The Mere Future

August 1, 1998 By Sarah Schulman

"Sacred knowledge in the hands of fools destroys."—Upanishads

And me? I got a good job writing ad copy. Once I learned to put all my creativity into marketing, I was quickly promoted up the Byzantine escalator. At this moment I was in the DNA room working on a helix. That's when we develop two publicity campaigns for two competing products, both of which we produce. When all the antitrust laws were recalled, researchers determined that people needed and wanted the illusion of competition so that they could get up in the morning. We were happy to provide the service.

Product A was called Weight Loss for Christians by Darleen Mae Bodine, and Product B was Christian Weight Loss by Archibald Smith. One product was for those consumers who identified as white trash. The other was for those who saw themselves as WASPs. This was complex advertising. Research surveys had shown that people try to outwit advertising by purposefully purchasing out of their own self-perceived niche. For example, ads with black people in them did not sell products to black people. They sold to the white people who wanted to be in favor of living in an integrated world. They felt, very strongly, that they were fighting fascism by buying razor skates advertised by black actors. Ads with black actors that were aimed at black people never showed in the same spheres of influence as the white-aimed ads. For this reason we employed the Hall of Mirrors strategy. People who really were white trash would, of course, not want to be so pegged. They had aspirations, after all. So they would buy the stuffier version, because when they imagined themselves to be 50 pounds thinner, an all-brick Episcopal church came along with it. Real WASPs, on the other hand, had severe nostalgia for bacon, and when they imagined themselves losing 10 pounds, they imagined eating slabs of it with blueberry pancakes on Sunday mornings in the country house down home. Of course, when either of these niches purchased said object and then proceeded to not lose weight, they would reassess the fantasy element that determined their selection and race to the Christian Diet Shop to buy the second volume. Two turds with one bone.

Christian was my favorite department. All the queers worked there, and a couple of poets. The most important word to use in the ad copy here was Satan. Let's say you were marketing a hardcore speed-metal Christian acid band. Well, you wanted to get a good juicy picture of Jesus on the cover, and then the copy would say "Easy Listening is Satan's tool." And the nuclear disc would be called "Jesus Come Inside Me" and the band would be called "Virgin, Live." It was easy.

"Attention, Attention," the red overhead lights started flashing. "All employees in the Gay and Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Focus Group, fiftieth floor, please."

Obediently, I left my hub.

There was that couple from banking, George and George Henderson-Smith. And the ones from graphics, Laurie and Laurie Nussbaum-Glukowski. Then there was Carolyn Steubanville-Woodson-Van Moschisker. (By the time she'd divorced Suzette Woodson, they'd already had four children: Waldo, Cornelius, Theadora and Lucille, so shifting to Steubanville–Von Moschisker would have been awkward.) It had been years now since gay people were allowed to get married, the only hitch being the monogamy pledge. That was the compromise that The Human Universal Morality Battalion (THUMB) had won in Congress. And they attributed it all to the name change from The Gay and Lesbian Universal Morality Battalion (GLUMB)—along with their military image, which was crucial to winning in the northeast. Philip Morris, of which they were a department, suggested mandatory military service for all married gay couples to prove their loyalty. If they could go through Basic Training without telling anyone that they were married, the trust of their fellow Americans would be well-deserved. That's progress.

Thank God for tolerance.

I was annoyed, that day, to be summoned away from my ongoing project of placing poems on cigarette packs. Originally, the plan had been to sell ad space in poems. If there was a Coke on the landscape, the writer got a little royalty. But that still didn't solve the problem of no one wanting to buy the poem in the first place. So then we got the idea of slapping them on over the cancer warnings. Now poems were part of daily life. All over the world people sitting in bars were picking up their packs of Natural Slinkies or Big Bad Smokies and, in a moment of shyness or sudden quiet or any silence that revealed the profundity of human discomfort, any executive or logger or talent scout or drunk could look down on the table and see Daddy, Daddy, you bastard, I'm through. It was market research that selected that line as the most universal piece of poetry ever written, one that would translate into any culture and at the same time appear to be private and tender and touch a vulnerable spot.

This wasn't the first time the gay subgroup had been beckoned by upstairs to solve a marketing dilemma. We had previously worked on the gay Gap campaign, developing two new divisions for virtual spin-off stores. There was ACT UP Gap and GMHC Gap. Each customer knew which one was for them. Then we came up with the "Audre Lorde Wore Khakis" campaign. But nothing was as successful as the "AIDS Is Over So Live a Little" campaign for Breck Pharmaceuticals. Riding on their notoriety for curing AIDS, the drug companies were now in the luxury-vacation business, the beachwear business and a national chain of No Fat restaurants and grocery stores. Of course, they still sold maintenance drugs to keep the formerly HIV positive in retroconversion. Sixteen pills, 14 times a day, one hour after eating fat and two hours before eating sugar, two hours before eating no fat. If they ate fat when they weren't supposed to or didn't eat fat when they were supposed to, they farted uncontrollably, which was a public recognition that they were "Bad Boys" and didn't do everything their doctors told them. This had become a status symbol of rebellion and there was now a chain of gay dance clubs called Farters where the Bad Boys would go.

As for everyone else with AIDS? Let's just say the drugs were counter-indicated for methadone, birth control pills and melanin.

Actually that idea originated in my hub. It was thought of by Jay Friedman-McMahon, who died suddenly of a mysterious cause only a few months before. I wondered if it was suicide. He seemed so pale and skinny. He'd been depressed and had talked about quitting the business. But everyone tries to give up. People who can't make it in software become doctors; it's the lay of the land. It's that or global investments. Go to Mexico and buy a duty-free family. I like copy-writing. Replace words with words, tires with tires. An eye for an eye. That's competition on a level plain.

"The new trend that we're launching on Monday is Lack Literature," the big cheese told us breezily. Smiling. Sexy. Light. "Its roots are in lack of experience, lack of justice, lack of compassion. Its proponents will be called 'Lackers' or 'Lackees' for slang."

I keyed into my notepad Lack Makes Right.

"We're bringing up this line now, under the Social Category Unit, because of the backlash in the repopularization of books. People seem to want to read the old ones of which there is a surplus, since no one bought them for so many years. We cannot make profit on old books that people can find in basements. So, we have to develop a desire for Lack."

Lack Is Back. I keyed in and immediately thought of the niche slogan Lack Is Black.

"Now I know that you are all familiar with the Bond v. Dominick Murder Trial coming up on Tuesday at 9 p.m. Eastern Standard Time. You've all seen the preview interview shows, the magazine exposés, the Internet ads and the Pre-Pre-Pay-Per-Views. However, we feel that a tie-in book would be the best way to piggyback the new Lack Line."

I keyed in the retro-slug for the old customers. Things Go Better With Lack.

"Very good 060," the big cheese said, reading my thoughts off her monitor.

"Now, as you know, there are two defendants to choose from. The public is getting acclimated to the new Freedom of Choice Legal System. Sixty-five percent feel it gives them more flexibility in their decision making, and we know it creates double opportunities for product endorsement. However, I think we're all clear that Bond will be acquitted and that the ex–drug abuser sociopath will be convicted. So, given the odds, we've decided to do a book for Bond that can be in homes by next Tuesday, but we want it to have a unique focus."

Laurie Nussbaum-Glukowski raised her hand. She had long hair and pretended to be sexy. She pushed her breasts up so that the hook word was stacked. She wore sexy midnight-blue silk pants. She flirted with all the men. Her clothes were more sexy than she was. I hated her instantly. But there is that thing about hate. If the hated would only act a little bit differently, I would love them. It's a personality pattern. Therefore I sit panting with the expectation of the slight shift in behavior

that will make everything new again. In this case, if she had been personal with me and had a private talk, instead of running away every time a man left the room, then I would have been her friend. I longed, at that moment, for the old days of the Secret Society when Nadine and I first fell in love, when gay girls sussed each other out right away and always found private moments to talk about what was really on their minds. The things that no one else could ever guess.

“A homosexual angle on a case with no homosexual component would be fascinating,” Laurie said. Ass-kisser.

“Just what I was thinking,” big cheese smiled.

“A breakthrough that will call attention to the campaign itself providing extra hype opportunities.”

“Well,” coughed George Henderson-Smith, one of the 300 Harvard-educated black men working for the company. He was always sick from overwork, being in the Ivy League, Black, Upwardly Mobile of Middle-Class Origins, Gay, Married, HIV, Child of Proud Parents, Collector of Slave Memorabilia and Country Music Fan niche study groups. “Fear and homosexuality still go together like love and heterosexual marriage. According to yesterday’s home poll, when 43 percent of readers think of homosexuality the first word they think of is rich and the second is fear. Would it be too retro to recycle the homo-horror mode?”

That was it, the race was on. I started furiously keying in but Nussbaum-Glukowsky got it first, of course.

“I won,” she screamed, hitting the red bell. “Het Cemetery.”

There was silence then, the kind of involuntary silence that accompanies the recognition of brilliance. Even though I hated her, I couldn’t help my admiration. And this would resonate broadly with our AIDS Is Over campaign. Three birds with one stone.

“Het Cemetery,” she repeated, glowing. “Now It’s Your Turn.”

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