

IT'S TEA AT THE TOP —London

Preface

Pioneering agency Abbott Mead Vickers remade the world of advertising. But co-founder Peter Mead – still in the business after more than 45 years – proves to be more nice guy than Mad Man.

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As Peter Mead gets older people have started using words like “legend” a bit too much for his liking. “Someone described me as ‘stately’ the other day,” he says, wincing. “Sounds like a bloody ship!” It’s an intriguing conundrum. Because although he is, on paper, one of the true doyens of the British advertising world – one of the three founders of Abbott Mead Vickers (AMV), arguably the most successful agency the UK has ever seen – in the flesh he is completely, well... normal. There is none of the assumed grandeur that often comes with unassailable recognition, none of the arrogance that comes with status, nor the stiff formality that comes with seniority. He is charming, engaged and quite humble.

But it would be wrong to say that all this is in spite of his success; it is the very reason for it. Mead’s unique ability lies in building and maintaining relationships and for years this was his key role at AMV. While David Abbott was the creative genius, Mead and Adrian Vickers were the account handlers – go-betweens with the agency’s clients. “At the core of everything I believe about business is the word ‘relationships,’” says Mead, sitting in his office in west London. “Developing relationships – if you spend all your life doing that you won’t go far wrong.”

This people-centric view isn’t just about schmoozing clients, however: at AMV it has always extended to the

everyday running of the business. In his new book on management, *When in Doubt be Nice*, Mead describes a process he calls “the breakfast test”. Once AMV was big enough to start acquiring smaller agencies, Mead would go for breakfast with MDs looking to sell their companies and observe how they treated the waiters. “While they could be really sycophantic to me,” he writes, “a clicking of fingers or an inability to say thank you to the staff demonstrated they weren’t the people for us.” Not only did this reflect a moral code, it also made business sense. “I’ve always thought that people perform better when they feel good and nourished and cherished and that their work is valued,” says Mead. A case in point: during the recession of the early 1990s, the agency refused to countenance redundancies.

This attitude was instilled in the company at its birth. AMV was set up in 1977; a small agency with big potential. Mead is in no doubt as to where that potential came from: “David [Abbott] was the greatest creative talent, in advertising terms, this town has ever seen,” he says. Abbott brought a pinch of stardust with him (US magazine *Advertising Age* described him back then as “British advertising’s answer to Robert Redford”). Over the decades Abbott made a name for himself and the agency, creating groundbreaking ads for clients such as Sainsbury’s, *The Economist* and Ikea.

Up until 1998, when Abbott retired as chairman and creative director of the company, the triumvirate at the top of AMV were more like friends than business partners. Mead describes it as “an umbrella of affection that was inviolate”. When Abbott died quite suddenly last year, Mead lost the person he calls his and Vickers’ best friend. In a characteristically candid moment, Mead mentions an article in his copy of *The Times* about a brilliant young South African cricketer: “I read that and thought, ‘I must ring Dave and talk to him about it,’ and he wasn’t there anymore. It was dreadful.”

Unlike Abbott and Vickers, who both studied at Oxford, Mead was an unlikely adland executive. He grew up in working-class Peckham, south London.

His father owned a window-cleaning company and everyone expected him to go into a similarly “working-class profession”. At 16 he left school and went into the despatch department of an advertising agency. The rest is the story of a young man finding his feet and snatching opportunities as they came along. Mead had the fortune to stumble into an industry in which success largely depends on people skills and courage: two attributes he has in abundance.

Today Mead is a vice-chairman of Omnicom Group, the US company that acquired AMV in 1999, and chairman of its European arm. His open-door policy is well known and often exploited by managers at AMV who know they can “pop up for tea and sympathy” (Mead is a prodigious tea-drinker). As the only remaining founder at AMV his presence is that of a spiritual guide more than anything: there to advise and nurture rather than interfere in the day-to-day running of the agency; or, as he puts it, “It’s a question of nudging the tiller.”

While his days of managing the business are behind him, Mead’s office – overlooking the red-brick Landmark Hotel – is a repository for decades of devotion to the agency. It is the antithesis of the cold glass-and-steel box you might expect. A cluttered archive of personal effects, one wall is dominated by two aquariums filled with exotic fish, there’s an antique jukebox, at least 100 books – with titles ranging from *The Future of Advertising* to *Moral Calculations* – photos of his children and family, and a framed receipt from the last meal he ever shared with David Abbott. “Things I like to be surrounded by,” he says, with no sense of a need to conceal this human desire.

His humanity also manifests itself in insecurity, which seems completely at odds with his CV. Despite all his achievements and the conspicuous fact that they came from next to nothing, Peter Mead still doubts himself. “I’m never sure I’ll finally prove myself to myself,” he says in his deep lugubrious voice. But, as always with Mead, there’s an upside and a wry smile, too: “But really secure people tend to be either boring or a pain in the bum.” — (M)

66

I’ve always thought people perform better when they feel good – when they feel nourished and understand that the work they do is valued

99



The rules

- 01 What time do you like to be at your desk?**
On a good day, at 09.30; on a bad day, slightly later.
- 02 Where’s the best place to prepare for leadership: an MBA school or on the job?**
On the job is a much better vehicle.
- 03 What’s your management style?**
Trying to get the best out of people by charm rather than bullying.
- 04 Are tough decisions best taken by one person?**
They’re best made by a tiny group of people, probably no more than three.
- 05 Do you want to be liked or respected?**
I want to be respected above all things. But I don’t want to be feared; I don’t think fear motivates.
- 06 What does your support team look like?**
I have an amazing executive assistant.
- 07 What technology do you carry on a trip?**
A BlackBerry Passport and a Samsung.
- 08 Do you read management books?**
A lot are regurgitations but I do remember Tom Peters’ *In Search of Excellence*. I love company histories.
- 09 Do you run in the morning? Wine with lunch? Socialise with your team after work?**
I haven’t run in the morning since I was seven. I occasionally have a glass of wine at lunch but this agency has always been the antithesis of *Mad Men* – we’d rather have a cup of tea. I’ll happily have dinner with people I work with.
- 10 What would your key management advice be?**
If you want to be a leader, make sure you’re surrounded by good managers.