

# David Ogilvy versus Rosser Reeves and their “Competing” Advertising Philosophies: The Real Story

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*David Ogilvy and Rosser Reeves were legends in the making when their advertising philosophies collided in American popular culture and the marketing and advertising communities during the late 1950s and 1960s. According to the industry press, Reeves’ “hard sell” approach and Ogilvy’s “soft sell” approach supposedly were vastly different, and the men were portrayed as fierce, even hated, rivals. Using primary research from two archives, this research uncovers the true nature of the relationship between these two advertising icons and their beliefs about any differences in their advertising philosophies and creative work. Personal letters, internal agency memos, and various business documents reveal surprising and never before published findings about Reeves and Ogilvy’s long and lengthy friendship, family ties, cooperative working relationship, their conflicts, and the common, solid foundation of their advertising philosophies. It is this foundation that still influences much of modern day marketing and advertising.*

Both David Ogilvy and Rosser Reeves believed that the sole purpose of advertising was simply to sell the products or services provided by their clients. Both men abhorred the tendency of advertising agency copywriters and art directors to claim their work as some form of “art.” Advertising, they insisted, was fuel for the marketer’s engine, driving forward their clients’ businesses. Indeed, their agencies, Bates and Ogilvy, Benson & Mather (OBM), became successful and well known largely because of their commitment to building their clients’ brands.

But both men, recognized as the public faces of their respective organizations, espoused certain approaches to marketing and advertising that seemingly represented two extremes. It was the battle between Reeves’ “hard sell” versus Ogilvy’s “soft sell.” The value and worth of these two approaches was at the center of an industry-wide debate in the late 1950s and 1960s about advertising creativity and advertising effectiveness. And in the media’s eyes, the two “intense rivals,” Ogilvy and Reeves, were poised against each other in polar opposite corners with the men and their philosophies becoming the focal point of the debate.

But were their advertising philosophies really that different? Were they truly intense rivals? This paper looks at the real relationship of these two advertising titans and the differences in their philosophies, both real and imagined, revealing never before published material of the two men and highlighting interesting and surprising bits of marketing and advertising history.

## Ogilvy and Reeves

Just who were these two men at the center of the debate about how advertising should be created and how it should work? Certainly, both Ogilvy and Reeves could be considered renaissance men. They were well read, articulate, enjoyed good food and fine drink, had a range of hobbies and interests, and traveled extensively overseas. Both took great pride in their writing skills and often claimed that their only professional desire was to be good copywriters. But clearly, their routes to copywriting fame were quite different.

## Rosser Reeves

Reeves, a native of Danville, Virginia, took a more traditional path to becoming a copywriter at a major advertising agency. Following his student days at the University of Virginia, Reeves began his working career at the *Richmond Times Dispatch* as a young reporter. Migrating to New York City and the advertising profession, Reeves eventually landed at Blackett-Sample-Hummert, where he was able to learn his craft from Frank Hummert, one of the early great American copywriters. Moving on to the packaged goods powerhouse, Benton & Bowles, Reeves befriended Ted Bates. Citing top management with a lack of client engagement, Bates, along with a core team that included Reeves and two accounts, Colgate-Palmolive and Continental Baking, left to begin the Ted Bates agency. Here, Reeves’ talent and insight drove him to heights as head of copy at the agency and eventually chairman of the board.

## David Ogilvy

Contrary to popular myth, David Ogilvy considered himself a Scotsman and not an Englishman, even though he was born in West Horsley, England. He was educated at Oxford and similar to Reeves, he left before completing his undergraduate studies. Ogilvy's early jobs formed his later views on advertising. He often cites his work as a chef at Paris' Hotel Majestic and his selling of Aga cooking stoves as teaching him the fundamentals of management, efficiency, and in particular, sales. But it was Ogilvy's work with the George Gallup organization in Princeton that taught him the importance of understanding consumer habits and attitudes. This learning became the foundation of his work and approach to marketing and advertising in later years.

The war and a stint as a farmer in the Pennsylvania countryside preceded his starting Hewitt, Ogilvy, Benson & Mather in New York City, a feat all the more impressive given that he had never written an advertisement. The shop's success was fast and enduring, becoming one of the most famous advertising firms with a roster of top-drawer clients such as American Express, Shell, Lever Brothers, General Foods, Rolls Royce, among others. His agency's work is often credited with helping define the "Creative Revolution" in 1960s advertising.

There is a strong romantic element associated with Ogilvy and his work. He was seen as an "Englishman" endowed with a natural elegance and a refined accent, one that Americans often assumed automatically accompanies qualities of sophistication, fine breeding, and exquisite taste. He could be easy in manner and delicate in his personal touch. On the other hand, Reeves had more of a sharp edge to him. He was an American with that familiar, native directness in his communication and uncompromising nature in his manner. Reeves, often employing a piercing, hard gaze to reinforce a point when working with his agency colleagues or clients, could press a viewpoint in an intimidating way. In both manner and composure, the two men appeared to embody their respective advertising philosophies.

### Press Portrayals - "Rivals" & Their Philosophies

As it was portrayed in the industry and popular press at the time, their philosophies were polar opposites.

Reeves, the often brusque, hard-edged American, espoused an approach to advertising known as the "hard sell." In essence, it was about identifying a unique and meaningful product attribute or benefit and then hammering that point repeatedly in advertising. His philosophy was based on finding a product's unique selling proposition or "U.S.P.," which became strongly identified with the Bates agency and Rosser Reeves. Many critics of Reeves often

point to the famous or infamous Anacin television commercial as exemplifying the Reeves' philosophy. It featured a side view of an animated, silhouetted human head. Pictured within the head were a hammer, a saw, and a lightning bolt all gyrating to screeching sounds, emulating the force and aggravation of a painful headache. Many Americans of that generation can still recall the commercial and its incessant pounding.

Reeves was called the "Prince of Hard Sell" and "master blacksmith, responsible for many of the most mind-pulverizing commercials in the history of television" (Whiteside, 1969, 47.)

Ogilvy's philosophy was characterized as "soft sell." Today, marketers and advertisers would likely recognize and identify the Ogilvy work as "brand advertising," where a premium was placed on building a story behind a brand or as Ogilvy called it, "story appeal." The outcome was in contrast to Reeves' work where a consumer was to recall a specific brand proposition. According to the industry press, Ogilvy's work was more focused on crafting an enduring and appealing brand image that would remain with consumers over time. Often, his work had a strong element of sophistication, subtlety, and refinement about it whether that element was the actual copy or smart visuals.

The Hathaway, Rolls Royce, and Schweppes work is often held up as ideal examples of the best creative and the high point of the 1960s "Creative Revolution." By contrast, the Bates and Reeves work is often portrayed as pedantic, irritating, and pedestrian. Humorist Stan Freberg even stated that Mr. Reeves was "the dean of the Gastro-Intestinal School of Advertising." (Whiteside, 1969, 47).

In the early 1960s, both men and their philosophies debuted to the larger public in the form of books, achieving a popularity well beyond that of the marketing and advertising communities. Reeves' initial draft was an internal document written primarily for Bates' employees. Soon, at the urging of many who read the draft, Reeves revised his initial work and added chapters for an official public release. *Reality in Advertising* appeared in book stores in 1961 to much acclaim and criticism. For some, *Reality in Advertising* was a revelation into the inner workings of Madison Avenue where minions soullessly crafted advertising messages to lure unsuspecting consumers to purchase unneeded products. Others felt the book a coup for the industry as it presented a strong case for advertising as simply vital information dissemination to a public who is intelligent and savvy enough to receive and process that information prior to making smart buying decisions. One view was of manipulation and the other of a simple but necessary function of the business model.

Aside from the critics, *Realty in Advertising* helped make Rosser Reeves the public face of the Bates agency. The book sold over 35,000 copies in America during its first several years. It was reprinted several times and was translated for a number of countries around the globe,

eventually selling over 150,000 copies by the middle of 1965 (Lee, 1965).

Perhaps motivated by Reeves' success, Ogilvy soon followed with *Confessions of an Advertising Man*. The book detailed Ogilvy's advertising approach as well as a number of other subjects such as obtaining and keeping clients, hiring great employees, managing an agency, etc. *Confessions* was also a success and inspired Ogilvy to follow up with several other books in later years.

Aside from sales success, both *Reality in Advertising* and *Confessions of an Advertising Man* gave Madison Avenue people with whom the public could associate with what they were viewing on television. It was Reeves versus Ogilvy. It was "hard sell" versus "soft sell." For some, it was pedantic repetition hammering home a point over and over again driving a numbed consumer to buy something they did not really need versus elegant copy lines meticulously woven and crafted gently to persuade one to consider a purchase. While that is an all too simplistic characterization, much of the industry press indulged in this characterization and participated in setting the two men and their philosophies against each other. But did Reeves and Ogilvy see themselves as professional rivals competing for businesses and public or professional attention? Were the two philosophies really as different as they were portrayed?

## PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between Reeves and Ogilvy so to understand properly their real relationship and their respective approaches to advertising. Were Ogilvy and Reeves truly intense competitive rivals? Were their advertising philosophies and approaches really polar opposites? Did the two men view their philosophies as being so different?

Reeves and Ogilvy are icons of the American marketing and advertising scene. They are now considered copywriting legends. Their advertising philosophies and the merits of each were at the center of a major debate in the marketing and advertising communities back in the 1950s and 1960s about the effectiveness of advertising, how to create it, and its overall role in society. Yet, that debate continues at some level even today. Shedding light on Reeves and Ogilvy's relationship and views will reveal surprising insights into their thinking and work and might just point toward a more sober and effective approach to advertising for the future.

## METHOD

This research represents the initial step into a much more in-depth piece of work that will feature Ogilvy and Reeves and their advertising philosophies.

Traditional methods of historical research were used for this research. Two archival collections were used: the Rosser Reeves papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society

on the campus of the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Wisconsin and the Hartman Center for Sales, Marketing, and Advertising History at Duke University located in Durham, North Carolina. Primary research documents included personal correspondence, internal agency memos, agency creative documentation, etc.

Specifically, this paper will first look at the two men's relationship and then at their respective advertising philosophies. Finally, conclusions will be developed based on the findings.

## OGILVY AND REEVES' RELATIONSHIP

Rosser Reeves and David Ogilvy enjoyed an intertwined and complicated relationship, one that might be classified as a healthy friendship although it experienced some rough and awkward moments. Their relationship is impossible to capture in a pithy, convenient phrase, but it certainly does not resemble the media-created construction of intense or even hated rivals.

### Early Relationship

Mutual respect was the initial cornerstone of the early relationship.

When Reeves was a copywriter at Blackett-Sample-Hummert, Ogilvy and Reeves had lunch together almost every week for several years. Reeves had somehow received a copy of Claude Hopkins' manuscript of *Scientific Advertising*, which was kept in a safe at Lord & Thomas. According to Ogilvy, Reeves would recite parts of the book to Ogilvy and taught him how to put those principles in action (Ogilvy, 7 April 1965). It was this appreciation and reverence for Claude Hopkins' principles of salesmanship in advertising, using best advertising practices, and holding advertising accountable for results that formed the common bond of their approach to advertising for their entire lives. Hopkins was the connection and foundation.

Years later, Ogilvy wrote Reeves and cited the importance of the Hopkins learning. In a letter to Reeves providing his input for Reeves' draft of *Reality in Advertising*, Ogilvy writes, "Twenty-two years ago you changed the course of my life by lending me the manuscript of Claude Hopkins' *Scientific Advertising*, which had not then been published" (Ogilvy to Reeves, 22 August 1960).

Ogilvy's esteem and respect for Reeves was such that when Ogilvy wrote his impressions of the American advertising scene for the *London World Press News* in 1939, Reeves was included as one of the "up and comers" in American advertising (Nielsen Researcher, 1942).

### Family Ties

The Reeves and Ogilvy relationship was deeper than just that of Rosser and David as budding industry

colleagues. There were strong family ties. Ogilvy's first wife was the sister of Reeves' wife. And it was not just David with whom Reeves shared a close relationship in the Ogilvy family. Reeves enjoyed a long and deep relationship with Francis Ogilvy, David's older brother and member of the management team at Mather & Crowther, one of London's top agencies. Their first exchange of letters located in the archives was in 1946 when Reeves was contemplating a trip to England. In fact, Reeves was proposing that Francis pay the expenses for Reeves and his wife to travel to England for a winter trip. In return for paying for the travel and lodging, Reeves would in turn provide instruction and advice to the teams at Francis' agency (Reeves to F. Ogilvy 30 1946).

The letters between Reeves and Francis and Aileen Ogilvy are numerous and touching in tone, underscoring the deep friendship and affection the couples shared. Clearly, the families enjoyed a close and intimate friendship. Vacations were taken together. During business trips, Reeves and Francis Ogilvy attempted to get together for dinners. The letters and the relationship continued for decades

Of course, there was a business side to the relationship as Reeves had an international vision for his agency that would include offices in key countries around the globe. Clearly, his idea for England included a relationship with Mather & Crowther, of which Francis was the Managing Director (Reeves to Pinkham, 31 July 1962).

## The Reeves & Ogilvy Agency?

Of all the learning gathered for this research, perhaps the next piece of information will surprise or shock industry veterans, current participants, and academics. Is it really possible that Rosser Reeves could have been the president of the revered Ogilvy agency in America? Could Reeves' "hard sell" and Ogilvy's "soft sell" possibly have resided under the same "new and improved" roof? The history of the industry could not have unfolded in the same fashion were this to be true.

Actually, this marriage of two unlikely mates came quite close to happening.

Representing a group of investors led by his brother's agency in England, David Ogilvy was in charge of pulling together the details for creating a version of the Mather & Crowther agency in America. He also took the lead in a number of other areas, including finding and hiring a president for the agency. On October 8, Ogilvy wrote Reeves that four British agencies were looking to establish an American agency and were in search for a president: "Meanwhile, I wonder if you know of a good man for President? The salary will have to be modest at the start, but he will own a goodly portion of the stock. My role will be that of invisible brainstormer [sic]. And liaison with London; I need a bigger shot to head the show. Grateful for suggestions" (D. Ogilvy to Reeves, 8 October 1947).

From the documents, it is clear that Reeves became the target for the British. Ogilvy writes in a handwritten document to Reeves: "I am getting cables saying, 'I hope you are keeping Rosser warm,' 'Bobby delighted with Rosser,' etc. So I seem to have done a great job of selling you by mail. My difficulty, of course, will be to deliver what I have sold. Please don't decide negatively until you see these people. We all want you BAD" (D. Ogilvy to Reeves, 1947).

Of course, the deal was never closed, but it may well have been very close. Reeves met with Francis in May 1948. It is unclear whether business was discussed during the trip. The archives do not have any additional documentation on Reeves' possibly joining the budding Ogilvy agency in the United States. But the potential marriage of Reeves and Ogilvy as an advertising dynamic duo forces one to pause and consider the significant consequences. At the very least, it demonstrates the enormous respect in which David Ogilvy held Rosser Reeves.

## Close Business Ties

As their agencies grew in size and prominence, Reeves and Ogilvy often shared information about the industry, best practices, and potential accounts for each other's firm. This is hardly the sign of a fierce or hated rivalry. For example, Ogilvy wrote Reeves thanking him for suggesting that Ogilvy approach a certain unnamed account. Ogilvy responded by saying that his agency was occupied with new business gained in the previous month: "During the last month we have started work on the Campbell billing, on Thom McAn [sic] and on a new Lever product -- three new accounts that aggregate \$7,500,000 in billing" (D. Ogilvy to Reeves, 7 June 1954).

In 1962, Reeves recommended a potential client to Ogilvy, Benson & Mather, but Ogilvy declined, writing, "We now have twenty clients billing \$60 million. Our purpose is to have only fifteen clients, billing an average of \$10 million each. That is why we turn down so many accounts which bill less than \$10 million. As for an account which bills \$300,000...no indeedy. No thank you" (Ogilvy to Reeves, 26 April 1962).

In addition to recommending client opportunities, Reeves and Ogilvy often shared thoughts on best practices in the industry. One very specific example stands out as to just how close these two men worked in sharing information. Ogilvy once wrote Reeves, with a memo titled, "HELP!" asking for assistance on writing "effective radio" advertising. Ogilvy noted that he had a number of documents on effective television and print advertising but "nothing on radio." In his letter, Ogilvy included a copy of a document from the Research Department of Ogilvy, Benson & Mather about research on effective radio advertising (Reeves to Ogilvy, 2 July 1962). Reeves responded by writing that while he had lots of personal experience in

writing radio copy, he had never seen anything particularly effective or insightful written on the subject. Reeves closed by asking, “In fact, if you find anything, I would appreciate it if you would send us a copy” (Reeves to D. Ogilvy, 6 July 1962). This radio example is but one of several documents located that demonstrate the connected relationship between the two men.

There are other examples of Ogilvy and Reeves’ close working relationship. The two men exchanged thoughts on hiring various individuals, often serving as a recommender for a promising creative person. They seemed to keep each other up to date on happenings in their respective agencies. In one such letter, Ogilvy wrote Reeves with details of major, top management changes at OBM. The changes would allow Ogilvy to concentrate on producing outstanding creative product, serving as chief Creative Director for the shop and freeing him from the binds and burdens of day-to-day management (Ogilvy to Reeves, 9 December 1965).

And, Ogilvy and Reeves worked together on other projects that were not directly related to their agencies. For example, the two worked on “resuscitating the image” of the “advertising man,” following the publication of John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society* and Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* in 1958 (Reeves to D. Ogilvy, 12 March 1958). One example of this work was Ogilvy appearing on a television broadcast discussing and debating the merits of advertising (D. Ogilvy to Reeves, 11 March 1958).

So, both Ogilvy and Reeves had a business relationship that was interwoven with many threads. These men were in steady contact with each other, sharing vital lessons, exchanging information, and working cooperatively on projects. This cooperative relationship is well demonstrated by their work on Reeves’ *Reality in Advertising*.

## Books

Both men enjoyed tremendous success publishing books about their advertising philosophies.

Reeves’ famous book, *Reality in Advertising*, was initially an internal document put together by Reeves from his various presentations that he made to Bates employees about the Bates way of advertising. The original draft was completed and distributed in early 1960. At first, Reeves was anxious to keep it out of the hands of Ogilvy and other competitors. In fact, he sent a copy to his sister-in-law, Melinda, Ogilvy’s first wife, with strict instructions not to let her ex-husband see this internal Bates manuscript. Reeves wrote, “I thought you might like a copy for your personal library – but in the name of God, don’t let it get into the hands of your ex-husband. It would be extraordinarily embarrassing to me. In other words, Melinda, don’t just stick it on a bookshelf. It would be the first thing he would put his fingers on the next time he comes to call” (Ogilvy to M. Ogilvy, 17 May 1960).

Soon after, Reeves proceeded quickly to have the book published by a commercial publisher and therefore asked a number of close associates and friends to review the book and forward suggestions and criticisms. Ogilvy was one of those reviewers, and he was thorough, efficient, and direct in his critique. Clearly impressed, Ogilvy begins with, “When Knopf publishes your book, I shall order two hundred copies of it – one for every officer and campaign-builder at Ogilvy, Benson & Mather, and one of each of our clients” (Ogilvy to Reeves, 22 August 1960). Ogilvy’s points were direct and unapologetic. He finished with, “You have written a great polemic, which can only benefit your agency -- and all advertising” (Ogilvy to Reeves, 22 August 1960).

Ogilvy also reviewed new chapters that Reeves added toward the end of the process. Ogilvy was politely direct in suggesting that Reeves extract portions of the chapters that he disliked. Regarding Chapter 35, Ogilvy wrote: “I find this dull and pretentious. Stick to the area of your supreme expertise.” While Ogilvy liked two of the new chapters, he was merciless on others. For example, on Chapter 34, he wrote: “Omit this chapter. You are at your best when you are on your subject -- how to make good advertising campaigns. When you get into economic theory you are no longer a great professional -- you are an amateur.” Further, Ogilvy wrote, “if you must include the chapter, at all costs omit your criticism of Keynes. It is sophomoric and embarrassing. For example, people will laugh at your ignorance when you write ‘in the year 1936, a relatively unknown man named John Maynard Keynes...’” Finally, Ogilvy finished his note with the following: “I cannot wait publication of your book. I need it to help educate so many clients and employees” (Ogilvy to Reeves, 12 September 1960).

Perhaps the most telling comment from Ogilvy was his suggestion that Reeves had written a book that would be perceived with “equal importance” as that of Claude Hopkins’ *Scientific Advertising* (Ogilvy to Reeves, 22 August 1960).

When Reeves’ publisher, Knopf, was looking for quotes from well-known advertising practitioners to include in their promotion and public relations material, Reeves suggested a number of names, most prominent of which was Ogilvy. Reeves wrote: “His name is an absolute must for the jacket -- providing that you use any quotes at all. David is, perhaps, the most spectacular man in the agency business today” (Reeves to Robbins, 4 November 1960).

In addition, the two worked together on other publications. When Ogilvy was working on his first book, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, Reeves wrote a letter recommending his own publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, and his own agent, Mr. Robert Mills, to Ogilvy. The recommendation was a powerful one as Reeves wrote, “I think Mr. Knopf is the most distinguished publisher in America and easily the ‘Number One’ prestige publisher in

this country. I would hate to see your book under any other imprimatur” (Reeves to D. Ogilvy, 11 September 1962).

Then, on another publishing project, when it was learned that Hopkins’ *Scientific Advertising* was going to be reprinted, Reeves suggested to the publisher that Ogilvy and Reeves each write a preface to the new edition. This effectively tied the two Hopkins disciples directly to their copywriting mentor (Reeves to Ogilvy, 18 May 1965).

But as with most relationships, there were moments of less than noble behavior and at times, fairly unprofessional behavior.

## “Snits” and Battles

These two powerful men certainly had their differences. Over a period of time as both firms grew, a clear sense of competition emerged between the two. The fact is that as OBM became a larger firm, gaining ground on Bates, the two gentlemen were not above snipping at each other.

Perhaps an early sign of such occurred in the spring of 1954, when a bit of tension between Ogilvy and Reeves surfaced. Judging by several documents, the two men exchanged letters regarding a Walter Lippman column about the McCarthy Senate hearings (Reeves to D. Ogilvy, 25 March 1954). In response to an Ogilvy letter (D. Ogilvy to Reeves, 12 April 1954), Reeves reacted with stern words to Ogilvy’s assertion that McCarthy was Reeves’ “hero.” Using a full page and a half, Reeves denied the assertion and outlined his beliefs: “It is hard to be an intelligent, and active, anti-Communist today without being quoted all over the lot as being a ‘McCarthyite.’ I am a very out-spoken anti-Communist --- but please don’t pin any such labels on me. So far as I know, I am not any kind of an ‘ite.’” (Reeves to D. Ogilvy, 15 April 1954).

Other signs of frostiness in the relationship began to emerge later. As his own firm was enjoying growth, Ogilvy no doubt took pleasure in his agency’s surge of popularity, publicity, and prestige. In his 1962 Christmas speech to his staff, Ogilvy seemed to take delight in outlining the differences between his agency and his primary competitors, such as McCann-Erickson, BBDO, Dancer, Benton & Bowles, N.W. Ayer, and of course, Bates. The highlights were that OBM employees had “more pride in their outfit,” “work harder,” “had higher standards of professional performance,” “always tell our clients the truth,” and “produces better advertising campaigns” (Ogilvy, 14 December 1962). Curiously, Ogilvy released the piece to the press through his public relations department, and Reeves passed it on to his top management colleagues with a cover note that declared, “I always like to see how the other one-half lives” (Reeves to Bates, 19 February 1963).

Further, during the Cunard Ocean Liner controversy, which is reviewed below, when Ogilvy and Reeves were exchanging tense letters on whether or not Bates had plagiarized an Ogilvy advertisement, they got into heated, perhaps petty, sparring match about Bates’ long-time claim

that the agency had “lost only one account -- and that one, because of a merger, to a client we had never met” (Reeves to D. Ogilvy, 26 February 1963). Ogilvy responded to this claim by having one of his employees research the claim and then passed along the results in a letter to Reeves: “Your agency is more than three times as big as ours, and more profitable. Indeed, your achievement is so remarkable that it does not require exaggeration” (Ogilvy to Reeves, 12 March 1963). The note contained an attachment citing nine points where the Bates agency had lost accounts or had mismanaged a number of them to the point that they were losing share and sales fast. In turn, Reeves shot back with a letter countering seven of the nine points and expressing grave concern over both the skills of the “fact-finder” and Ogilvy’s reliance on such a person (Reeves to Ogilvy, 22 March 1963).

Then, in a pointed last line, Reeves wrote, “I hear your book has now gone to press. When are you going to let me read a copy?” (Reeves to Ogilvy, 22 March 1963). This was relevant because Ogilvy was one of the few who was given a chance to read and submit changes to Reeves’ *Reality in Advertising*. Did Ogilvy not send an advance draft for Reeves to review? When Reeves wrote the above comment, he well knew that Ogilvy was in the final stages of writing his own book on advertising and was not going to provide an advance copy to Reeves.

Also, around this same time, Ogilvy felt the need to send Reeves a note and attachment that detailed OBM’s growth from 1954 to 1962. During those years, billings increased 226% and OBM’s rank as the 44<sup>th</sup> largest agency in 1954 increased to the 21<sup>st</sup> largest agency in America by 1962. These were incredibly impressive figures for the period. No other agency could cite such increases. Ogilvy noted that the growth had occurred even though the agency had refused “an average of 59 new accounts every year” (Ogilvy to Reeves, 6 May 1963). In a handwritten note, Bates wrote to Reeves that the 59 accounts were probably averaging “2 bucks each” (Bates to Reeves, 6 May 1963).

Clearly, as the two men and their agencies became competitors, the relationship showed signs of fraying. But the Cunard controversy threatened to blow the relationship open.

## The Cunard Controversy

Perhaps the largest dispute between the two men was about a campaign created by the Bates agency for Cunard Ocean Liners. This dispute brought to life the differences and similarities in the advertising philosophies of the two men. This dispute featured a hostile and terse exchange of letters back and forth over a period of about a month.

On February 16, 1963, Ogilvy fired off a quickly typed note to Reeves dripping with satire: “In my book I have a section on plagiarism – with illustrated examples. I would like to include your Cunard advertisement (enclosed). Could you therefore ask your secretary to let me have a proof on

coated stock? During the last week several people have said to me, 'We didn't know that you had the Cunard account.' Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but I question whether it's an indication of greatness" (D. Ogilvy to Reeves, 16 February 1963).

Reeves responded by forwarding the letter to the Bates top management team with a short note stating that "Mr. Ogilvy is in what we Southerners call a 'snit'" (Reeves to Bates, 21 February 1963).

Ogilvy, obviously responding to a call or letter from Reeves' dismissing the incident, then eloquently rips Reeves by classifying the episode as so "unworthy" of Bates and Reeves. However, Ogilvy, careful not to offend Reeves personally, wrote: "You are widely regarded as one of the greatest creative forces -- if not the greatest -- which has ever come into the advertising business. I have always been proud of numbering myself among your disciples. I hate to see you descend from the pinnacle of leadership and become a mere imitator of your disciple. As I am never tired of proclaiming, you changed my whole attitude toward advertising. You have exercised a tremendous influence over my evolution as an advertising man. But I could never allow myself -- or any of my employees -- to steal your campaigns...It may well be that in recent years you have become so pre-occupied with larger matters -- top management, expansion into Europe, Federal Trade Commission, wealth, etc. -- that you no longer give a damn about your reputation as a mere creator of great advertising campaigns. But I cannot bring myself to believe this" (Ogilvy to Reeves 23 February 1963).

Several days later, Reeves responded with a letter that highlighted where Reeves and Ogilvy see common areas and similarities in their advertising approaches. Reeves first recognized that Ogilvy had always agreed that "our basic advertising philosophies" were the same but that there were "differences in technique," which was largely due to the fact that Bates had medicines and packaged good accounts, and Ogilvy had service, fashion, and other non-packaged goods businesses. This was key as it underscored their beliefs in good, fundamental marketing principles but also recognized that advertising approaches can differ based on the type of product or service being advertised. Reeves followed by asserting that once the Ogilvy and Bates agencies began evolving their account bases into different kinds of businesses, the advertising approaches would have to change. Reeves wrote, "As you veer in one direction, we do not consider it an imitation of us; and as we veer in another direction, we do not consider it an imitation of you. The Cunard advertisement is a Cunard advertisement before anything else -- not a Bates or an Ogilvy advertisement." (Reeves to Ogilvy, 26 February 1963). Reeves closed by asserting that the Bates agency borrows from all the great advertising figures and practices and that there is a huge difference between "imitation" and "emulation." Reeves wrote, "We always try to emulate the best to reach the

highest existing standards" (Reeves to D. Ogilvy, 26 February 1963.)

Finally, demonstrating the emerging competitive nature of the relationship, Ogilvy could not help himself in forwarding a note to Reeves from advertising legend Raymond Rubicam: "In a recent letter Raymond Rubicam wrote, 'You will be interested to know that I read a Cunard ad on my last day in New York, thinking it was your ad? I was about to phone you my congratulations when a Y&R secretary told me that it was Bates swiping your stuff.'" (Ogilvy to Reeves, 5 August 1963).

The episode, fortunately for both men, never reached the press to any extent, but it did reveal another side of their relationship and their sense of ownership of their respective advertising philosophies.

## Mutual Admiration

In spite of the Cunard incident and other "snits," ever present in Reeves and Ogilvy's correspondence are humor and just good fun, often affectionate in tone. There were numerous instances throughout the years.

One letter from Reeves to Ogilvy was clearly accompanied by a photograph of Ogilvy in perhaps a not so flattering state. Reeves wrote, "This is an open attempt at blackmail. Unless you send me \$10,000 in unmarked bills, in a paper bag, I will turn this over to the F.B.I., *New York Times*, and the Immigration Authorities" (Reeves to Ogilvy, 3 November 1960).

Again in 1964, Reeves wrote Ogilvy to announce the existence of yet another photograph: "The negative of this photograph is lying in my desk drawer. If you will send me one case of Scotch or fine champagne, I will not release it to *Madison Avenue* or *Advertising Age*. I have never been above blackmail" (Reeves to Ogilvy, 11 March 1965).

Through the years, the men often demonstrated an immense respect for one another. In the early 1960s, *Advertising Age* was putting together a list of the top ten copywriters in the country, requesting input from key industry figures (Crichton to D. Ogilvy, 23 February 1960). Ogilvy included Reeves on his list, labeled the "best copywriters -- still active" (D. Ogilvy to Crichton, 29 February 1960). And Reeves included Ogilvy at the top of his list of the five best copywriters (Reeves to Crichton, 15 March 1960).

Even though Reeves was not asked by Ogilvy to read a draft of Ogilvy's book, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, Reeves was asked by Richard Kluger, Book Editor of the *New York Herald Tribune*, to write a review that carved out an "anti-position" versus the position that Ogilvy took in *Confessions*. In highly revealing comments from two separate letters to Kluger, Reeves responded that Ogilvy "is not only a very good friend of mine, but an 'ex' brother-in-law, and was for many years a part of the family. In addition, he is a very respected and very brilliant competitor" (Reeves to Kluger, 1 July 1963). Reeves

emphasized that “I am a strong supporter of Mr. Ogilvy’s advertising. He is one of the most brilliant of the current practitioners” (Reeves to Kluger, 10 July 1963).

In another example, perhaps feeling remorseful that he had not asked Reeves to review the initial draft of this book, Ogilvy, expressed to Reeves his gratitude for all the kind words Reeves had been expressing about *Confessions*: “I write to thank you for all the kind things you have been saying about my book. I am touched, and grateful. I had better confess a sense of guilt over the fact that the book does not contain an acknowledgement of my great debt to you. The truth is that I took that acknowledgement out of the manuscript, in a fit of fury over the Cunard matter. Petty of me. I regret it (Ogilvy to Reeves, 3 February 1964). Two days later, Reeves wrote Ogilvy and remarked: “I cannot say otherwise about your book because it is a good book. I am sorry that in your ‘fit of fury’ you reached for your blue pencil. Your book is now a part of advertising history, and I am sorry not to have participated in it” (Reeves to Ogilvy, 5 February 1964).

## Relationship Summary

These two advertising titans had a professional and personal relationship that while it had its difficult moments, was generally based on respect and sincere friendship. In fact, the following perhaps best captures their relationship.

When Reeves retired in 1965 to a life of pursuing his many hobbies and interests, he received numerous notes and letters of congratulations, best wishes, and thanks. Upon Reeves’ announcement, Ogilvy sent a telegram to Reeves stating, “Suddenly Madison Avenue seems empty and I feel very much alone. Love David Ogilvy” (D. Ogilvy to Reeves, February 1966).

## PHILOSOPHIES - COMMON ELEMENTS

The industry press seemed to delight in playing the two men and their philosophies against each other. But did Reeves and Ogilvy really see their approaches as being all that different? Actually, the documents show that both men did not view their guiding principles and their work as being all that different.

Both men were grounded in the thinking of Claude Hopkins for whom they shared a profound respect and reverence. In fact, Reeves gave Ogilvy a rough copy of *Scientific Advertising* in 1938 (D. Ogilvy to Reeves, 18 April 1960). This seemed to be the connection that bound the two together. Ogilvy wrote, “In 1938 you gave me a typed copy of the Hopkins book. It changed my life. I know it by heart. Every year I give away twenty copies, to word-smiths. They never comprehend. You write like Hopkins. My favorite style” (D. Ogilvy to Reeves, 18 April 1960). It was an appreciation that the two continued throughout their lives.

In April 1960, Ogilvy wrote Alfred Politz to thank him for providing twenty more copies of *Scientific Advertising* for distributing to Ogilvy employees. Copies of Hopkins’ book were hard to find in those days. He wrote, “My friend Rosser Reeves, the Chairman and Creative Head of Ted Bates, has just finished a book which is reported to quote Hopkins on every page” (Ogilvy to Politz 20 April 1960).

If fact, there may be a stronger connection to Ogilvy and Reeves’ approaches to advertising than previously understood. Specifically, Reeves’ philosophy of the Unique Selling Proposition or “U.S.P.” may be grounded a bit in Ogilvy’s beliefs. In July 1947, Ogilvy sent Reeves a copy of a memo Ogilvy had written for the Mather & Crowther Creative Department in London. The document is essentially a lessons-learned document, capturing the key elements of creating successful advertising. The learning had been gathered from clients, agencies, and research firms and distilled to “Thirty-Nine Rules.” In that document, Ogilvy referred to the use of the “B.S.P.” or basic selling proposition, a concept eerily similar to Reeves’ U.S.P. Ogilvy wrote: “Every M&C ad should contain a basic selling proposition...The heart and guts of every ad is its B.S.P. Everything else is mere technique -- headline, subhead, copy, illustration, layout. Good technique can increase the effectiveness of a low-testing B.S.P., and bad technique can reduce the effectiveness of a high-testing B.S.P. But the B.S.P. is 75 percent of the battle” (Ogilvy, 1 August 1947, 1). Ogilvy’s words had a strong echo that resonates in the words and beliefs of Rosser Reeves years later. In fact, in many ways, Ogilvy’s “Thirty-Nine Rules” read much like a guide to classic packaged goods advertising with various rules about creating headlines, layout, and claims. The irony is that the man often held up as a creative’s creative, had a history of issuing fairly strict rules and demands for his creative teams, a quality that many would associate with Reeves.

## Role of Advertising

Actually, the two men shared another strong belief. They viewed advertising as a form of salesmanship versus art. Ogilvy wrote, “Yes, I meant it when I said that awards are a baleful influence on advertising. My friend Rosser Reeves once told me that he would fire anybody at Bates who won an award. The whole award thing tends to enthrone the highbrow art director, the pretentious copywriter...We have won dozens of awards. I am not proud of them. I am only proud of ads which bring results...I get no satisfaction from winning an award, because the judges never know enough to qualify as judges. They don’t know what results the ads have brought. I have judged advertising contests. The whole procedure is a farce. I shall never judge another contest.” (D. Ogilvy to Brown, 10 April 1961).

Reeves also felt forcefully about the issue: “You know, it is terribly easy for copywriters to lose sight of our one



objective -- which is sales. A copy man is an artist in business, and it is very easy to concentrate on the art and forget the business!" (Reeves, April 1965).

## Reeves and Ogilvy - Own Words

In personal correspondence and in the press, both Reeves and Ogilvy sought to lessen the perceived differences in their advertising philosophies.

For example, in Ogilvy's letter critiquing the first draft of *Reality in Advertising*, he wrote: "It is grotesque, and for me almost tragic, that so many people should regard me as the leading opponent of your Reality Sell philosophy, when I am in fact your most fervent disciple" (Ogilvy to Reeves, 22 August 1960).

In another letter, Ogilvy informed Reeves that a *Newsweek* journalist called to ask about the meaning behind his quote on *Reality in Advertising*. Ogilvy wrote to Reeves, "I told him that 23 years ago you had completely changed my whole concept of advertising and that ever since I had been numbered among your disciples. He was speechless with surprise" (Ogilvy to Reeves, 6 April 1961).

Perhaps Ogilvy best described their perceived philosophical differences in his introductory speech for Reeves when Reeves was being inducted into the Advertising Hall of Fame. Ogilvy expressed that he was flattered that Reeves chose him to give the introductory remarks. Ogilvy spoke of their weekly lunches and discussions about advertising early in their careers. According to Ogilvy, Reeves "changed the course of my life...Rosser totally converted me. He persuaded me that the purpose of advertising was to sell. He gave me a wholly new frame of reference. Reality in advertising." Ogilvy noted that eventually he was influenced by others and that he sometimes "diverged from Rosser's principles, most in matters of style -- which probably don't matter very much...I subscribe to most of his dogma. He has been the greatest single influence on my evolution as a copywriter...Here is my beloved friend. (Ogilvy, 7 April 1965).

## Philosophy Summary

Could it be that others perceived the differences in Reeves and Ogilvy's advertising philosophies more dramatically than they did? This is probably the case. Both men felt that their philosophies were grounded in the same principles. These principles were inspired by Hopkins and his assertion of advertising as salesmanship and not art. Further, Hopkins' work was grounded in core marketing and selling fundamentals of providing the consumer with something they wanted and something that was different from what competitors offered. Plus, Hopkins believed in holding advertising accountable for results.

However, both men clearly recognized that while their principles may have been the same, their execution of those

principles took on different forms. To Reeves and Ogilvy, it was the principles, the core and fundamental marketing principles, which were the most crucial. The "style" or "technique" of delivering on those principles in actual advertising was less of an issue to them but yet probably most important to the consuming public and press as that is what they saw on a day to day basis.

## CONCLUSION

This research has shown that Reeves and Ogilvy were not cut-throat rivals battling over advertising philosophies and the winning of new businesses. Indeed, they had a close friendship and were often competitive, but they cooperated in many ways of which the industry press and larger public were completely unaware. David Ogilvy and Rosser Reeves were a dynamic set of copywriters, businessmen, and friends. Their complicated relationship, at times rough and awkward, was one built ultimately on respect and affection. This pair literally set the agenda for the marketing and advertising communities in the late 1950s and 1960s with their debate on the role of advertising, how advertising was to be created, and how it actually worked. Portions of this debate continue to this day. And with the advent of so many new opportunities for advertising communications in the world of new media, this debate may continue at some level in the future. Reeves and Ogilvy and their advertising philosophies will be an integral part of this debate.

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