

# Advertising Age®

## Where's the Shop? Cliff Freeman Slips Into History Books

Agency Behind Classic Wendy's Ad and 'Pizza, Pizza' Shuttters After 22-Year Run

By [Kunur Patel](#)

*Published:* November 02, 2009

A correction has been made in this story. [See below for details.](#)

NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- In what was left of an office on West 20th Street in New York, a small group of casually dressed people were packing boxes amidst empty file cabinets and unplugged phones when a visitor arrived.



**EXPLOSIVE ADVERTISING:** In the '90s, Freeman's agency fired a gerbil out of a cannon in an ad for Outpost.com.

"Cliff Freeman is ceasing operations at this location," said a woman who asked not to have her name printed and then asked the visitor to leave. She bore a strong resemblance to online photos of Gail Hoffman-Frusciante, the chief financial officer and one of the few remaining employees of Cliff

Freeman & Partners, a legendary ad agency that could once brag about being one of the most creative shops in the land.

For a one-time creative hotbed that ought to get a mention in any history of TV advertising, the demise of Cliff Freeman & Partners will have sadly little effect on the much-changed marketing business of today -- aside from the emotional impact of many who say they owe their careers to the place. A few people, maybe even a dozen but probably less, will need new jobs and a precious few clients will need new agencies.

The most significant client, Baskin-Robbins, offered just the stoic statement: "Baskin-Robbins is aware that Cliff Freeman & Partners has closed its doors. We have a search under way for a new agency partner."

Several top executives who spoke with Ad Age were unable to point to any single reason for the agency's collapse. It's been noted that it had a reputation for old-school (if good) TV work and not for the cross-discipline, and in particular, digital work that most marketers demand today. Some said poor account management was to blame. Another person cited the failure to replace lost clients, and one even said it was merely cyclical and that small, independent agencies are more vulnerable to economic cycles. All, however, called it a "sad day" and had nary a negative word about Mr. Freeman.

### **Milestone**

Although it went with more of a whimper than a bang, the end of the agency has an end-of-an-era feel to it -- at least for those old enough to remember the storied shop's heyday. In the 1980s and 1990s, Cliff Freeman's work was unmissable. At the shop Dancer Fitzgerald Sample, Mr. Freeman was responsible for the Wendy's pop-culture sensation "Where's the beef?" At his own agency, started in 1987, he did Little Caesar's "Pizza, Pizza" and other memorable work. In the 1990s, there was a run with over-the-top dot-com advertising, such as when it fired a gerbil out of a cannon for Outpost.com.

This decade, though, has been a different story. Cliff had trouble emerging from the dot-com bust and an exodus of clients and, by 2003, began leaking crucial talent. One trio of executives started the boutique Amalgamated; creative director Eric Silver -- he of the gerbil cannon -- went to BBDO. Flirtations with holding-company money and succession plans failed, and the agency never really got out from its founder's shadow.



Cliff Freeman

In 2004, MDC Partners pumped some cash into the firm to help aid a turnaround, taking a minority stake in return. In November 2005, Mr. Freeman brought in Jeff McClelland, a big agency executive with time at Dentsu and Ogilvy, to become its first CEO. The idea was to help the firm adapt to

changes in the ad environment and help an agency best known for TV spots to do some more multidisciplinary integrated work. Mr. McClelland had some new-business success, bringing in sandwich chain Quiznos and Bonefish Grill. But by 2008, he was out, replaced with BBDO account man Clayton Ruebensaal, who lasted just five months in the role.

In early 2009, MDC announced it was selling its 20% stake in Cliff Freeman & Partners back to the agency. It had a total of \$800,000 invested in the business.

By a few accounts, Mr. Freeman did truly intend to make a go of it after getting back his independence. With Baskin-Robbins still onboard, the agency added at least two small clients, Michelin Guide and Saudi Airlines. (It's unclear what will become of those.) And it was one of the hundred or so agencies involved in the cattle-call review of Zappos.

Early this year, the agency relaunched its website with a new domain, clifffreeman.com, supporting it with a fairly extensive industry PR campaign, and managing to garner awards. Reporters were sent a code to be entered into the new site, whereupon he or she received a personal greeting recorded by Cliff himself. There was also a Facebook page, which currently has no administrators.

Few doubt that Mr. Freeman, 67, himself will resurface. The question is where -- and that's one he's not answering. Asked Friday in the elevator on the way into what was left of his office, Mr. Freeman had no comment as he walked back to the cardboard boxes that contained the remnants of his agency.

*Contributing: Emily Bryson York, Rupal Parekh, Bradley Johnson*

~ ~ ~

***CORRECTION:*** Due to an editorial error, the original version of this story mistakenly attributed a campaign for Snapple featuring "Wendy the Snapple Lady" to Cliff Freeman & Partners. That work was created by Kirshenbaum Bond & Partners.

---

## How things have changed

Selected major agency mergers and closings since 2000

### **D'ARCY MASIUS BENTON & BOWLES**

#### **2000 U.S. AGENCY RANK: 11**

Product of various agency mergers. Created such famed campaigns as "This Bud's for you" (Budweiser) and "Look, Ma! No cavities!" (Procter & Gamble's Crest). Publicis Groupe bought D'Arcy parent Bcom3 Group in 2002 and jettisoned the D'Arcy network late that year, dividing clients and key staff among Saatchi & Saatchi, Leo Burnett and Publicis Worldwide.

### **LOWE LINTAS & PARTNERS WORLDWIDE**

**2000 RANK: 14**

Product of various mergers. Interpublic in October 2009 aligned Deutsch with Lowe Worldwide, making Deutsch the North American hub of the Lowe network. Deutsch is absorbing Lowe, New York, itself a successor to a number of fabled agencies (Bozell; Lintas; Ammirati & Puris; Scali, McCabe, Sloves).

**BATES****2000 RANK: 17**

Successor to Ted Bates & Co. ("Melts in your mouth, not in your hands" for Mars' M&Ms) and Backer & Spielvogel. WPP bought Bates parent Cordiant Communications in 2003 and quickly broke up the Bates network. The brand still exists in Asia, where WPP's Bates 141 today operates as a marketing-communications network.

**BOZELL****2000 RANK: 25**

Agency resulting from merger of Bozell & Jacobs (formed in Omaha, Neb., in 1921) and Kenyon & Eckhardt ("If you can find a better car, buy it" for Chrysler). Entered Interpublic in 2001 as part of True North acquisition. Interpublic in 2003 folded Bozell into Lowe and said, "The Bozell brand will be retired." The brand came out of retirement; the agency's Omaha branch bought itself back from Interpublic in 2004 and today operates as Bozell.

**N.W. AYER & PARTNERS****2000 RANK: 94**

Founded in 1869. Created such enduring slogans as "Reach out and touch someone" (AT&T), "Be all you can be" (Army) and "A diamond is forever" (DeBeers). Parent Bcom3 folded it in Kaplan Thaler Group in 2002.

*Source: Ad Age DataCenter*

Copyright © 1992-2009 [Crain Communications](#) | [Privacy Statement](#) | [Contact Us](#)