

Title:

Profiles of the Powerful: Advertising Exec Steve Grasse

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Summary:

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After ten minutes with Ed Tettemer in the offices of the agency he founded with partner, Steve Red, you begin to understand the agency's passion for excellence. After an hour with Ed, you begin to understand the intensity of his personal passion. You begin to understand it but I have a feeling that, even after days and days of exposure to him, you probably wouldn't get the whole picture.

"Passion," the word, may seem descriptive of a complicated set of feelings and opinions. Oddly, in thinking about Ed Tettemer's passion for his agency and its clients, it seems rather simple. It's just that he wants everything to be excellent: excellent clients, excellent co-workers, excellent marketing solutions, excellent creative executions, excellent everything.

"Where'd you go to college, Ed?" (A question most interviewers ask without expecting surprises in the response.) "Never went to college. Dropped out of high school and never looked back. Got my college degree at the Elkman agency and my graduate degree at Earle Palmer Brown."

Maybe it's best to start at the beginning. Ed was born and raised and was "scared of the city," living in a rather parochial environment. His Father was a sheriff in Bucks County and his Mother worked as a secretary in the office of the small township where they lived. Theirs was a simple life, a good life in a small town atmosphere. He and his Dad fished a lot and they ate what they caught. The vegetables on their table came from their garden except for the mushrooms they harvested after heavy rains. It seemed to be an uncomplicated existence far from the pressures and tensions of traditional business, especially the advertising business.

Dad was pretty much occupied with his job and the politics of the community. Mom was more influential on the lives of Ed and his older brother. Neither parent made strong suggestions about what Ed and his brother did to prepare them for a career. They were good people and Mom, especially, influenced the way Ed has turned out. She was passionate about music and books. Ed is, too. She preached, "Keep your eyes and ears open." Ed tries to do that. All she wanted for her children was for them to be happy and she didn't try to control their every move. Today, Ed appreciates that.

His childhood was a happy one. He liked to fish. He played a lot of baseball. He was a fairly typical American kid. Then, when he was in high school, there was a dramatic change. It was called the Viet Nam War. Consistent with how many people felt at the time, his older brother took off for Canada to resist the war. That had severe, negative impact on life in peaceful Bucks County. Overnight, the Tettermer family became pariahs. Friends deserted them. The community changed its view of them. Church changed. Bad stuff!

Clearly, that situation had a powerful influence on Ed's psyche. He dropped out of high school and spent over three years hitch hiking all over the country. He found ways to make enough money to do a lot of both savory and unsavory things. He was a confused young man wandering the country during confusing times.

But he never lost touch with his Mother and Dad so, ultimately, he went home to Bucks County and found a job working as a glorified gopher for the Doylestown Intelligencer. He ran ads back and forth from the paper to its small, retail advertisers. He says, "I guess I was a junior account executive and didn't know it." He delivered ad proofs, started helping small stores with their ad copy and quickly learned how those small retailers did their newspaper advertising.

During the year at the paper, he got to know and got to be friendly with many of his customers. He realized that most of them didn't have a lot of confidence in the help they were getting from the paper. He believed that he could help them do better advertising, advertising that actually worked and could be tracked. He doesn't know why he believed that but he believed it.

He remembered Pete's Place in a rather nostalgic way. Pete's Place was a restaurant in Ottsville just north of Doylestown. Their ad always ran on the same page with other restaurants. All of the ads were the same size, were laid out in a conventional rectangle and had many of the same messages: good food, low prices, family atmosphere, etc.

Pete's Place was pretty much the same as a lot of places in that part of the country.

Except for one thing. Their logo and sign was a big wagon wheel.

After Ed convinced them to try to look different, their next ad was designed to be round. It stood out nicely on the page with all the rectangles. Someone once said that good advertising should zig when the competition's zags. While Ed didn't refer to that specific quote during our interview, much of what he said about Pete's Place and about Red Tettemer's work seems to support that "Zig if they Zag" idea. Ed reflects, "I think I made six bucks on the work I did for Pete's."

The result? He worked with mostly small retailers for four years and developed a keen understanding of how the retailer thinks and of what it takes to motivate consumers to respond to advertising and promotion. In his own words, "I guess I didn't really know what I was doing but I liked my clients, worked hard and made a decent living."

Marriage followed as did a move into Center City where he, wife Lyn and daughter Jessie still live. His first job in the city was with the old Elkman Agency where he claims to have started "Knowing nothing." His boss, Creative Director Jim Block, promised to make him into a copy writer and further promised that he would like doing it. Jim did what he promised and Ed did like it. He had five productive years there but was always the junior writer. He needed more.

Off to Becker/Kanter (now Panzano & Partners,) he soon learned the logic of focusing on vertical businesses. He was a senior creative director there working almost exclusively on shopping center advertising and promotion. The "vertical" idea had great influence on him in the early days of Red Tettemer when they spent most of their effort with cable TV and entertainment accounts.

He was recruited to Earle Palmer Brown where three factors influenced his thinking and his behavior. First, Brian Meridith, then the head of creative at EPB, showed him how important it was to have a good idea at the beginning of creative execution. "What's the idea? What's the idea?" was hammered into his consciousness. Second, he formed a new perspective about "vertical." While it's valuable and, at times, necessary, to focus on specific industries, it's also valuable and stimulating to have a broader base. Today's Red Tettemer is definitely broad based and probably always will be.

The third factor was, perhaps, the most important. In early 1992, Ed just didn't know what to do with his career and his growing, positive reputation. "I was disillusioned.

I just didn't believe in the people I worked for."

Fortunately, he was allowed to do some free lance work and frequently

collaborated with Steve Red with whom he had a marvelous working relationship. He got a call from Steve about working with him on several large assignments. His copy, Steve's design skills and their ability to work together so effectively brought out his assertion, "I had the time of my life working with Steve."

It took Ed three years to convince Steve to join with him to form Red Tettemer in 1996.

They live by their mission statement, "Energize our clients and their businesses." Ed is proud when he reports that they try hard to make their clients' competitors envious. They've followed those convictions while moving from "vertical" client groups into more general accounts. Some of their recent acquisitions are SEPTA, University of Pennsylvania Health System and Hatfield Meats.

Neither Ed nor Steve has much tolerance for the traditional approach used by many agencies. So, they've successfully created a fun environment. Their office space is designed in creative ways. The décor is imaginative but comfortable. There are surprises everywhere: a conference room with no conference table, eclectic art work all over the walls, small nooks and crannies with interesting appointments and two balconies which allow for panoramic views of the City. The physical experience of the offices is sure to be pleasant and entertaining for every age group: traditionalists as well as employees, whose average age is under thirty.

What's the smartest business decision you ever made, Ed? Instantly, the response is,

"Being in partnership with Steve Red. In fact, that may be my best life decision."

How about your worst decision? "I waited too long to expand from our "vertical" focus.

also, I think I've been too reclusive." (Maybe this article will help, Ed.)

Fun for Ed? Trying to understand client needs and finding solutions. Cooking. Reading. Joining the fire company near his beach home. Remarking that he thinks he made his Mother and Father proud. Red Tettemer's annual retreat. Family. Many things.

One more question, Ed. "What would you do with a couple of wishes?"

Thoughtfully, he responds in a way that further demonstrates his passion. He says that he'd like to keep in closer touch with all of his employees, that he wishes he could reenergize the agency more frequently and that he'd like to take

time to celebrate their good fortune more frequently.

If life is dull, if you need a shot of passion in your life, if you'd enjoy being stimulated by the innards of an ad agency, if you respond to another person's motivation and, yes, passion, visit Red Tettermer. While you're there, try to spend a few minutes with Ed. As his Mother taught him, "Keep your eyes and ears open." You'll enjoy the visit.