

DAN WIEDEN
1945 — 2022

Ad Agency Co-Founder Coined 'Just Do It'

By JAMES R. HAGERTY

One thing Dan Wieden didn't want to do as a young man was to follow his father into the advertising business. "I could never figure out why he was in such a whorish industry," Mr. Wieden told *Adweek* magazine in 2003.

In the mid-1960s, he majored in journalism at the University of Oregon. He married young and had children in his 20s. That meant a need for steady income and led to advertising. The challenge of packing a lot of meaning into a few words hooked him. In 1982, he joined David Kennedy to found the ad agency Wieden+Kennedy, based in Portland, Ore.

They had one client: Nike Inc., then a small company. It was a perfect fit. Phil Knight, Nike's co-founder, loathed conventional advertising. The new agency's founders were inclined to pitch ads that were offbeat, edgy and artistic. In 1988, Mr. Wieden came up with Nike's tagline, "Just Do It."

In a 2009 documentary, "Art & Copy," Mr. Wieden said he got the idea partly from a remark attributed to the convicted murderer Gary Gilmore, shortly before his execution in 1977: "Let's do it." Mr. Wieden recalled thinking, "I like the 'do it' part of it." Nike representatives didn't respond to requests for comment. A Wieden+Kennedy spokeswoman declined to comment.

The Nike ads helped vault a tiny regional shop into a global advertising firm. Subaru of America hired Wieden+Kennedy in 1991. Since then a long list of clients has included Starbucks Corp., Microsoft Corp., McDonald's Corp. and Coca-Cola Co. The firm has about 1,500 employees and offices in Europe, Asia and the Americas.

To avoid the risk of being gobbled up by a giant holding company, Mr. Wieden created a trust to preserve the firm's independence.

Mr. Wieden died Sept. 30 at his home in Portland. He was 77 and

had Alzheimer's disease. His partner, Mr. Kennedy, died a year ago at the age of 82.

Mr. Wieden (pronounced why-den) attributed the firm's success partly to a habit of hiring misfits and oddballs rather than seasoned advertising pros. As for managing people, he said, "I think people need to feel safe but still under pressure in some weird way, a healthy pressure. People need to feel that you're rooting for them to succeed."

Wary of complacency, he advised advertising people to "walk in stupid every morning." As he put it: "The minute you think you know, the minute you go, 'oh, yeah, we've been here before, no sense reinventing the wheel,' you stop learning, stop questioning,

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and start believing in your own wisdom, you're dead."

Messrs. Wieden and Kennedy "didn't really dictate or mandate," said Bill Davenport, a longtime colleague. "They let people find their way. In some ways, it was a sink-or-swim culture. But they never had a heavy hand."

After graduating from the University of Oregon in 1967, the younger Mr. Wieden wrote marketing material for Georgia-Pacific Corp. He hated the job and, by his own admission, created so much trouble that he finally got fired. He tried freelance writing and then joined the ad firm of McCann-Erickson. There he met Mr. Kennedy, whose artistic skills and humor complemented Mr. Wieden's writing talent.

At first, their office was furnished with a card table and cardboard file cabinets. They used a pay phone to call clients.