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## Behind the Brand

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# Behind the Brand

Learning how we think about what we buy, Patrick Palmer '87 brings a fresh approach to advertising.

Story by **RACHEL HATCH & TIM OBERMILLER**

Outside the Leo Burnett Building, overlooking the Chicago River and State Street, the concrete shimmers with summer heat. Inside the home of the world's ninth largest advertising agency, both the temperature and vibe are set for comfortable coolness.

Patrick Palmer leads the way through the firm's creative department. Picked by the *Chicago Tribune* as one of the city's top "creativity/homey" work spaces, each of the team's four floors presents the hip, minimalist feel of an artist's loft. Plywood sheets bordering the perimeters are filled with artist sketches, Post-its, and quirky decorations put up by team members to reflect personal styles and stir imaginations. Each floor is framed by high-tech conference areas on one end and, on the other, "energy" rooms — brightly colored spaces for lunch, beverage breaks and impromptu games of foosball.



**Palmer (above) is a pioneer in account planning, which strives to understand consumers' perspectives in the buying process. (Photo by Lloyd DeGrane)**

the first in a string of Burnett-produced brand mascots now rooted in America's psyche: Tony the Tiger, the Pillsbury Doughboy, Morris the Cat, Charlie Tuna and the Marlboro Man.

Under Burnett's leadership, the firm created what's become known as "Chicago school of advertising." The term describes the visual, direct and often emotional appeal of its ad style. If a TV ad for Hallmark cards ever brought you to tears, you've felt the power of this style. The

This is not Palmer's department — his office is a few floors down — but it's where much of his ideas and hard work end up. A big part of Palmer's job is to hone key messages that Burnett's creative directors transform into ads designed to provoke, cajole, inform and inspire — not just in what we buy but how we live.

It's a task the firm has been wildly successful at since Leo Burnett launched his agency in 1935 with a single client, Minnesota Valley Canning Co. Burnett created the Jolly Green Giant to represent the firm —

“Chicago style” also evokes the company’s hard-work ethic and the ways it cultivates long-term loyalty among its many “blue-chip” clients, which include Kellogg’s (a client since 1949), Procter & Gamble (1952), Allstate (1957), General Motors (1971), McDonald’s (1981), and Coca Cola (1991).

The company has grown in the decades since Burnett’s death in 1972, and now has 90 offices and 8,500 employees in 72 countries. “For an ad agency, that’s big,” says Palmer. “Compared to General Electric, it’s nothing. But the difference is, as an ad agency, we have nothing but people. You could start an ad agency with one person and a computer, maybe not even a computer — a napkin and a marker would be enough to have an idea.”

Celebrating the company’s 75th anniversary this past August, Burnett’s Chicago headquarters shows reverence for its storied past. Baskets of red apples welcome visitors, as they did when the agency first opened its doors during the Depression — and cynics scoffed that it wouldn’t be long before those doors would close and Leo Burnett would be selling apples on the street corner. But the firm has also embraced change, as evidenced by Palmer’s own contributions since joining Burnett in 2003 as an executive strategy director. Winning many of advertising’s top awards, he was named executive vice president and director of global brand planning in 2009. He is also the agency’s senior strategist in business development, responsible for attracting new clients to the firm.

Palmer is considered a pioneer in account planning, a revolutionary subfield of advertising begun in Britain in the 1980s that strives to understand consumers’ points of views and then serves as an advocate for those views throughout the planning and implementation of an ad campaign.

“When I started in account planning, there were only a handful of us in the nation,” he says. “I think the first national conference looking at account planning had about 50 people in 1992 or 1993. By 1996, there were 1,000 of us at the conference. It caught on fast.”

Research as always been a part of advertising, Palmer explains. But account planning takes research “out of the basement — literally.” Before account planning emerged in the United States in the 1990s, “there were research departments in the basement that would bring up folders, charts and information the ad manager might use — or might ignore — when putting together an ad.”



**Celebrating the company’s 75th anniversary this past August, Burnett’s Chicago headquarters welcomed visitors with baskets of red apples, as they did when the agency first opened its doors during the Depression. (Photo by Lloyd DeGrane)**

Account planning merges social anthropology, psychology, cultural and media studies and qualitative research in the quest “to understand why people do what they do and make the choices they make. It’s a bit like being a detective, finding out what makes people tick.”

When working on an account for an auto manufacturer a few years ago, Palmer went on vacation with a family to understand what would be needed to craft a message for a new minivan. He has gone on jobs with painters to understand how they choose paint. “Some days we talk to the guys washing the cars, other days it is CEOs, anything to get a better understanding of what motivates people to make choices,” he says.

In their investigations, Palmer and his fellow detectives look at more than what prompts people to buy a product; they delve into the significance a product can hold. A brand is often much more than the name on a truck or on a tube of toothpaste, he says. “A brand is like a symbol that helps define who we are and who we want to become.”

Looked at another way, Palmer says, “when anyone buys any product of any kind, large or small, they’re really hiring that product to do a job, to accomplish something, and it works on many levels. So, you pick up a can of Coca-Cola, on one level, to quench your thirst because you’re thirsty. But you’re also hiring it on another level because you want to be refreshed emotionally. And you’re hiring it on yet another level because you want to be connected with history and tradition and all those things that go with Coca-Cola.

“That’s why those cute, little hourglass-shaped bottles sell so well at Christmastime. Even people who do not drink Coca-Cola cannot resist those cute little bottles, because it’s such a connection to nostalgia and identity.”

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Palmer’s interest in history is no surprise — it was his major at Illinois Wesleyan, where he was also a Theta Chi member and student union commissioner in Student Senate, helping to plan concerts, speakers and other events. The fact he chose Illinois Wesleyan is the real surprise.

“If you really wanted to know where my heart was, you would have had to go back to my bedroom in high school, which was decorated prominently in orange and blue. I grew up fairly near the University of Illinois and I was a huge Fighting Illini fan. I still am. I’ve been to Final Fours, I’ve been to Rose Bowls. I still love the university and I was dead set on going there.”

It was Palmer’s father who “sat me down and gave a very reasoned explanation of why I should choose a university that did not have a graduate school. He said I wouldn’t have access to professors who were focused entirely and exclusively on undergraduate education. He summed it up by saying, ‘You want to have access to big minds, not just big buildings.’ And that was pretty persuasive. Especially when you consider that he had been a professor at the University of Illinois,” Palmer adds with a laugh.

Palmer says he benefited from “the very personal style of education” that Wesleyan offered. He remembers sitting down with History Professor Michael Young during office hours as he went

through “each of my papers line by line. It was an amazing experience and really formative — not because I learned how to write, although I did, but because that personal experience created a desire and an ability to learn that has been vital in my own life.”

Another formative encounter was with Sue Huseman, who taught French and headed Illinois Wesleyan’s humanities division, later becoming president of Monmouth College. Palmer recalls taking Huseman’s 8 a.m. French class his freshman year. “Madame Huseman had a clear policy. You miss class at your own risk, your own peril, but if you miss more than two quizzes, always given on Friday, your letter grade will be lowered one letter.”

A late-night social schedule and an 8 a.m. class were not, it turned out, a good mix for the freshman. After his third Friday of sleeping through a French quiz, Palmer was surprised when Huseman called him at 8:15 to ask why he was not in class. He apologized, telling her he was sick, and rolled back into bed. Fifteen minutes later, his phone rang again. It was Huseman, this time calling from his dormitory lobby, insisting that he “come down immediately” to take the quiz.

“So I put on a bathrobe and scurried down to take the quiz,” Palmer recalls. “And then she said, ‘You be in my office at 11 a.m.’ I did go, and it was the most remarkable half hour of my academic career, for sure, and maybe my life. I started out saying, ‘Thank you so much for taking the time to come and get me. My grade is so important to me —.’



**Palmer (above left) hones key messages that Burnett’s creative directors transform into ads designed to provoke, cajole, inform and inspire. (Photo by Lloyd DeGrane)**

“She said, ‘Stop it, stop it! You are missing the point. I came because I wanted to meet with you and show you how much I care about you, and how much I want you to learn French. Because to me, a grade does not matter, and it should not matter to you. What matters to me is that you learn French. That is my life’s purpose. That is my point of pride.’

“She said, ‘Are you not in the least bit curious what French can do for you? Do you not want to be able to understand the universal language of art and culture and romance? Don’t you want to order breakfast for your wife in Paris?’”

Palmer was, in fact, able to order breakfast for his wife, Laura (James) Palmer ’87 on a trip to Paris for their 10th wedding anniversary (the couple has four children; a testament to the power of romance). Still, he admits, “I don’t speak French very well, but the most important thing I took with me that day was the desire to learn. And that desire has carried me through to this day.”

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Jeans and T-shirts are the attire of choice among Leo Burnett workers, and Palmer admits he often dons the same casual garb. “It’s one of the appeals of working at a place like this, if you don’t care for dressing up,” he says with a smile.

The casual style is all part of what Palmer describes as “a youthful business. It also keeps you young.”

“This is a job where you need to think fast, and my liberal arts education prepared me for that,” he continues. “When I graduated, my current job did not exist. You have to be in constant change mode. I liken it to an F-16, and not just for the speed. Those jets continually adapt to changes in the air speed and air pressure. Their flaps and foils are not designed to fly straight, but to always be prepared to go a little off course.”

Palmer had plans to go to law school after graduation, but a discussion at IWU’s Career Center with lawyers about their jobs convinced him he wanted to do something more off the beaten track.

Palmer says he ended up “sideways and backwards into public relations,” taking an internship with the Bloomington-Normal Chamber of Commerce. There, he met with several ad agency representatives who “advised me to follow their path, and get a master’s degree at Illinois State University,” he says. The master’s program was in communication. “Not communications, mind you, but communication, more of a study of social psychology, of human behavior.”

For the next several years, he worked in public relations and advertising. The main catalyst of his professional development was four years at the Los Angeles firm Rubin Postaer & Associates, says Palmer. As strategic leader on Honda automobiles and other accounts, Palmer says he “stumbled upon” the idea of account planning as a way to better connect clients’ products and services to the people who buy them.

“I do have a very interesting job,” he says, reflecting on his career. “It is really a lively period of time in the world of advertising and communications — there are remarkable things happening in everything we do.”

Palmer admits that when he tries explaining his job to people, their typical reaction is, “‘I didn’t know people actually did that. I didn’t know you existed.’ That’s interesting, but it’s not that interesting, because I think there are many jobs and many careers that didn’t exist 10 years ago and may not exist 10 years from now.”

It’s no coincidence, Palmer adds, that his company actively recruits from liberal arts colleges. “I spend tons of time looking at and evaluating talents, and what we recruit for, very specifically, are ‘t-shaped’ people. A formal skill set developed through education is part of the ‘t’ but the other side is a personal passion, or deep curiosity or unique talent.” It’s also no coincidence, he adds, that from more than 1,000 applications for internships at Burnett sent in from college students across the nation last year, two of the 40 interns chosen were IWU graduates.

“I’d like to say that I had everything to do with it,” says Palmer, “but, in fact, I didn’t interview all of them, other people did. And they were blown away because they said, ‘This is what we’ve been searching for all along.’”

The t-shape of Palmer’s own personality is reflected in his fascination with how technology and social changes are transforming advertising, as well as in his belief that certain fundamentals have not changed.

The Internet and social media have created a revolution in how people access information and entertainment — even how they converse, Palmer says. America has also become much more culturally diverse since the days when Burnett’s ingenious brand icons spurred the imagination of a relatively homogenous society.

“Many companies talk about the need for diversity, but in a creative field it is essential. You have ideas and inputs reflecting all kinds of diversity — not just race and gender, but diversity of thought, background, age and creative inspiration. Innovation happens when people have different ideas, but a common goal.

“The one thing that does not change is humanity,” Palmer says. “The need to love and to be loved, to be needed, to feel as though we are part of something, to leave a legacy. Technology may change how we get what we want; it does not necessarily change what we want.”



**From small beginnings, Leo Burnett (above) grew his company into one of the world’s top ad agencies, with offices in 72 countries. (Photo provided by Leo Burnett)**