



# Interview: Dave Thomas on Copywriting & Comedy

I spoke with comedian Dave Thomas, of SCTV and McKenzie Brothers fame, about his former career as a copywriter at McCann Erickson Toronto, his transition into comedy, and the role of comedy in advertising.

**Q. Where did you work as a copywriter, and what was your experience?**

DT: I got a job at McCann Erickson in Toronto in 1973. The way I got the job was pretty typical for someone with no experience and no samples to show. I wrote up a bunch of fake ads, using existing art and creating my own copy. I also wrote up a little packet of TV and radio commercial scripts. Then I got a phone book and went through the yellow pages under advertising agencies and called every

one, alphabetically, trying to get interviews. It was a pretty horrible process of insults and rejection. But I was determined and relentless. And, by the time I got to the "M"'s in the phone book, I got hired at McCann Erickson.

The creative director at McCann at that time was a man named Harry Yates. He was a real ad man like the ones you see on the TV show Mad Men. Harry had been a copywriter at Doyle Dane Bernbach in New York City during its heyday in the late 60s and early 70s. I forget why Harry left

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New York and came up to Toronto, but whatever the case, he was a very smart guy and a great copywriter. He is now deceased.

Harry liked me and took me under his wing. I started out writing retail stuff - very low end advertising copy for newspapers and print. But in a very short period of time, Harry put me on the Coca-Cola account as a junior copywriter. Again, I was writing retail stuff – newspaper and print ads - things like that. One of the jobs I got at that time was a TV commercial for a contest Coca-Cola was running called Capital Caps. I was supposed to write a 30 second spot to sell the contest to the public. Unfortunately, there was about 28 ½ and a half seconds of legal copy that Coca Cola needed in the commercial and that left me very little room to be creative or funny. But I remembered a routine that Don Knotts used to do on the old Tonight Show. He played a weatherman who got confused with all the data that he had to give on the weather. He used a



Rick Moranis & Dave Thomas as "The McKenize Brothers"



Harry Yates, McCann Erickson Toronto

**“..within less than a week, I was on an airplane on my way down to Los Angeles to supervise production of this TV commercial for Coca-Cola with Tim Conway”.**

pointer and several roll up charts and the routine was essentially a prop gag where the pointer would break, the charts would roll up unexpectedly – things like that. But it was an extremely comical bit and so I borrowed from that routine for my Capital Caps commercial. My 28 ½ seconds of legal copy was written on roll up charts and I turned this commercial for a contest into a physical comedy bit.

When I submitted the commercial to Harry he said, “Why don’t you perform for me?” And when I did, he laughed and said, “You have to go up to Coca-Cola and perform this for them. It’s the only way you’ll sell it.” So I did and they loved it too. Their head of marketing asked, “Who do you want to be in it?” And I said, “Tim Conway”, figuring that there was no way that Tim Conway would ever do a commercial in Toronto. Well, I was pretty naïve at that time and I did not understand the kind of power and money that a company like Coca-Cola and McCann had because within less than a week, I was on an airplane on my way down to Los Angeles to supervise production of this TV commercial for Coca-Cola with Tim Conway. Tim did a terrific job and the contest was a big success for Coca-Cola. And that was all it took - just one thing that works and the whole game changes.

At Coca Cola’s request, Harry promoted me to head writer for the Coca-Cola account. And I was immediately doing their mainstream television and radio commercials for Canada. One of my commercials caught the eye of the creative



SCTV Cast Photo

**“I really believe that if you can make people laugh, at least you can say you got their attention”.**

director of McCann worldwide in New York City. His name was Bill Backer and he was the man who created the famous "I Want to Teach the World to Sing" TV commercial with all the kids singing on the mountaintop. Next thing I know, I'm in New York City sitting across from Bill Backer in his Lexington Avenue office. He is also deceased.

Anyway, as we sat there in his office for that first meeting, Bill started quoting Shakespeare and that just kind of confused me. But I had just finished a graduate degree in English literature, majoring in Shakespeare, so I started quoting Shakespeare back at Bill. Well he loved this. I became his favorite young copywriter just because I could quote Shakespeare. After a few days, Bill asked me if I've ever written a jingle before, and you never say no to anything in advertising. So of course I said yes. But then I had to write it.

TV jingles are like little poems, a kind of commercial haiku and I had no idea how to write one. Anyway, I wrote a jingle and Bill loved it – of course he did. I was probably the only other copywriter at McCann New York who could quote Shakespeare back to him. Then Bill got Billy Davis to write the music. Billy was a famous musician and when my friend Paul Shaffer found out that Billy was writing the music for one of my commercials, he totally flipped out. He is also deceased.

We recorded the jingle in New York and then I was on my way to England to supervise shooting a television spot for Coca-Cola U.S. When I finished the commer-



Bill Backer, McCann Erickson New York

**“..never say no to anything in advertising”.**

cial, Coca-Cola Canada wanted me back in Toronto. So I left New York City, But Bill Backer told me I had a job at McCann Erickson New York anytime I wanted it. When I got back to Toronto, I was kind of torn – not really sure whether I should leave Canada or not. I think if I had stayed in advertising, I would have moved to New York for sure. But right about that time, I heard Second City was having auditions down at the Old Fire Hall on Lombard Street in Toronto and that was all it took to end my career in advertising. I auditioned and got into a cast with John Candy, Dan Aykroyd, Gilda Radner, Eugene Levy, Andrea Martin and Catherine O'Hara. My bosses in an advertising thought I was crazy to abandon my career in advertising to form a stupid comedy show in Toronto, but it was what I wanted to do. My total time in advertising was 2 years - from 1973 to 1975.

**Q: What made you want to transition into comedy?**

DT: The reason I decided to go into comedy is pretty simple. It's what I always wanted to do. Advertising was really a sidebar for me. It allowed me to keep writing and stay, kind of, in the business—and by that I mean show business not

advertising—by doing radio and television commercials. But I always felt that no matter how funny I got in writing a television commercial, my comedy would always be playing second fiddle to a box of soap. So when the opportunity to get into second city presented itself, there was really no questioning or debating that went on in my mind. Showbiz this was what I wanted to do.

**Q: Do you see any similarities between being a comedian and being a copywriter?**

DT: I don't think there are any real similarities between being a comedian and being a copywriter - at least not superficially. I suppose if you drill down in an academic way, there are some similarities in the way you need to connect with people in both advertising and comedy. And I suppose there is an argument for saying that selling a joke might be similar in some way to selling a box of soap – although having done both, I personally don't see it. I think these are the kind of discussions they have on CBC radio or NPR and by that I mean, academic discussions that make esoteric connections that usually have nothing to do with real-life.

**Q: What are your thoughts on the role of comedy in advertising?**

DT: I think there is a role for comedy in advertising. I really believe that if you make people laugh, at the very least you can say you got their attention. But I've also heard that there has been some research done specifically on this subject. The conclusions of that research were that where people may have found a particular commercial funny, but they do not always remember the product in the funny commercial. And for this reason, many advertisers feel the comedy is not a good way to communicate a sales message. Personally I see this more as a failure of the copywriter to find the balance between comedy and the sales message.

**“I auditioned (for Second City) and got into a cast with John Candy, Dan Aykroyd, Gilda Radner, Eugene Levy, Andrea Martin and Catherine O’Hara.”**



Rick Moranis, Geddy Lee, & Dave Thomas recording "Take Off"

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**“..if you get lost in your joke and fail to communicate the sales message you will probably get fired”.**

**Q: Do you have any advice for aspiring copywriters who want to use humour in their work?**

DT: My advice to aspiring copywriters who want to use comedy in their work is “Be careful.” If you get lost in your joke and fail to communicate the sales message you will probably get fired. And getting lost in your joke is easy to do - especially if you’re funny. In some ways I think this may have been why I left advertising. In my heart, I wanted my jokes to be the star of my commercials, and I knew that my bosses wanted the box of soap to be the star. Sooner or later, I was going to slip up and sacrifice the sales message for the joke.

*Interview by James Shortly*

# Special Thanks To Dave Thomas For The Incredibly Insightful Interview.