

Why is this New York agency apologizing to clients on its 150th birthday?



By Sam Bradley | Senior Reporter
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Most of us celebrate milestone birthdays with a party or a restaurant dinner. American ad agency The Gate is marking its 150th year in business in a less conventional manner – by apologizing to its former clients.



The Gate has marked its birthday with a round of apology videos / The Gate

After “eight or nine” name changes, The Gate is the second-oldest agency still operating in the United States (J Walter Thompson, now part of Wunderman Thompson, is the eldest), having been founded as Mandel and Frank back in 1872.

To mark the MSQ-owned firm’s sesquicentennial, it has released a series of appeals to former clients, pledging that whatever past errors lost their business back in the day, its current team is more than capable of doing the job.

The six apologies are addressed to past commercial partners including Tuscan pasta-maker Buitoni, French jeweler Cartier and cruise line Cunard (themselves established respectively in 1827, 1840 and 1847).

In the agency’s address to the latter client, an agency exec boasts about the agency’s legacy of copywriting talent and the seafaring jingle, ‘Anchors away, let’s not wear our corsets all day.’

He then takes the time to say sorry for a scandalous liaison committed by a Gate chairman 103 years ago, concluding that “if you give us a second chance, our current agency management won’t play strip shuffleboard with any of your passengers.”



The apology is a joke, The Gate’s present-day staff only have conjecture about why their predecessors lost Cunard’s business, and the exec is played by an actor. But in real life the agency held the account until 1919, at one point marketing Transatlantic crossings aboard the ill-fated liner Lusitania.

“The campaign is some grade-A groveling,” admits Nancy Aresu, president of The Gate New York. But there’s logic behind the work. “At The Gate we believe that there are two types of people in the world: simplifiers and complicators. We’ve always identified with the simplifiers,” she says. “So for our 150th anniversary, we decided to cut to the chase. We’re sorry to those clients we’ve lost over the years and we want a second chance to make it right.”

According to David Bernstein, chief creative officer at The Gate New York, the agency chose the unusual celebration as “a fun way to call attention to the event without taking it (or ourselves) too seriously.

“We knew The Gate had an illustrious history. But after some extensive research, it really became clear just how many famous clients we’ve worked with over the years. Which led us to wonder how we could win them back.”



He says: “Turning 150 is a big deal - it’s not a brief you get every day. But how often do agencies take themselves far too seriously for their own good?”

To confirm the agency’s age and provenance, its team did “an awful lot of research,” working with the Advertising Association, the Smithsonian, the New York Public Library and the New York Historical Society. Bernstein says “our new business researcher Lisa can now practically recite every issue of the Standard Directory of Advertising Agencies.”

Though the company hasn't yet heard back from Scott Paper, Cartier or Inglenook Wines, Bernstein says “we wanted to create something that appealed to our own sense of humor, that would put a smile on the face of others, rather than just give ourselves a self-congratulatory pat on the back.”