

Interview with Kenneth Roman

Why did you write *The King of Madison Avenue*?

I remember receiving a memo that David Ogilvy had written shortly after I joined Ogilvy, Benson & Mather. He had written to a client about an advertising campaign. Ogilvy hated the client's campaign and gave them eight reasons why it was a bad campaign. At the end, he provided his ultimate reason. He said, "Your layouts are different. That's the only thing that can be said in their favour. Well, you can cut the udders of a cow and it would be different also. However, that cow would not produce milk!"

I was so startled by the memo that I couldn't throw it away. By the time I left the agency I, like most others in the business, had a large file of David's memorable letters, memos, and anecdotes. I wondered what I was going to do with them all until I realised that they could form the basis of a biography.

Ogilvy told his own story many times. He had written his autobiography, though he called it "a bust". He also wrote *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, but that only told part of his story. By writing *The King of Madison Avenue* I realised that I could do things that he couldn't: I could put him in context and assess objectively how important he was. I could discuss his legacy from today's perspective. Also, I could bring alive his idiosyncratic personality, which was certainly remarkable.

I carried out 120 personal interviews and referred to over 100 books. I went through 30,000 papers at the Library of Congress and elsewhere and I travelled to his homes. It was a huge amount of work and I loved every minute of it!

Were there any unexpected discoveries as you went back over the career of someone you knew so well?

The basic outline of Ogilvy's life was well known, partly because it was such an implausible story: He failed to complete his Oxford degree and became a chef in Paris. Then he moves on to sell Aga cookers to Scottish housewives in the depths of a depression. He became a researcher in Hollywood working for George Gallup before moving into undercover work with British security co-ordination. After the war, he became a farmer in the Amish community of Pennsylvania. At the age of thirty-eight, never having really worked in advertising, he opened an advertising agency in New York to compete with the biggest names of the day. Within ten years he had become the most talked about person in the industry. He told these stories himself many times.

I found that the stories were *almost* correct--but not quite. He had embellished a little. He said, "I was thrown out of Oxford. I failed every exam and was sent down. It was the worst mistake of my life." I went through the files at Oxford and there's no evidence that he failed any exam or that he was thrown out. He had dropped out, but, of course, that wasn't as good a story. He was an actor, and like any good actor he wanted to give himself better lines, so he embellished, and that was a surprise.

Do you still see his influence today?

Yes, I see his legacy in many important ways. He created half a dozen great campaigns, but they are not the most important lasting influence. Ogilvy really popularised the concept of brand and brand

image, which he picked up from an obscure academic journal and really put on the map. He also brought research into the advertising business. He championed direct marketing, which I believe is the spiritual parent of the Internet, and he was an early consumerist advocating a respect for the consumer and their intelligence. His most famous line is, "The consumer is not a moron. She's your wife. You wouldn't lie to your wife, don't lie to mine."

Another key legacy is in the agency that he founded: an agency that has survived the retirement and death of the founder as well as a hostile takeover. It's still there today with his name over the door and a culture that is largely intact.

In the book you discuss how advertising has changed with the coming of the digital age but you also highlight how many of Ogilvy's core values hold true. Do you think Ogilvy would have thrived in the modern advertising world?

For a start, he hated computers and he wouldn't have been able to turn one on. He didn't even use a typewriter or a ball point pen; he used only freshly sharpened pencils.

He had no concept of technology but he understood and embraced many of the principles that we follow today--that advertising should be measurable and accountable, which is something that the Internet has the power to deliver. He was passionate about direct marketing. He called direct mail his secret weapon and the direct marketing office his spiritual home. Also, he understood the power of research, which he embraced and made sure it was used correctly with a passion that no-one else had at the time. The Internet is at the heart of much of this today, and he would absolutely embrace it for that reason.

From your account, Ogilvy appears to be a man of many contradictions--tremendously kind to those around him but equally capable of being incredibly insensitive to them in his words and actions, for example. How do you account for these contrasts? Were they calculated or unintentional quirks of his personality?

Many people have tried to answer this question because his behaviour was so idiosyncratic. At times it was eccentric, at other times boorish and outrageously bad-mannered.

For example, at dinner with a client the maitre d' would list the chef's specials, and David would say that he just wanted grape nuts cereal, or he'd order a plate of ketchup. He'd go out with clients and order two mince pies as a first course, two mince pies for main course, and two more for dessert.

I think it was calculated so that those who saw him would then repeat these stories later. He was conscious of his public persona and the need to be memorable.

He always said, "If you can't advertise yourself, how do you expect to advertise for your clients?"

Ogilvy's first career steps look strangely faltering. What do you think motivated him at this stage in his life?

Yes, he did go from job to job, but he learned from every experience along the way. For example, selling Aga cookers door to door left a mark on him. He said that he learned quickly that no sale meant no commission, and no commission meant nothing to eat! So, he became a salesman and he remained one all his life.

He went to work for George Gallup in Hollywood doing research in the movie business. Here he learned to value research, and he brought this to the advertising business to develop better campaigns. So he picked up these experiences, and they helped him evolve into the man that he became

This wasn't part of a deliberate plan, though. It wasn't until he was 38 that he went into advertising. Later, he said that he couldn't have been successful in anything else.

As someone who worked with David Ogilvy, are there any moments that you witnessed that particularly stand out in your memory?

One of my first meetings with him was memorable. I was an account executive for a new dog food called Prime. We were all set to take it to national distribution when the client said that the last line of the commercial, the customer promise, wasn't particularly memorable. He asked if we could improve it. Ogilvy heard about this and came to see me. He told me that he'd work on it over the weekend, and so I went home assured that the most famous copywriter in the world was working on my problem. I considered it solved! On Monday morning Ogilvy came into my office and he put a piece of paper face down on my desk. He told me that he'd been working on my problem all weekend and come up with dozens of ideas. None of them were any good except one, he told me. He turned over the paper and it said, "The Prime Minister of dog food".

I said, "Thank you, David, we'll consider that very carefully", before carefully filing it away.

Are you working on another book at the moment? *The King of Madison Avenue* received glowing reviews and praise. Will you write a follow up?

I spent three years writing this book and have spent the last year talking about it. I have written about Ogilvy since completing *The King of Madison Avenue*--a well received article about Ogilvy on leadership. His real strength was leadership and institution building, and it's a great area to look at. I'm not sure that it's a subject for a further book, though. We'll see.

I would like to write another biography, probably in the business area, and I have several other ideas in mind.

How would you sum up *The King of Madison Avenue*?

It's about an advertising man, but it's not an advertising book. It's about a man who created something enduring in business and who was an inspiration in so many ways. It's a book about a personality who was so memorable and so interesting, so outrageous and so lovable--all at the same time.