



ADTALK

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Goodbye, Rosser Reeves

Just stop and think: when was the last time you, as an advertising person, heard the term 'USP'? Think real hard now. Give up? Already?

The fact is that until not so long ago the good old 'Unique Selling Proposition' dominated an advertising person's life. Every product had a USP (which was what kept it there in the marketplace, after all). Life was simple then. For, as Rosser Reeves informed you, all you had to do was to isolate that USP and hammer the hell out of it in your advertising. And then everybody went home at 5:30 in the evening and had tea.

But, as the saying goes, that was then and this is now.

Today, with full-blooded competition, and open access to technology, we are confronted with parity situations in one product category after another. Whether we're talking soaps or two-wheelers, there is no real, tangible difference between one brand and another any more. They're all intrinsically more or less the same. (And where one is fortunate enough to enjoy a product advantage over the competition, it would be wise to realise that one's competitor, if he were serious, could wipe it out in maybe six months' time.) That is the way it is all over the world. And that, rapidly, is the way it's becoming in India as well.

So no more USP, buddy. It is dead. In fact, it is officially dead. For the very agency that invented and popularised the concept

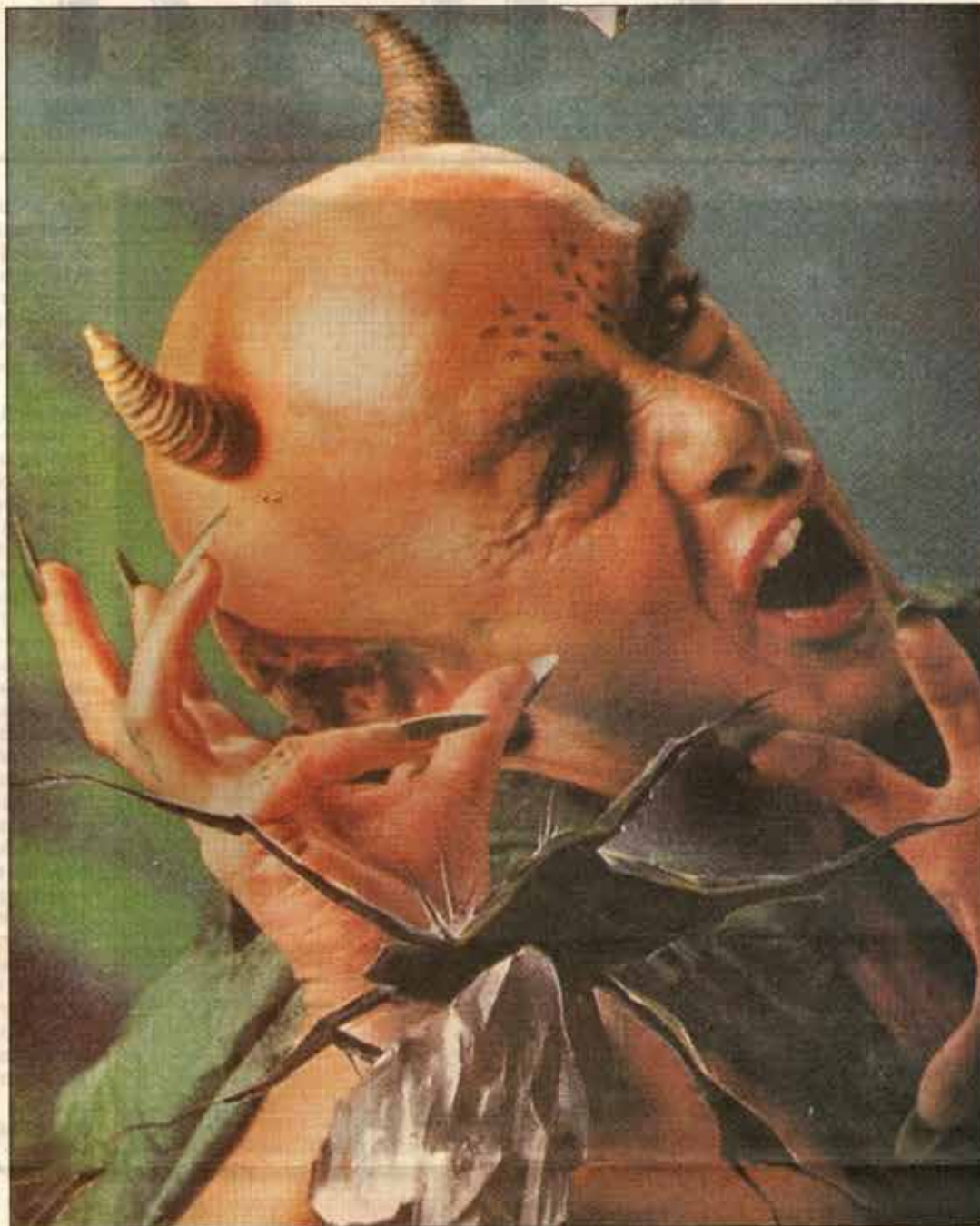
of the USP—Backer, Spielvogel, Bates—has, according to a news report in *Advertising Age*, discarded it as an operating credo, and moved on to something more relevant to our parity age.

If the age of the USP is now officially over, where do we go from here?

The most incisive answer to that question perhaps comes from the UK agency, Bartle, Bogle, Hegarty. For their basic philosophy is summed up as: "We are not a service industry, we are a manufacturing industry." A strange thing, you may say, for an advertising agency to claim. But as they go on to explain: "In the old days advertising dramatised product differences. Today advertising usually *is* the product difference. It is therefore part of the manufacturing process."

So the role of advertising shifts from merely communicating information about the product to actually *adding value* to it. And, increasingly, the only difference between one product and another is the difference that the advertising contributes—the imagery that it cloaks the product with, making it somehow more likeable, more "wantable" than its competitors.

In India, as elsewhere, we've made the quantum leap from the Age of the USP to the Era of Value Addition. And in the process the advertising industry is having to throw out its old bag of tricks and develop an entirely new bag of tricks—filled with imagery, drama, emotion, humour, whimsy entertainment and the other sundry tools



These days, advertising usually *is* the product difference

of non-rational persuasion. The kind of non-rational tools that help make MRF tyres, for instance, more wantable than Modi tyres, Bajaj scooters more wantable than LML Vespa, Eveready batteries more wantable than Nippo, or Onida TVs more wantable than Philips.

There are some product categories in India that have known the reality of this kind of value-addition advertising for a long, long time—especially categories like textiles, cigarettes and soft drinks. But now this reality is racing to confront the marketers of even the most unlikely and hard-headedly rational products, from financial products to computers, from industrial chemicals to machine tools. Nobody, it seems, can hide from it any longer.

Thus, in an increasing number of these categories, it is no longer merely the product that matters, but all of the necessary surrounding imagery, the entire set of intangible values and attributes created around by the advertising in order to appeal to the consumer. And that, really, is what makes the difference between just a commodity product and a brand. A brand is basically a product with a mythology constructed around it. The stronger that mythology, the stronger the brand.

In this context, it is interesting to read the survey of 'the world's 300 most powerful brands' conducted by a UK group called Interbrand not long ago. For, in the shortlist of the world's 10 most powerful

brands, alongside consumer brands like Coca-Cola, Marlboro, Nescafe and Sony, there is a computer brand—IBM. (Way back in the 1960s the company had already created a diabolically clever mythology around its brand. For, as the slightly menacing saying went among the business executives of the time, "Nobody ever got fired from his job for specifying IBM...")

Going further down the list of the world's 300 most powerful brands are other interesting revelations. Brands such as 3M (adhesives, abrasives etc), Caterpillar (earthmoving equipment), Zantac (ulcer drug), Castrol (industrial and other lubricants), Massey Ferguson (farm equipment), and Apple, Lotus 123 and Unisys (com-

puters and software). All of them, of course, in product fields that one might consider too hard-headed and technical for such airy-fairy stuff as brand imagery.

But what was positively terrifying was to discover that one of the world's 300 most powerful "brands" is apparently Exocet missiles. The report explains that until the Falklands War, only military experts had heard of this French missile, but its apparent success in the War (with the help of some very skillful public relations management) made it a household name all over the world. Subsequently, says the report, "the brand name Exocet came to be seen by various governments as such a potent symbol of national pride and virility that countries began to buy the missile largely due to the appeal of the brand" (italics mine).

What makes this all the more chilling is the fact that the Exocet was technically a bit of a dud: in its highly publicised sinking of a British warship, for instance, the missile itself failed to explode, and the ship sank because of a chance fire caused by the missile's flaming engine.

Anyway, coming back to the point, it seems clear that this new role of advertising—as value-adder and brand-differentiator—is going to affect the entire marketing and advertising industry in a fairly radical way.

Already, some fundamental changes have taken place. Ten years ago, for example, what a client really looked for from his agency was "good, solid service". The creative product, while people paid lip service to it, was clearly seen as a necessary evil (or perhaps even an unnecessary evil). Today, of course, there are fewer and fewer clients who can afford to think this way.

One can see an interesting extrapolation of this trend in the future: with the sophisticated new tools that have recently been developed in the West for *actually* measuring advertising effectiveness, sooner or later we are going to see a system where agency compensation is linked up with the actual effectiveness of the advertising product. (Why shouldn't an agency that produces a premium advertising product earn a premium compensation? And, conversely, why should a client pay a standard compensation for a standard advertising product?)

But that, of course, is the subject for a separate column by itself.