The Oral History Library
of
The Fashion Institute of Technology

TERRY SHAFFER

The Bloomingdale Interviews
by Estelle Ellis
Q. Now, this is Terry Shaffer, and we are going to be talking... Or, I am really going to be listening to you, Terry, tell me why you've come to Bloomingdale's. And, specifically, how you see Marvin Traub, and what his particular position in the company represented to you: his presence, his posture, his point of view. One of the things that he said to you persuaded you to come to Bloomingdale's.

And back up a little, and say where you were before, so we have it in the context, that you're someone of choice.

A. I will take a big step backwards. I'll go back 10, 14 years ago I took my MBA and started working at Doyle, Dane & Bernbach, working for William Bernbach, who, at that point in time, was certainly the foremost advertising man in the world and someone I wanted very much to work for and I had the good fortune to be one of two people chosen in 1972 to work for Bernbach.

And I worked in New York for three years on a number of different package goods pieces of business, and then went to Paris for four years where I worked on Polaroid, Chanel and a number of other very highly visible pieces of business.

I went to the Far East, Doyle, Dane opened offices in Tokyo, Hong Kong and Sydney, and was approached by Federated Department Stores to come and talk to them about working for one of their divisions at Philenes that needed a makeover to make it into what it had once been—a real carriage trade store—in New England. So that was really my first exposure to anything
about retailing. I had no retailing experience, real retail experience, up to that point.

Q. What was your point of view about retailing? So few creative people want to identify themselves with retailing.

A. Well, I was always very interested in fashion and fragrance, and having been in Paris—having worked on the Chanel business—I did know something about it. Always, Bloomingdale's was a very special kind of store that was referred to and talked about, especially in Paris. People always talked about what they had just purchased at Bloomingdale's in New York and brought back to France. So, when I had this opportunity to work with Federated (which, obviously, is the parent company of Bloomingdale's), I was very much intrigued by it and ended up working for Federated for three years (or, for Philenes for three years), and really loved it. But I always looked at Bloomingdale's and either tried to take what they had done and improve upon it, or do it as well. And there were a lot of things that we did, I think, as well. And there were some things I think we succeeded in doing even better than them. And then I went to London for about a year and a half, and when I heard about this opportunity at Bloomingdale's I was absolutely riveted to know more, and just had my first meeting, oh, maybe three months ago now, with Marvin. And the thing I think he has been so tremendously successful at is understanding that there is so much sameness today in retailing in the market today. Every store sells basically the same merchandise. And what is so unique about
Bloomingdale's is that it is theatre. It has an appeal to all of the senses and that is what makes it so unique. And Marvin, many years ago, realized that there is this tremendous degree of sameness. He looked around and went abroad and... He went to India, he went to Italy, he went to Israel, to develop merchandise, to buy merchandise that was dramatically different from any other store in the country. And he has continued to do that. He's never been afraid to take chances; that feeling of let's not be afraid to be first, and let's not look over our shoulders to see what other people are doing. Let's just do what we think is right and forge ahead. And that's what brought me to Bloomingdale's.

Q. Tell me about the man. Your perception of him, since you've indicated to me that leadership matters to you, and your relationship to leadership is critical in your choice of connections. How do you see him, as a man?

A. After two weeks, really possibly three, I find him somewhat of an enigma. I really had hoped to have spent more time with him than I have after this very short two week period, but he has an incredible... an incredibly fertile mind where, you know... I guess he must generate 100 ideas a day, all of them not equally good, but it's my good fortune to be able to work with him and be able to pull out from those 100 ideas the one or two really brilliant ones and develop them into reality. And I think he is very unique in that regard and that he is a merchant, and merchants are not given a tremendous amount of
credit for being creative, but I think he does possess both.

One of the things I always ask people in an interview situation is, do they perceive themselves as being... possessing an analytical mind or a creative mind. And I say I don't think it's possible for people to possess both in equal measure. I think one is more an analytical person or a creative person. In my case, I am more creative than I am analytical, and I am always a little bit leery of the people who think that the answer that I'm looking for is that they possess both in equal measure. To which I respond I think the last person to really possess both in equal measure was Leonardo da Vinci. But I think truly is one of these kinds of individuals, who possesses both in equal measure. I think he is marvelously analytical, and at the same time tremendously creative. I consider myself extremely fortunate to be working for Marvin.

Q. How do you position Bloomingdale's in the universe of retailing today, where, as you say, department stores are not only clones of each other, but being written off as a mode of distribution. What is the potential, the future for Bloomingdale's? What do you want to do with it?

A. Much like the motion picture business, which has seen a renaissance, it is to make shopping a diversion. It's like going to the cinema; it's like going to the movies. And it's entertainment, and it's that angle that I think has made Bloomingdale's so terribly successful: pure, unadulterated fun, pleasure, excitement.
Q. Are you talking about the events that they do? Are you talking about the environment? Are you talking about the merchandise content?
A. It's all of that and more. As I say, it's an appeal to the senses: the sense of smell, the sense of taste, the music, the commotion, and, obviously, the visual, in terms of...
Q. Who did you talk to? Before you made the decision about coming to Bloomingdale's?
A. Marvin.
Q. Only.
A. Only.
Q. Who did you talk to on the other side, about whether you should come?
A. To Hank Kalmenstein (?), Mort Kaplan, a number of other people who are friends, colleagues, associates of Marvin's, but it really was Marvin, first and foremost.
Q. And people who worked there. Did you talk to any people who worked there?
A. Obviously to the people in the personnel department. To Gordon Cooke, but really it was primarily time spent with Marvin that made me...
Q. What did he tell you about his vision for the store that made you want to come?
A. It was more my convincing him that I was the person that was right for the job, as opposed...
Q. What was the job?
A. Title, function, responsibilities...
Q. I think mostly I care not so much about the title as the conceptual...
A. To market the store, to really position the store, to be first to develop films, to develop books, to develop new ideas. Perhaps there could be a coloring...A Bloomingdale's coloring book, a whole line of merchandise with the Bloomingdale's label. New promotions, new events, and things that will keep Bloomingdale's foremost in people's minds.
Q. In other words, to conceptualize communications as a wellspring of products?
A. More than just products. The way those products are positioned in terms of lifestyle. I mean, Bloomingdale's is more than just an emporium to buy apparel. I mean, it is...It represents a way people live; it is a lifestyle. And it is developing this lifestyle and being very current with what is happening. I mean, it is one thing...One thing that is so patently obvious to me in America is that retailers so often do not have their fingers on the pulse of the country, or the world, for that matter. And retailers should be the first ones to pick up on what people are reading, what people are seeing, what people are wearing, in terms of fragrance, clothing, what people are listening to, what people are eating...
Q. They call that the signals of change.
A. The signals of change. And there are too many retailers
who are too busy to even leave their offices at lunchtime, to take a walk on the street to just observe and look at life and go to a movie and go to a concert and ride a bus and go on the underground. It's all change and it's all happening around one and it's so vital to get out. And I think that that is one of the things that Marvin does so very well, is he does have his fingers on the pulse of the world.

Q. If he's an enigma, does it not concern you that you are not getting a clear picture of who you are working with?

A. The enigma is only now beginning to emerge, now that I am on board, as opposed to the two or three private sessions we had prior to my being on board.

Q. All right. Then let's take those two or three sessions that were the persuaders. What two things did he say—or three things—that made you want to come? That made you believe you could do it, even?

A. I think that, first of all, that there was a tremendous amount of planning and thought that had gone into the future of the store. For example, in 1987, the store will be doing a South China Seas promotion in the spring. They will do a Mediterranean promotion in the fall, but then in 1988 we are already committed to doing a South Korean promotion that will precede the Olympic games. And then in the fall of 1988, the theme will be China and Hong Kong revisited. So it was tremendously exciting to be in an organization in which so much time, thought had been given to the sales promotion,
the theming of what the store was going to stand for. So that everyone, obviously, would have a vision, a focus of what the thrust was going to be. And, obviously, it makes it much easier for the merchant, as well as the people within the sales promotion, marketing, to be thinking about what is going to happen. And I look forward to being an integral part of what happens in 1989. Maybe it's not a country promotion. Perhaps it's "the best of." I mean, there are so many other areas that one can explore, other than doing country promotions. And country promotions have been very important because of the amount of funding that is available from third world countries, in terms of promotion, development of their own industries. But I think that, you know, there are other opportunities besides country promotions.

But I think the vision, the direction, and the energy of the man was...I had come in from London on Tuesday or Wednesday, and my first meeting with Marvin was scheduled for 7:00 AM, in his office, and I have a rather lengthy toilette in the morning, and it took me forever to get conditioned to the idea of working for a man who's able to get up and be going a million miles an hour at 7:00 in the morning. Because I was up at around 4:30 to be ready for this 7:00 meeting of mine. So..And he's still going strong at 7:00 at night.

Q. Uh huh. High energy.
A. The highest.
Q. Anything else you want to tell me, that you think is
important? In terms of your view of being here, in New York, now?

A. Give me another two weeks.
Q. Okay. I think that's fair.
A. Terrific.
Q. That's enough then. You know...
A. Are you still running?
Q. Yes. Now what do I do? Do I just press this down...?
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

Transcripts housed in Special Collections:

1. No photocopying without written permission from the oral author or his designee. The Director of the Library will furnish addresses; the reader must write for permissions.

2. Written permission is needed to cite or quote from a transcript for publication. The user must send the Library Director the pertinent pages of final draft; the Director will assist in obtaining the final permission. The form of citation normally used is: "The Reminiscences of [name], [dates], pages [pages] in the Oral History Collection of The Fashion Institute of Technology." No fees will be charged for published use. User is asked to furnish Oral History Program with a copy of the published work.

3. In order to see PERMISSION REQUIRED or CLOSED memoirs, the reader must obtain the written permission of the oral author or his designee. Contact the Library Director for addresses. The reader writes for permissions. Written permission if obtained must be presented when the reader visits.

4. TAPES
If a reader would like to hear a sample of a tape, he must contact the Library Director, who will screen the portions to be heard. No tapes will be heard in their entirety.