

ROBINSON'S RICHES.



Phyllis Robinson. First copy chief at Doyle Dane Bernbach. Member of the Copywriters' Hall of Fame. Discoverer and nurturer of talent -- including four writers who have gained Hall of Fame recognition. Here, from a recent interview, are observations and remembrances of this extraordinary creative leader.

On early ambitions:

"At a very early age. I announced I wanted to be a poetess. I loved all the crazy lady poets of the day, and I loved to write. Verse, songs, I wrote at the slightest excuse. I wasn't sure how I'd make a living, but I felt sure I'd stay very busy writing."

On her first copy jobs:

"After majoring in sociology at Barnard, I went to work in urban housing. The idea of writing was in the back of my mind, but I didn't have the chance to realize it until I landed a job as a copywriter with the Methodist Publishing House in Nashville. Later, I got my first agency job with a small agency in Boston. I came back to New York and went to work at Grey. That's where I met Bill Bernbach."

On Doyle Dane Bernbach's early days:

"Bill told me he was setting up an agency with Bob Gage, Ned Doyle and someone named Maxwell Dane. Well, Bill was my favorite creative director, I had enormous respect for Gage, and I loved Ned Doyle's sandpaper charm. So how bad could this man Dane be? Bill offered me a job as a copy chief for \$135 per week. I said I'd think about it. Which I did, for 12 hours. We opened June 1, 1949 with 12 people. There was a spirit of high adventure. We were out, and free, and no one was telling us how to make ads. We figured that if we could do great work, we might become a \$2 million agency, and then everything would be fine."

On hiring talent:

"I had an advantage. I was new to this business of hiring people. So I didn't suffer from any preconceptions. Besides, we wanted people who could do the kind of work no one was doing. So we couldn't look in someone's portfolio and expect to see the kind of work we wanted. We had to look for potential. More often than not, it was tucked away in the back of the portfolio, ads that never sold, ideas that had been killed. I also found potential by poring through hundreds of ugly little ads, looking for that spark, the willingness to take a great leap."

On rules:

"From the beginning, the exciting idea has been that we don't have any rules, that we throw out the rules every day and make up our own. As for techniques, it's not a matter of saying, 'This problem needs a humorous solution and this one needs a serious solution.' It's not what you do, it's the way that you do it."

On teaming creative people:

"First-rate people work effectively with first-rate people. Except when the chemistry isn't right, when there's a personality clash. Two volatile people can produce great advertising -- or maybe just blood on the wall. Two low-key people can produce effective, even exciting, advertising. But if they don't, maybe you need to team a quiet one with a volatile talent. Sometimes two juniors can produce startling work; sometimes a junior teamed with a senior. There aren't any rules. You just have to mix it up, see what happens. There's nothing as exciting as a person's potential for growth -- and nothing as rewarding as seeing that potential realized."

On leadership styles:

"No two people are alike. Bob Gage likes to lead by example, by doing good work that demonstrates his standards. Bill Bernbach leads by inspiration. He gets people so excited, so thrilled about advertising they can do work they didn't know they were capable of doing. I tend to be a tough supervisor. I want to see everything. I'm vocal about the work I don't like -- and I've always tried to be equally vocal about the work I like. How far can you lead people? I think they must find solutions within themselves. Sometimes I'd point out something in the copy and suggest that a buried idea might be stronger than the one they'd built the ad around -- but that's as far as I think you should go."

On today's Americans:

"Today you're talking to a generation that grew up watching 'Romper Room' -- and laughing at the commercials. Now they're adults, savvy, cynical of advertising. Much of today's advertising is

all flash and style with no substance. I don't believe it sells. But something of substance works. Today, more than ever, people respond to a bold idea, presented vividly, memorably."

On writing:

"Obviously, you must know the product, know the client, know the people you want to sell. If you've done your homework, the advertising should come easily. If it doesn't, I have a few techniques. One is to sit down and write, even if you wind up throwing out ninety-nine percent of it. That one percent might be a gold mine. I've been lucky. I write easily. And I've never had a block. But sometimes I have to do a lot of revising before I'm satisfied."

On building a reputation:

"Our early reputation was built in print -- and, to a very large degree, in black-and-white. It's a shame so many television writers simply can't create effective print -- it's a great way to reach selected audiences. There's a special challenge, an opportunity, in print, to show your ability to solve a problem -- and to put it down on paper for close examination."

On The Wall Street Journal:

"I have great respect for The Wall Street Journal. An enormous amount of material is sent to me by the people I work with at the agency, and it's amazing how high a percentage of that material is clipped from The Journal. I have a sense of professionalism when I think of The Journal, the feeling that the information is reliable. Aesthetically, I love The Journal. It simply exudes class. The writing style? It's very meaty, very clean, and very disciplined. From time to time, it's occurred to me we should steal some people from The Journal's staff -- and that's a feeling I don't have with many periodicals. Another thing, ads seem to spring out of the format. The Journal is a very classy publication."