

# Dominant is Sexy

It's not news to any HUB subscriber that today, more than any other time, clutter is the "C" word. Yes, we know there are 200,000 SKUs at the Mega Mart today vs. 15,000 a short while ago, but this is no longer about volume. Clutter's going three-dimensional now — call it clutter metastasis — where the media itself is a fragmented and chaotic moving target of cable, online magazines, pop-ups, the blogosphere, "real world" stealth, product placements and grass-roots networks.

We're supposed to master it with our usual aplomb like Chuck Yeager, calmly trying option A, B and C while the rocket's spinning end over end and bouncing off the stratosphere. Of course Chuck gets the solution right every time. Let's see how we're doing? *We'll just turn on the TV...*

Ooooh, nic-c-c-ce...For 27 seconds of the 30-second spot that just cost you \$925,000, you've showed us six dorks in an apartment dressed up in Halloween costumes having fake fights with Styrofoam swords (for a major credit card); or you've dramatized a bewildered young couple being shown a filthy dump by a real estate agent who, at the last moment, points out that the house has a special tree in the back yard, causing the husband to shout, we'll take it! (for a beer).

Now what? You've got three seconds to actually *sell something*, let alone create a brand.

Most of the time, the audience gets a punch line, your product name and a voice-over tie-in straining to connect with some value proposition, slapped on at the final bell. In fact, it looks like you're just getting *a product placement in your own commercial!* What, where, why and how in the name of (a religious deity) does selling occur in this work of art? How does this solve the problem of clutter?

If you answered, "*well, all we can hope to do in this chaos is to get our product noticed, plus, the MTV generation only wants .004-second cuts, so we have to amuse, shout, explode, annoy or otherwise jar the eyeball in our direction, then hope*

*for the best.*" If that's your idea of the mission — congratulations! You're in the entertainment business.

But you're not and never were in the marketing business. You can put a bear in a pink tutu on the top of a house and grab the whole town's eyeballs. But you'll not sell the house. You'll have broken through, but to an irrelevant area of the brain. Not the place from which buyers are moved to action. As a professional, your answer to the clutter problem is false.

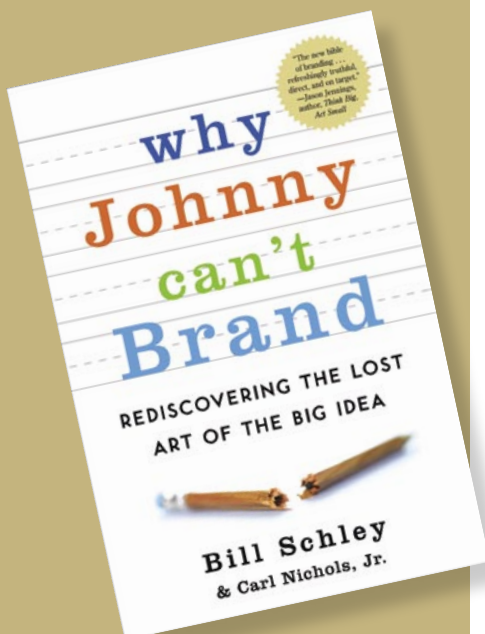
No matter what the medium, this is the central question for an industry that's been in an identity crisis for far too long now for it to be considered a passing adolescent phase — an industry confused about whether it's in the business of circus stunts, or the business of sales and commerce. In other words, it's an industry that's confused about the nature of creativity and excitement in the purveyance of products and services — *the nature of its craft* — its only reason for being.

The answer will determine whether our institution (American advertising and marketing) retains any respect and viability, or winds up in a kind of self-fulfilling state of chaos, as it chases its panicky obsession with the increasingly fragmented new media, and the notion that the rules of communication have somehow changed along with it.

We — all of us — have been the cause of this problem. It's shameful for some to suggest that it's "the clients'" fault. It's everyone's duty and responsibility to know better. And it ought to be our number-one

In this age of wild clutter, we need the "idea centered" brand — now more than ever.

by **Bill Schley & Carl Nichols**  
*Principals*  
**david ID**



priority to solve it, now — *especially* when we wake up to the reality of how amazingly simple it is for any of us to make the adjustment.

We just wrote a book called *Why Johnny Can't Brand* to challenge the cynical notion that what makes marketing communication effective has somehow changed with the advent of unprecedented clutter, a notion advanced by practitioners who don't want to face the fact that entertainment is easy; making the product the most exciting thing in the message — *real branding* — is hard. If Chuck Yeager was a master marketer instead of test pilot he'd have the right answer to this issue, too. The answer is, in this age of wild clutter, we need "the idea centered" brand — based on a core, singular selling idea — now more than ever.

To some extent, today's brand practitioners are victims of the dead-end road to creative glory they've put themselves on, the only path that many of them have ever known. Yet they could switch to the path of righteousness in about four hours by reading any one of four or five books that 98% of them have never heard of. Since not all of these books are still in print they can get a pretty good primer by glancing at ours.

The wonderful, hopeful truth is that the answer is waiting under all of our noses, an answer that becomes more relevant the more fragmented and diffuse the state of modern media and communications becomes. It's based on the golden age of communication principles ushered in by a group we call the Brand Titans in the 1940's, 50's and 60s — principles that seem all but forgotten by too many marketing people in power these days. Yet creating communications without them is like attempting modern science without the rules of physics discovered by scientists like Einstein and Planck over the last 100 years. And the result for all to see, is horses blowing flatulence in a blonde's face in an effort to sell beer.

The reason these principles were discovered in these seemingly ancient decades was because the new paradigm of mass market, electronic media — radio and TV — were just then revolutionizing

the culture, and advertisers needed to figure out in a hurry what worked and why. People like John Caples, Victor Schwab, David Ogilvy and Rosser Reeves really *did* write the bible back then. Timeless wisdom in waiting.

Today, we're at another revolutionary crossroads as exploding new forms of media arise to replace comfortable institutions like the 30-second spot. This, however, is a *media* revolution, that's been disastrously mistaken and miscast as a *message* one. It's back to reality time. The medium will always be important but it will *never* substitute for a message.

When you understand the message equation, you understand that even venerable old saws like, "Sell the sizzle, not the steak," is a false "epiphany" for any thoughtful young marketer trying to figure this stuff out. A Brand Titan wouldn't have said that. It would lead companies to believe, in effect, that they can manufacture sizzle and actually forget about the steak.

Have you ever gone to The Palm Steakhouse in New York City and ordered a 24oz. plate of *sizzle*? It is and always will be about the steak when you're building a dominant brand. The steak is the vessel with the vitamins, the protein, the flavor, the color, the history, the process, the culture and the complexity. Make your steak the idea and the star, and the sizzle will pop and snap better and louder than all the others, by default.

So how, in practice, do we begin to turn ourselves around? It starts with a mindset. What we're talking about is anything but guru fluff. It's applied sales physics. It starts with the axiom: "If you build a better mousetrap, *absolutely no one gives a sh-t.*" In fact, they hate you for disrupting their impossible schedules with a new concept they have to learn about, decide if they can trust and teach others to implement. No one *ever* sees what you see until you show them and sell them.

The only thing that can vault your brand over this firewall without a \$50 million ad budget is the same as it was in the ancient time of Demosthenes — an *idea* — taken from a very special category

of ideas, unlike any others. To be precise: *A Dominant Selling Idea*. When you apply the right principles, any brand can have a dominant selling idea in about 40 business days.

Fear not — *no one demands that you be dull*. Creativity, color and fun will always be the body of stand-out communications. But the heart is the selling idea. Idea first, entertainment second — or no real brand. Otherwise, your expensive advertising and marcom will be like a new sports car, delivered without an engine. It's pretty, but with no means of driving itself into the mind of the customer.

When you understand the Dominant Selling Idea, you'll understand how to do the hardest, but most critical thing in marketing: make your *product the star*, not a sock puppet or a crowd of cats.

Because in the end the sexiest thing of all is increased sales.

In the next issue, we'll get specific about exactly why, in 7 out of 10 companies large and small, *Johnny Can't Brand* — and how we can turn it around with a handful of stunning, focus-inducing principles. We've met the enemy, and he is us. All we need to win is to re-engage with our own best sense of reality. ■

**Bill Schley and Carl Nichols** are the authors of several books, most recently *Why Johnny Can't Brand: Rediscovering the lost art of the Big Idea*. They are partners in **david ID**, ([davidid.com](http://davidid.com)) an international brand consulting firm headquartered in Connecticut. During their careers, they've built brands for companies at every stage—from global giants like Procter & Gamble and AstraZeneca to start-ups that have later gone public.

Bill was previously a creative executive at Ted Bates Worldwide and won the industry's Effie Award for sales effective advertising. He also built a number of successful brands at firms he co-founded, the most recent sold to a NYSE company.

Carl was previously CEO of the Einson Freeman division of WPP and a global director at D'Arcy, Masius, Benton & Bowles. During the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, he opened the first Western ad agency offices behind the former iron curtain.