



PHOTOS BY THOMAS WASPER

Eyeing Success: Bill Hamilton, founder of marketing firm theAgency in Camarillo, with models of billboards and street furniture featuring ads from past campaigns.

Career Creative

How an advertising exec straight out of 'Mad Men' moved to Camarillo and opened an agency for small clients.

By HELEN FLOERSH Staff Reporter

Bill Hamilton's resume reads something like the backstory of a character from "Mad Men": In addition to degrees from New York University and Parson's School of Design, Hamilton also holds an MBA from Harvard Business School. His advertising career has included stints as head creative at well-known agencies McCann Erickson and Leo Burnett. He was the creative force behind award-winning campaigns for big-name clients the likes of Coca-Cola Co., Bank of America Corp. and Kentucky Fried Chicken during the industry's heyday.

"It was a lot like what you see on 'Mad Men,'" Hamilton said. "I was really lucky to be in advertising at that time. It was a lot of fun."

With that kind of background, it may come as a surprise that Hamilton has chosen to put his Madison Avenue pedigree to work in Camarillo, where he has been running theAgency, a full-service advertising firm, for 25 years.

Big ideas

Quiet Camarillo may be far from the hustle and bustle of New York and Chicago, but for Hamilton, it's an ideal place to call home.

"We're only about an hour out of L.A., but we don't have to deal with all the traffic," he said. "And, of course, the weather is perfect — the most perfect weather in the country, in fact."

Hamilton is determined to offer his local clients at theAgency the same creative prowess he wielded at McCann Erickson and Leo Burnett. The firm is currently running campaigns for the Ventura County Lodging Association and Ventura County West, among

others. Clever quips are an agency trademark; one advertisement for business law firm LightGabler reads, "When it comes to employment law, this is not a strategy," above an image of a man with his fingers crossed.

"Having a creative run this agency is a priority, and so is having big ideas," Hamilton said. "A big idea will work anywhere in the world, and I would put ours up against any big agency, anywhere."

Disruption has changed the ad industry since Hamilton started his firm. Digital advertisements are expected to outsell TV ads by 2018, according to the American Marketing Association. Yet Hamilton is confident that the rules of yesteryear remain important today. "Banners and mobile ads ... these are just tactics," he said. "You still have to have an advertising strategy. The strategy behind the tactics is what builds a strong brand."

And in order for that strategy to work, businesses must be able to connect with their audiences. No number of retweets or Facebook impressions can take the place of relationships, Hamilton explained.

"I don't know how many times I've heard small clients say, 'Oh, I tried advertising. It didn't work,'" he said. "And I say, you didn't try advertising. You put your mission statement in a little box next to a picture of your product and you called it advertising — that's not advertising! You made no connection with your people. You made no promise to them."

Hamilton believes that a brand is nothing more than a promise, and with the advent of the internet that promise is more important than ever. Contemporary consumers conduct a lot of online research about companies and products.

"People can spot inauthentic things very

quickly. And if they do that, you're screwed," he said.

At theAgency, Hamilton's best advice to clients is simple: Be what you are. "The most successful brands have a position in people's minds, and it gives them pricing power," Hamilton explained. "Make sure that your strategy in advertising includes an authentic and believable and doable promise, and then stick to it. That's really the basis of true advertising."

Marketing education

Hamilton's earliest aspirations were more Dr. House than Don Draper. He wanted to be a cardiac doctor, but his father was in the television industry and when he accompanied his dad to work it piqued his curiosity.

"The byplay between my father and the advertiser was really interesting," he noted. "I would watch my father do these commercials, which he did in a very natural way, where he really developed this relationship with his audience."

His observations inspired the philosophy behind his career.

"Watching my father made me realize the power of a trusting relationship," he said. "Understanding your audience is so important. You cannot over-emphasize it."

Though Hamilton doesn't discount the impact of his perspective on his success in advertising, he is quick to credit his former colleagues as his inspiration.

"Working for big agencies and big clients was an incredible education — it was really my Ph.D. in advertising," Hamilton said. "I was really lucky to sort of fall into great jobs with terrific people."

His curiosity and enthusiasm attracted



Ad Advice: Today's consumers spot inauthentic companies, Hamilton says.

some skepticism. A former boss once told Hamilton's wife that those who worked with Hamilton thought he was "crazy," he recalled.

"I'd ask all these questions no one had ever asked (my boss) before," Hamilton said. "Like when we were working on an ad for Wrigley's gum. 'What are people who chew gum like? How are they different from other people?'"

Those questions would eventually form the basis for Hamilton's style of advertising. For example, he decided to bring his new way of seeing brands to a campaign for Coca-Cola.

"The commercial I pitched was nothing but a bottle of Coke, one of those typical sex shots with the water dripping down," Hamilton recalled. "When people watched me present it at the agency, they were like, 'What is this? What's the idea?' But in reality, if you're a Coke drinker, if you drink soda, if you're hot,

that image just seeped into your brain, and you had to have that bottle of Coke. ... For the time it was so unusual, but it worked."

Cosmetics campaign

For 30 years, Hamilton glided from one big agency to the next, designing campaigns for major clients as a top creative executive. One of his favorite stories involved a campaign for cosmetics company Revlon.

The cosmetics maker came to Leo Burnett in Chicago during Hamilton's tenure there to request a campaign for a new product. The assignment came as a surprise because Revlon is from New York, and its advertisements usually had a glossy, sophisticated look developed by New York agencies. In contrast, Midwestern agencies typically made demonstration ads for household products.

"The advertising at Burnett at the time was very Midwestern – not New York-y, not slick – but for some reason Revlon came to us," Hamilton said. "Because I had gone to school in New York, everyone said, 'Give it to him.'" The product was for older women, and Hamilton saw it as an opportunity to try something different.

"In those days – I think it's still true today too – if you scroll through Vogue or another magazine and you look at the ads for makeup, it's all big pictures of beautiful women," he explained. "So instead, I just took this tight, close-up fashion shot of a doll, the kind that has a glaze on it that'll get these fine little cracks all over the face."

Hamilton's objective was to resonate with his audience: "The whole point was that that's how women felt about how they looked, like the youth had cracked," he said. "This ad was saying, 'This is how we know you feel, and we can fix that.'"

Emotional intelligence was just one factor behind Hamilton's success. He also was well-versed in the challenges faced by the companies for whom he created advertisements, thanks to the lessons he took from his time at Harvard Business School. He obtained the

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BILL HAMILTON, theAgency

degree so he could understand how to help a company change and grow beyond its marketing operations.

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Career change

By 1980, Hamilton had worked for most of the top agencies. Yet as the decade drew on, he started to sense that the industry he loved was evolving beyond recognition.

"It was the early '80s when things really started to change," he said. "Ad agencies weren't ad agencies anymore – they were holding companies."

Hamilton had been serving as head creative on a campaign at Dancer Fitzgerald Sample when the company was merged into Saatchi & Saatchi in 1987. He decided to leave big agency culture for good.

"Once you no longer have that individual vision driving the agency, pretty soon finance guys are running the show," Hamilton said. "When you're working for someone who only cares about numbers, the ideas start to dissolve."

Unwilling to compromise his vision of advertising, Hamilton decided to open his own firm. He recruited industry veterans with similar backgrounds and set out to offer small- and medium-sized businesses the chance to benefit

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Simplicity: Hamilton's firm theAgency produced this ad for Sculptured Metal from Silgan Containers Corp. in Woodland Hills.

from his experience.

"I knew we weren't going to be big, we weren't going to be famous, Coca-Cola wasn't going to come knocking at our door," Hamilton said. "But we were going to do great work

did," he said. "They just stayed with the holding companies and the big salaries and they got big pensions. I could've done that, but it wasn't why I was in the business. I was in it for the ideas."

Today, the three-person team at the Agency provides a full range of advertising services to local clients, from billboards and print ads to TV commercials and web design. Their experience has quantifiable impact: Members of the Ventura County Lodging association saw per-room revenue gains of over 26 percent throughout the county following its advertising campaign.

But in a sense, the Agency was founded as much for Hamilton, and others like him, as it was for the clients it serves.

"I hired people who came out of advertising the same way I did, who had big agency experience and big client experience," Hamilton said. "I wanted to give them the chance to do what they do best, which is come up with ideas."

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Public Perceptions: Top, theAgency's ad for Community for a Clean Watershed; above, touting Ventura County West tourism.