

Men at Work

THE REWARDS OF RISK

Mark Fitzloff, a top player in the ad game, reveals his secrets to creativity and connectivity.

By Tom Foster

In the advertising business, big risks can lead to big rewards. But back in 2000, Mark Fitzloff was afraid he'd gone too far after he created an edgy Nike ad that appeared with a controversial wheelchair joke. It provoked Nike founder Phil Knight to suggest that Fitzloff, then a junior copywriter at the Oregon-based agency Wieden+Kennedy, be fired. But the bosses at W+K believed in the value of creative risk, so they took their own leap of faith: They said no to Knight.

Now, more than a decade and a half later, Fitzloff is W+K's executive creative director. He and his partners helm a ship of nearly 600 and manage the core creative work for accounts such as Coca-Cola, KFC, and yes, Nike. His team created those Old Spice commercials ("Hello, ladies..."), as well as Super Bowl spots for Chrysler with Eminem ("Born of Fire") and Clint Eastwood ("It's Halftime in America").

"The key to creating something memorable is not to be intimidated by the possibility that people will think it's foolish," Fitzloff says. "If we didn't make room for people to utter their most harebrained ideas, nobody would ever be furious at us, but we'd also just make the same time-tested tropes over and over again."

A 45-year-old father of two, Fitzloff is now focusing on the spots he has planned for this year's Super Bowl—the biggest game of the year in advertising. Here's how the 22-year veteran keeps pushing boundaries and finds peace despite a pressure-packed career.

Do What Others Won't

Fitzloff did standout work on less prestigious assignments. When he started as a copywriter, he had no training and took a job writing junk mail letters. That led to a better job writing stuff nobody wanted to. Then W+K hired him to work on Microsoft, the only tech client in an agency built around Nike. "I had a mentor telling me, 'It's a trap. You'll get pigeonholed. Don't do it!' But I did, and when Microsoft left the agency six months later, I was still there," he says.

Beware the Big Break

Especially in a visible industry like advertising, other opportunities come calling if you succeed. "That's a dangerous path, because if you take a job you're not actually qualified for, very soon you'll be found out as a bullshit artist," says Fitzloff. "The next thing you know, right when you should be in the prime of your career, you're a bit of a has-been." His solution is simple: Show patience. "Be able to say, 'I'm in a good place; I'm still growing and learning.'"



Make the Boring Exciting

In any line of work, you can be given assignments that seem like duds at first. "If you fixate on not having an emotional attachment to that brand, you're missing the opportunity," Fitzloff says. Think about ways you can make the project your own. "So in my case, I'm really into science fiction and fantasy. If that's what I'd rather be thinking about, then how do I find a way to make the brand exist in my sci-fi fantasy? I call it being selfish in your work."

Get a Laugh

A lot of the best commercials work because they make people laugh. One of Fitzloff's go-to humor devices is what he calls "the nth degree." "You say a thing, and then you say an extra thing that didn't need to be said about it, and then take it another step. You go until the viewer thinks you can't possibly escalate it any further, and then you do." Sometimes, Fitzloff says, great ideas come from applying the nth degree to thoughts that initially seem ho-hum.



Fitzloff's Portland office features unique portraits of each W+K employee, and a mural that reads "Fail Harder."

Fail So Hard

In creative work, you're putting a piece of yourself out there, Fitzloff says. Rejection can be devastating, whether it's by a client or the public. The pain it brings is punishment enough. For that, Fitzloff's company has a mantra: Fail harder. "Instead of rewarding people for the amount of work they've sold or something like that, we reward them on their ability to take risks and the natural surprise and interest of their ideas, regardless of what happens to those ideas."

Pursue Passions

If your only source of happiness is how you do at work, then you're setting yourself up for disappointment, says Fitzloff. Hitting a dry spell or a stretch of bad business can be deflating. So you have to look for the things in daily life you love, and then make those things as habitual as brushing your teeth. For Fitzloff, that means playing the piano every day for at least a half hour. "For me, playing music is like reading or going for a run: It tunes out the rest of the world."

Make an Impact

Fitzloff picks his three top spots that grabbed people for very different reasons.



The Ad "Born of Fire," Chrysler

The Hook

The fighting instinct "When this ran during the 2011 Super Bowl, Detroit was being written off by the whole country, and the ad tapped into a prideful defiance that was right for the times."



The Ad "I'm on a Horse," Old Spice

The Hook

Mocking the form "Deodorant ads traditionally make ridiculous promises—like if you choose this brand you'll have better lady-getting skills. Rather than make one of those promises earnestly, we took it over the top. The takeaway is that Old Spice is basically admitting the lie, which makes them so honest that maybe it's true."



The Ad "Best Job," Procter & Gamble

The Hook

Love of Mom "When the parent company of so many household brands sponsored the Olympics in 2012, we focused on Olympic households. We realized that the unsung heroes are the moms around the world making selfless commitments to allow their kids to follow their sporting dreams."