

Women Trailblazers

DDB Worldwide Celebrates Creative Trailblazer Phyllis Robinson's 100th Birthday

Robinson was the first female chief copywriter in U.S. history



Robinson worked alongside DDB founder Bill Bernbach to craft a collaborative company culture. DDB Worldwide



By Emmy Liederman

OCTOBER 22, 2021



Phyllis Robinson was obsessed with the ideas that never made it past the drawing board. When DDB art director Helmut Krone was stuck in a creative rut, she looked through his waste basket. When she sat down to interview candidates, she wanted to look at the ads that their previous employer had rejected.

"She felt that somebody might have had a great idea that a more traditional copy chief would have rejected," Keith Reinhard, **DDB Worldwide's** chairman emeritus, told Adweek. "She had a great eye and a knack for spotting talent."

Robinson was the first female copy chief in U.S. history, but her impact on the ad industry spanned far beyond this title. Working closely with Bill Bernbach to establish DDB as an agency, Robinson's number one concern was breaking the rules. When she began her role in 1949, the industry thought the best way to get a consumer to listen was by repeating the same message relentlessly. Robinson and her team knew this approach wasn't effective, and they had a solution for marketers: embrace playfulness and collaboration, and offer the freedom to experiment.



Original 1960s Ad



2017 International Women's Day Ad

DDB Worldwide honored Robinson's Polaroid work in a 2017 campaign. DDB Worldwide

Recognized as The First Lady of Madison Avenue's creative revolution, **she remains at the forefront** of DDB Worldwide's company culture. Robinson, who died in 2010 at the age of 89, would have turned 100 today.

"Her influence is as evident today as it was 72 years ago when she first walked through the doors of DDB," said global CEO Marty O'Halloran in a statement.

Championing a new way to work

When Robinson entered the advertising world, she took issue with many of its conventional practices, including its departmental separation. Instead of working together to create the best possible ad, copy editors, art directors and producers sat in separate offices. They were told to keep to themselves and just move their work down the production line.

"Bill and Phyllis said 'This is crazy, they ought to be working together,' and that was one of the key elements of the creative revolution," said Reinhard.

After establishing a collaborative creative team, DDB changed the way marketers approach, design and write ads. Robinson is most known for her youthful, tongue-in-cheek approach to creative, which engaged audiences on an individualized level. When she took time off to vacation or take care of her daughter, clients still begged for her opinion on projects.





Robinson used conversational and playful language in her ad copy. DDB Worldwide

Her most famous work includes punchy Polaroid creative and Clairol's "Let Me Be Me" campaign, a revolutionary concept at a time when women felt confined to the expectations of their male counterparts. According to Reinhard, Robinson's undeniable ability to surprise and charm a consumer was reflected in her essence as a leader, co-worker and friend.

"She was very soft spoken in a way, but she could be incredibly blunt with a smile on her face and say 'I think you better go back and rethink what

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The Phyllis Project

DDB Worldwide works under four pillars, which the agency believes reflect Robinson's spirit: freedom from fear, freedom to fail, freedom from chaos and freedom to be. In 2017, DDB launched The Phyllis Project, which works to increase the number of **female creatives** across the network by empowering the modern women who share her qualities. The initiative helps women track their career development and carve out their future goals.

"Phyllis would have celebrated 100 this year, but we're looking forward to the 150 and the 200," said Roisin Rooney, global chief people officer at DDB Worldwide. "There will still be an amazing corral of women who will still be supporting and championing her."



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