns people on?"

As I recall, the sale of the idea wasn't very, very tough to Procter. Maybe they were humoring me. Ted Keller, the P&G guy more or less responsible for its approval (there, Ted, I'm not going to take the rap myself!), might have been figuring, "Let's try anything. A test can't hurt." Nobody at B&B seemed to think "Wow, this is the breakthrough idea." They, too, figured, "Test it. Maybe yes, maybe no."

■ The man cast as the bedeviled supermarket owner originally—and still—is Dick Wilson, a face you look at and say, "Where have I seen him before?" And you have—on tv shows, movies, even, gasp, in other commercials. A funny

man, this W'son, in the old silent film tradition, where a conic had to rely on a curl of the lip or a raised eyebrow to express an attitude.

George Whipple Sells Name for \$1

Video trivia: The original name I had selected for the supermarket owner was Edgar Bartholomew, a name I thought bespoke fuddy-duddyness. But our lawyers told us we had to find a real Edgar Bartholomew, and give him a buck before we could use his name. Try as we might, we couldn't dig up a real Edgar Bartholomew.

So we looked through the B&B employe list to see if any name there tickled our fancy. And, it just so happened that the late George Whipple, then head of Benton & Bowles' pr department, sold his name for a dollar.

I was home when account man Joe Burns called and said something like, "Sit down, John. Your Charmin commercial scored a 55 recall."

And I stood, phone in hand, silly-grinning and saying something that will never get into Bartlett's like, "Say Joe, that's great . . . just great."

■ It's natural to get excited when a commercial you write scores well. But that period of elation lasts only so long, about as long as the client's Nielsen holds up. So I was happy, but Nielsen so. No one has a right to think that what he does in this business will last for eight years, and God knows how much longer. No one can ever suspect that he'll create the world's most hated (and one of the most successful) campaigns. Especially for a toilet paper . . . er, bathroom tissue.

The commercial that scored so well was one titled "Digby," after the cop of the same name who was summoned by George Whipple to restrain the crazed Charmin-squeezing ladies. After Digby delivered his no-no to the ladies, he caught Whipple in mid-squeeze and gave him a shame-shame, "George Whipple . . .

please don't squeeze the Charmin." Titter, titter, tittered the three ladies.

The incredible thing about this inanity was that "an unusually high 51% of the commercial audience," said the research report, recalled the story line of Digby. Previously-tested Charmin commercials ranged from 2% to 27% in this category.

■ Sure, there were some negative comments, says the shriven Lithuanian. But the researchers wrote, "However, the Information Management Department shares our view that the quality of these 'negative' comments is not of a sufficient degree for concern, and is generally similar [stupid, silly] to what we have experienced in the past."

What happened in '64 to the present? Have attitudes changed, or have people? Initially only a few vicious letters went through the Cincinnati Post Office. One I still have, and enjoy reading from time to time, was from a Valparaiso University professor who objected to folks squeezing the Charmin



Before the "squeeze" and purchase by Procter & Gamble, Charmin Paper Mills ran space like this 1956 newspaper ad for a two-ply version of Charmin, dubbed Lady Charmin. The ads did well, but nothing like P&G's "Please don't squeeze" tv campaign that followed.

with such "vulgar vigor."

But now the Charmin commercials are honored—or rather, dishonored—by CROC, the Committee for Rejection of Obnoxious Commercials, which judged my effort to be one of the world's worst.

'Worst TV Series of 1971'

Time, reporting the dishonor, cited "Charmin toilet paper, which shows a group of half-crazed women pouncing on poor, effeminate store manager Mr. Whipple like the Erinyes attacking Orestes." June 19, 1972. Erinyes?

And Faith Popcorn pops off about the Charmin campaign: "My nomination of the worst tv series of 1971. It is a pity that such a potentially bountiful idea should have been executed in a form so banal, inelegant, tasteless and boring. I cannot help but express my anguished criticism—since it is my belief that, had the execution been in any way equal in brilliance to the superlative concept itself, its sales effectiveness would have been infinitely greater." March, 1972.

Johnny Carson spoofs it, columnists columnize it, Nashville had a fair-to-middlin' hit based on it. Now what should I do? Crow? Hide? Lie, maybe? Or, perhaps, find succor in the fact that the Gallagher Report claims "Charmin climbs to 27% share of \$400,000,000 market. Displaces Scott (Nov. 16, 1971) as number one brand. Charmin's patented softening process wins buyers despite irritating 'please don't squeeze the Charmin campaign.'" Despite—or because?

'Insult to All Womanhood'

Pretty pastoral pictures have never sold a lot of TP. Gorgeous babes have never skyrocketed bathroom tissue sales.

Enough. I've made a clean breast of it. I'm able to face anyone now, Jerry. You, Faith, even Hank Seiden, who was unusually vicious when he wrote that my campaign is "an insulting campaign to all womanhood. I'd like to see some women's lib gal put the squeeze on the guy who thought it up."

Well, the women's lib gal I'm married to hasn't put the squeeze on me yet, and that's doubly reassuring. Maybe, just maybe, things are looking up, Jerry, because my wife's Italian, too! #