

Craig Otto: Making advertising make sense

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Patty Tascarella
Senior Reporter
Pittsburgh Business Times



*You may not know **Craig Otto's** name, but you've probably seen his work. He came up with the concept of a star struggling to reach the top of a Christmas tree for Eat'n Park's beloved animated holiday TV commercial. And the term "airmall?" That's his, too. Here, Otto talks about making a major career change from the advertising agency Dymun + Co. to digital marketing firm Elliance Inc., and his passion for cars.*

Why change companies after 28 years?



Craig Otto is the director of brand development at Elliance.

JOE WOJCIK

For a long time, I thought that one day I'd own Dymun + Co. But when I realized this was not going to happen, I needed to make a shift. It's funny how destiny works. You make that decision, and when you're serious about it, doors seem to open.

How did you come to join Elliance?

I needed a new way of working. It came down to that. Times have changed, and I needed a dramatically different way of thinking and collaborating. I knew of Abu (Noaman, CEO) and I knew people who were here. That they'd come from traditional design, advertising and journalism backgrounds and were in this environment was a great signal to me that this was an agency preparing for the future. I saw a merger of communication, art and information science. Elliance has been digital since digital existed, but digital marketing isn't going to be called that much longer. It's really a marketing agency.

My career was pretty far along when the Mac was introduced, and it really changed art direction dramatically. I grew up in the business when art directors were idea makers and instigators – you'd pull a perfect team against a budget and make it better than you could on your own. With the Mac, art directors returned to the bullpen, [and] a lot of them stepped out of strategic thinking and became typesetters. I didn't think that was where my talent was.

OK, but you've described yourself as a Luddite. How do you reconcile that with working at a digital agency?

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Why did you go into advertising?

I'd watch Alka-Seltzer commercials when I was a fourth-grader and thought that work was amazing. I couldn't believe adults could create miniature stories that were so entertaining. It looked like so much fun. I could draw and tell stories. So my father and I were grilling steaks one Sunday. I was about 15, and he says, "What are your plans?" I wanted to be an artist. He said, "I've gotta tell you something. You like steak and cars way too much to be an artist. And I really don't want you to take this personally, but I need to be honest – you're a terrible painter. Seems to me, you ought to find a job where you come up with an idea for paintings and other people paint them for you."

Sounds like a revelation.

It was the most insightful thing. He said we ought to figure out who does that. That was brilliant. We set up interviews with photographers, illustrators, graphic design firms, printers. I even talked to someone in display at a department store in downtown Indianapolis. He took me on a business trip in Indiana and set up an interview with a creative director in Evansville. This guy says, "Listen, this is going to be a really intense day and I don't have time to talk a lot, but I want you to shadow me." He had people in and out of his office, he was yelling on the phone. It was like air traffic control and a circus rolled into one. I was awestruck.

You're best known for co-creating the Eat'n Park Christmas star ad in 1982. Was there another such pivotal campaign later in your career?

There have been a lot. I feel very blessed to have worked on things that have lasted for a long time. The star is one of them. There's nothing equivalent to that. But being the creator behind the "Voice of Color" campaign for PPG was gigantic. And being inventor of the word "airmall" and launching that at Pittsburgh International Airport. And working on the whole "Making science make sense" for Bayer. They're still doing it. Talk about early stage, that was pre-STEM. And the "Value of a Dollar" campaign for Dollar Bank with that etching style of putting you inside the dollar bill.

Your wife, [Lynn Epstein](#), also works in advertising. Do you give each other feedback on work?

She's always really honest, super honest. We met as teenagers at [Carnegie Mellon University]. Lynn started at Ketchum [Advertising] about two years after I did. Ultimately, she started her own business as a freelancer writer. I could never be a freelancer. It's too lonely. I'd go crazy. She gets her energy out of being able to focus on an idea. I get my energy out of people.

Is there a career path not taken?

It would be the custom cars culture in some way. I just love cars and racing. My earliest summer jobs were at dealerships.

If you could change jobs with anyone, who would it be?

No question – Lewis Hamilton, the current Formula 1 racing champion. He's a driver with the Mercedes team.

Bio Box

Title: Director of brand development, Elliance Inc.

Age: 57

Education: B.A., design, Carnegie Mellon University

Experience: Started as an art director at Ketchum Advertising in 1981, left in 1988 to join Dymun/Nelson, now Dymun + Co. Rose to rank of partner/creative director before departing for Elliance Inc. in late 2015.

Patty Tascarella covers banking, finance and the legal industry. Contact her at ptascarella@bizjournals.com or 412-208-3832.