

As Ms. Gerety recalled in a 1988 interview with a co-worker, Howard Davis, she had just finished a series of ads and was headed to bed when she realized that she had forgotten to create a signature line. Exhausted, she said “Dear God, send me a line,” and scribbled something on a slip of paper. When she woke up and saw what she had written, she thought it was just O.K. A few hours later, she presented her idea at a meeting. According to her, “Nobody jumped.”

When Ms. Gerety applied to work at the Philadelphia advertising agency N.W. Ayer & Son in 1943, she was told that her timing was perfect: the agency had just lost a female copywriter. At the time, women were usually hired to write for women’s products only. Her main account would be De Beers. For the next 25 years, she wrote all of the company’s ads.

Her counterpart in publicity was Dorothy Dignam, a plucky brunette who kept a list of questions male co-workers asked her in the drawer beneath her typewriter; things she was meant to know as a woman, like, “Could a winter hat have a bird’s nest on it? Is Macy’s singular or plural? What do you give a girl graduating from a convent? Is this thing an inverted pleat?”

Neither Ms. Gerety nor Ms. Dignam ever married. But their greatest professional achievement arguably was helping to create a sense of emotional attachment to the diamond engagement ring.

It’s hard to imagine a time when diamond engagement rings were not the norm; today, even after a decade and a half of bad press about blood diamonds and working conditions in the mines, among other concerns, 75 percent of brides in the United States wear one, according to Kenneth Gassman, president of the Jewelry Industry Research Institute.

Last year, Americans spent almost \$7 billion on the rings. But in 1938, when a De Beers representative wrote to N. W. Ayer to inquire whether “**the use of propaganda in various forms**” might boost the sale of diamonds in the United States, their popularity had been on a downward trend, in part because of the Depression.

N.W. Ayer conducted extensive surveys of consumer attitudes and found that most Americans thought diamonds were a luxury for the ultra-wealthy. Women wanted their men to spend money on “a washing machine, or a new car, anything but an engagement ring,” Ms. Gerety said in 1988. “It was considered just absolutely money down the drain.”

Still, the agency set an ambitious goal: “to create a situation where almost every person pledging marriage feels compelled to acquire a diamond engagement ring.”

Because De Beers controlled the world supply of rough diamonds, antitrust laws prohibited the company from doing business in the United States. The ads could not promote De Beers, or even show pictures of jewelry, so the agency commissioned bold paintings by artists like André Derain and purchased pre-existing works by Dalí and Picasso.

“Sentiment is essential to your advertising, as it is to your product,” it counseled De Beers in a memo, “for the emotional connotation of the diamond is the one competitive advantage which no other product can claim or dispute.”

Ms. Gerety’s early copy sometimes bordered on the heavy-handed. A typical wartime ad read: “Star of Hope: The engagement diamond on her finger is bright as a tear — but not with sadness. Like her eyes it holds a promise — of cool dawns together, of life grown rich and full and tranquil. Its lovely assurance shines through all the hours of waiting, to kindle with joy and precious meaning at the beginning of their new life to be.”

Meanwhile, Ms. Dignam was busy making sure average consumers saw diamonds everywhere. Her theory was that “the big ones sell the little ones.”

Capitalizing on the country's newest obsession, she wrote a monthly letter to newspapers describing the diamond jewelry worn by Hollywood actresses. She sometimes appeared as a guest columnist on the women's pages, writing under the name Diamond Dot Dignam. ("Jimmy Durante's valentine to his dream girl, Margie Little, was an eye-opening diamond ring. Rosalind Russell wears only two costumes in 'The Guilt of Janet Ames,' but one of them consists of three and three quarters pounds of diamonds and only two and a half pounds of foaming tulle and net and sequins.")

In the 1950s, N. W. Ayer started lending jewels to socialites and starlets for the Academy Awards and the Kentucky Derby. The campaign was a success from the start. After just two years, the sale of diamonds in the United States increased by 55 percent. In its 1951 annual report, N. W. Ayer noted that, "for a number of years we have found evidence that the diamond engagement ring tradition is consistently growing stronger. Jewelers now tell us 'a girl is not engaged unless she has a diamond engagement ring.' "

The company also succeeded in promulgating ideas like the Four C's, which arose from a surplus of very small stones. Buyers had been taught that bigger meant better, and had no interest. So N. W. Ayer added a box labeled "How to Buy a Diamond" to every ad, with the instructions: "Ask about color, clarity, and cutting — for these determine a diamond's quality, contribute to its beauty and value. Choose a fine stone, and you'll always be proud of it, no matter what its size." (The final "c" stood for carats.)

In the 1980s, the agency introduced a series of ads setting a new arbitrary but authoritative-seeming benchmark: "Isn't two months' salary a small price to pay for something that lasts forever?"

Some attempts at changing cultural attitudes were more successful than others. The agency briefly tried to get men interested in wearing diamond rings. A representative ad features a shaggy-haired couple in pajamas, playing checkers in bed: "She has a mind of her own. She gave me a diamond."

The "Women of the World, Raise Your Right Hand" campaign of 2003 also met with some eye rolls, though it owed a debt to a 1965 series of Ms. Gerety's that featured "bachelor girls, divorcées, widows, or career women buying 'on their own' as well as some married women," according to her assignment. "That part of the market which for one reason or another is either less, or not at all, motivated by copy appeals rooted in love."

Deanne Torbert Dunning, N. W. Ayer's first female vice president on the creative side, wrote the account during the turbulent years of 1968 through 1970.

"You had Betty Friedan and 'The Feminine Mystique,' you had the Pill, and by 1970, you had a full-blown women's movement," she recalled by phone recently. "There was an anti-establishment feeling. Whatever my mother had, I don't want. So the ads shifted to a more everyday, casual approach. They said, 'Yes, you can get married barefoot on a beach, but don't you still want a beautiful ring?'"

But one thing, at least, has remained firmly established: the line "A Diamond Is Forever," which has appeared in every De Beers engagement ad since 1948. In 1999, two weeks before Ms. Gerety died at the age of 83, Advertising Age named it the slogan of the century.

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