

**O**N THURSDAY, JANUARY 13, 1972, THE 41ST page of The New York Times carried nothing but opinion pieces from outside contributors. Or at least it looked that way at first glance. But the bottom-right quarter of the page was actually an advertisement. Bereft of images, boasting a bold, eye-catching title supported by 11 well-written paragraphs, the only giveaway it was an ad was the large Mobil logo beneath it.

It wasn't the first quarter-page advertisement to run on the Times' op-ed page – banks had taken out space – nor was it even the oil company's first advertisement in that slot. But the ad was notable because it looked and sounded like its editorial neighbors. It was one of the first "advertorials" to appear in a major newspaper, and it marked the start of one of the most famous communication campaigns to employ them. With the regularity of a weekly column, a Mobil ad appeared in that same bottom-right quarter on the Times' op-ed page practically every Thursday for the rest of the decade.

The man said to be instrumental in writing, editing and placing these ads was Herbert Schmertz, a vice president at Mobil and head of its public affairs department, whom the Washington Post called in 1979 "the most powerful, most successful public relations man in America." Mr. Schmertz passed away earlier this year at the age of 87. The advertorials he helped write appeared in most national newspapers, and remain perhaps his most enduring legacy.

Seldom reusing the same text, most Mobil advertorials followed a similar formula: a punchy headline – "All in favor of unemployment, please rise," for example – the Mobil logo at the bottom, and paragraphs that carried the clarity, confidence, and opinion of an op-ed. While the US grappled with an energy crisis and sky-high gas prices for much of the 1970s, and while oil companies faced sharp criticism from politicians and citizens alike, Mobil used these ads – reportedly paying \$3,500 (\$20,000 today) for the weekly slot – to tell Times readers its side of the story. Mobil defended the profits oil companies were making, lambasted national energy policies, touted the jobs the oil industry created, and reminded people about the development oil powered.

Their brilliance lay not just in the quality of their composition, but in the new approach to corporate communications they heralded. Advertorials bypassed journalists and editors – the gatekeepers of what did or didn't appear in print – and allowed Mobil to make its case directly to the public. Mobil didn't use the space to try to sell a product, but instead remained focused on explaining their point

of view on national – and often divisive – issues. They did so with a look and tone that matched the op-eds alongside, putting the oil giant's arguments on equal footing with the news stories that so often criticized them. And they worked. "He has given Mobil a glistening image, unlike those other companies in the industry," the Post wrote in 1979.

Detractors called the practice dishonest, others called it counter-productive. In 1988, Richard Cheney, a PR executive, said, "To go out and argue with people in public, it's like seeing two people fighting in the street. You're not going to take sides, you just want them to stop."

Mr. Schmertz saw the approach as self-defense. He told the Washington Post in 1979 that "Mobil is looked upon generally as being different from the rest of the industry. Different and unpredictable. They see us as more aggressive, more willing to speak out, face the opposition head on, publicly." About a decade later, when more companies had followed Mobil's outspoken example, Mr. Schmertz told The New York Times that the company had "made it respectable for companies to have views, opinions and philosophies and to express them."

Mr. Schmertz joined Mobil in the mid-1960s as a labor lawyer. By the end of the decade he was overseeing its public affairs department and would eventually sit on Mobil's board. It seemed a senior

Oil executive  
**HERB SCHMERTZ**  
pioneered  
a proactive,  
sometimes  
pugilistic  
approach to  
corporate  
communications  
that drew as  
much admiration  
as it did criticism

# The Advertorial

position for a PR man to hold at one of America's largest companies, but Mr. Schmertz thought it a job requirement. "The nature of a successful PR man now requires that you know as much about the business end of what you're involved in as the line managers do," he told the Post. "Otherwise, you're just a door opener or a flack."

The don't-back-down approach that Mobil took in public aligned closely with Mr. Schmertz's persona. When oil prices skyrocketed after the 1979 Iranian revolution, Mr. Schmertz supposedly walked outside the Mobil building in midtown Manhattan and debated protestors on the sidewalk. A few years later, after The Wall Street Journal ran an article Mr. Schmertz felt was harsh and unfair, he pulled all advertising from the paper and embargoed it: no interviews, no responses to questions.

Remembered as communications pioneer, Mr. Schmertz also exerted influence in the field of



# Architect

politics and corporate philanthropy. Before joining Mobil, Mr. Schmertz worked in JFK's administration as general counsel of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. During his 20-plus years with the company, Mr. Schmertz took two leaves of absence: the first to work on Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign in 1968, and the second to work on Ted Kennedy's campaign in 1980.

Mr. Schmertz was also an early and forceful proponent of what today seems like conventional wisdom: There was a financial case to be made for corporate philanthropy, not simply a moral one. Mr. Schmertz was instrumental in Mobil's sponsorship of public television, including the award-winning series "Masterpiece Theater," which adapted famous novels and biographies for television. It was well-received and well-watched, introducing millions to the Mobil brand by saying "this program is brought to you by..." It wasn't altruism that inspired the

patronage, but rather what Mr. Schmertz called "affinity-of-purpose" marketing. "More consumers are buying products not based on the product itself, but based on their feelings about the supplier of that product," he said at a 1987 panel discussion. There was immense value, therefore, in generating goodwill, and what better way for an oil company to do so than by supporting public television – a project that millions could enjoy, and which seemed to offer no financial return? The sponsorship garnered the company favorable coverage, and Mobil, when they weren't taking stances on national issues, mentioned their patronage in the quarter-page ads.

At a time when any misstep is amplified by the megaphone of social media, being wary of saying anything at all has never seemed more defensible. And yet, Mr. Schmertz's legacy is a reminder of the possibilities of a point of view, especially one delivered clearly and consistently. Instead of reacting to a conversation, companies can join it – and maybe even help shape it. "Our belief was that if we didn't participate in the marketplace of ideas," Mr. Schmertz said with his usual frankness, in a 2014 interview, "then we deserved what we got."

**"[MOBIL] MADE IT RESPECTABLE FOR COMPANIES TO HAVE VIEWS, OPINIONS AND PHILOSOPHIES AND TO EXPRESS THEM"**

Herb Schmertz

**EDWARD STEPHENS** is Deputy Editor of the Brunswick Review, and based in New York.