

CATCHING UP WITH... STEPHEN KAPLAN

The recipe for success includes Grey Poupon, a Rolls Royce and a dash of humor.

By Yash Egami



Advertising has always been ripe for parodies, but perhaps no spot has been parodied more for its brilliance, its sophisticated humor and its pitch-perfect tone than the Grey Poupon commercial featuring two aristocrats in Rolls Royces and a jar of mustard. The spot, which first debuted in 1979, became a cultural sensation and had millions of Americans uttering those famous words with an ironic, haughty accent: "Pardon me, would you have any Grey Poupon?"

Even today, the commercial is still being used as a punch line, which is a testament to its success (a recent cartoon in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution showed Mitt Romney pulling up next to a car full of homeless people and asking if they had any Grey Poupon.) We tracked down Stephen Kaplan, the art director on the original spot, and asked if he'd be willing to revisit it with us. His reply? "But of course."

What are you up to these days?

I have an agency, Bionic Crayon, and we service a wide range of clients. For instance, we're helping to launch a full line of new skin-care products, we're refreshing the website for an international diamond manufacturer, and we're repositioning and re-launching a 100-year-old condiment brand, so it's an interesting range that I like to go after. We have a really experienced team, so we're pretty adept to a broad range of categories. It gives us an opportunity to work in all platforms as well,

including print, package design, etc. I'm fortunate enough to work with a great ensemble that is great creatively and who deliver brilliant work, so I'm happy with the way things are going right now.

Talk about the story behind the famous Grey Poupon commercial. Where did the idea come from?

I've given it some thought, and the first thing that struck me was, the Rolls Royce concept was one of those creative moments you never forget because it represents the essence of the art director/writer relationship and what it's capable of producing.

When [copywriter] Larry Elegant and I were given the brand to introduce on TV, the mustard mentality in America was basic yellow or basic brown, and that was it. Grey Poupon was a Dijon-style mustard that had wine as an ingredient, and it also cost a lot more. So we decided to add to the cachet and position it as the best mustard in the world. And the first thing we decided to do—and I remember the meeting vividly—was to think of things that were symbols of the best. I remember Larry looked at me with the jar of Grey Poupon between us and asked, "What can we do with a Rolls Royce?" That was the first question and we never threw out anything else. And as an art director who loves vintage cars, that question triggered two things in my mind: the first was

seeing the burled walnut dashboard combined with the hood ornament from the inside of the car—I saw that right away from the passenger point of view from the rear seat. And then I remembered seeing the burled walnut drop tray also from the passenger point of view, and then I blocked out the first few frames of the storyboard, shooting from behind the chauffeur as we see him reaching across the dashboard toward the glove compartment to reveal the Grey Poupon.

As soon as [Larry] suggested a Rolls Royce, we didn't know exactly what to do with it, and as an art director I was pretty familiar with that car. My mind went to 1964-65, the years with the big grilles, larger dash and amazing woods. So for me it was a perfect fit and a complete dichotomy, and that was the joke. Once I showed Larry the first three frames, he came up with the line, "The finer things. Happily, some are affordable." And that was exactly when the glove compartment drops down. That set up the tonality for the whole thing, because there was a glimmer of humor there, which was one of the things we always liked. And then the rest of the board fell into place pretty quickly.

But with all of that, we knew we needed a big finish. I remembered the picnic scene in *Citizen Kane*—it's nothing but these giant limos coming into a location, and that's when it hit me: What if we had a second Rolls Royce pull up

and ask for some Grey Poupon because he's out of it? And that's what really sealed it. At that point, Larry came up with the line, "Pardon me, would you have any Grey Poupon?" Once we heard that and saw the frame, we spontaneously broke out in laughter because we knew we had nailed it.

It was a pure art director/writer concept where one person throws out the pearl and everything starts to build around that. It's about the relationship, and that's key in the agency business. When you're fortunate enough to be working with someone who's compatible in certain ways, it makes a hell of a difference in terms of what you can produce.

Why do you think the commercial became so legendary?

That's a great question. I've never used that word but I've thought about it a lot. I remember shooting the pull-up of the two Rolls Royces, and I was standing next to Harold Becker, the director, and he turned to me from behind the camera with a big smile and said, "This is f-ing classic!" It was prophetic considering we hadn't even started editing it yet.

When it came to this spot, even through the shoot, people were chuckling, and once we cut it, it just won the hearts of a lot of people. And I think it worked because we took a very haughty situation and made it accessible through a

little sophisticated humor. We weren't heavy-handed about it and the humor came out in a lot of subtle ways. Combined with the grand scale of everything, which was played against a simple jar of mustard, I think that's the essence of why this idea became popular. If you think about it, a Rolls Royce grille is rich, but two are richer. It's all over the top with the fine china and the burled walnut door opening revealing the mustard for the first time—it's totally unexpected. And I think all of these little bits of humor are the driving forces behind the success of the commercial.

And then there's the idea of the second guy pulling up as if he's asking for a cup of sugar. It's all of these things adding up that nailed it, and that's why it's still working so well after all this time.

Did you get a kick out of all the countless parodies and jokes? Which ones stick out in your mind?

I heard Letterman did a routine, Leno did a routine, Colbert did one recently and Jon Stewart did one as well. There was a cooking segment on *Martha Stewart* where she made a comment while passing the mustard back and forth.

Then there was a news anchor on one of the cable channels who actually got the footage and used the two Rolls Royces as a symbol of the one percent, and that was no more than two weeks ago. And then I heard there was a clip of President Obama when he first flew on Air Force One and he ordered a hamburger and the steward gives him a choice of the yellow or Dijon mustard and he says, "The Grey Poupon." It was kind of a quasi-parody but because he was sitting in Air Force One, everyone got it.

It's really astounding how deep it's played into the fabric of our culture. When we first did this thing, the only two brands out there were French's and Gulden's, and that was it. Nobody knew what Grey Poupon was unless you were really interested in gourmet food. Up until that point it was used suggestively in small space ads as a cooking ingredient and that was it.

Being in advertising for all these years, it's one of those terrific stories, and I'm always asked by a client every now and then, "Do you really think advertising works? What am I spending the money for?" And I always use this as an example. It's not the kind of thing that happens every day of course, but it does suggest that advertising does work. It's just one of those special brands for me.

Was it your favorite client you worked with? Who were some of the others that you enjoyed?

By far it was one of my favorite clients. But even when we were doing that, Larry and I

had some real success with Heublein, who had [the Grey Poupon brand] and others. We also worked with A1 and we did Ortega—we did a whole range of things for them, and we really had some big successes.

Even with A1 for example, we changed the whole positioning because up until they gave it to us, it was always used as a steak sauce. So we made it into a pour-on for hamburgers, and man, did we move the needle on that. It wasn't glamorous by any stretch, it was more hardcore packaged goods thinking and advertising, but it did what it had to do and moved a ton of product. I know for a fact that it was a big hit for the company for three years in a row. So between that and Grey Poupon and several others, we had a good time. We were shooting every other month in California because the campaigns were just building and building and the client wanted to do more. As great an experience as Grey Poupon was, the other experiences were just as great for different reasons. Maybe they weren't as romantic from the standpoint of being creative, but they were great shoots, great production values, had really great copy, and they were successful.

What ever happened to your partner Larry Elegant?

I've been out of touch with him for a bit. We had a great run, which was a lot of years, but I had some things that I wanted to do and he had some things that he wanted to do, and so we went our separate ways. 🍷

Art Director:
Stephen Kaplan

Client:
Heublein - Grey Poupon

Writer:
Larry Elegant

Agency:
Marschalk/New York

Director:
Harold Becker

[Photo: Bobby Gold]

