

# THE MAKING OF A BRAND

Everyone knows Patek Philippe's current advertising line: "You never actually own a Patek Philippe, you merely look after it for the next generation." Peter York looks back at the company's history of creative marketing, running up to that inspired campaign

I'm fascinated by the advertising history of great companies and famous brands. I like the way in which the best creative work tries to reflect contemporary trends and stays true to the reality of the product and the brand. And I like the way that a central theme emerges over the decades while all sorts of new concerns are fed into the story to update it (or "contemporize" it, as they say on Madison Avenue) – new products, topical themes, or a new aesthetic.

Patek Philippe has its origins in the nineteenth century, when the company combined a well-connected Polish marketing genius – Patek – with a French technical one – Philippe. Patek networked and exhibited and advertised like mad, while Philippe came up with pioneering developments that won the brand a stream of gold medals in those world's fairs that became the nineteenth-century mark of a great city.

Patek's marketing instincts took him to America in the mid-1800s. A downturn in the European market was offset against a growing business with rich Americans coming to Europe and retailers back home buying the best products from Europe. It focused Patek Philippe on developing a New World presence, "people on the ground," and by 1896 the company was set up with a distributor in New York City. The area was emerging as the parade ground of the world's most astonishing fortunes, with robber-baron houses being built and torn

down on Fifth Avenue (*The Best Address*, as per Jerry E. Patterson's 1998 book), where the Astors and Vanderbilts competed.

From the moment America became a focus for Patek Philippe sales, a New York-based advertising tradition was established – one in which a familiar technology- and innovation-based European brand was presented to an American audience in ways it could understand. You couldn't assume that Americans understood European traditions. The celebrities and business titans were unlike the crowned heads of Europe – they had different concerns – but they were to become clients and ambassadors.

Across America retailers in different areas did their own advertising, using local and topical appeal and their own "brand identities." Patek Philippe's marketing history makes for a rich period picture, as seen in John Reardon's cult book *Patek Philippe in America*, showing how the company was marketed from 1847 to the 1980s (the first global campaign began in 1985, followed a decade later with "You never actually own...," the central theme of the brand advertising today). During those years every imaginable appeal was made to wealthy Americans, from perfect timekeeping – endorsed by those gold medals and, in the twentieth century, by Geneva Observatory ratings – to exclusivity, craftsmanship, and quality control (Patek Philippe made only 20-something watches a day in the 1950s).

The advertising took in new designs and new events along the way, and a huge range of looks and innovations such as time-zone switchability for early jet-setters. There were women's models that were jewelry in their own right and men's evening watches – all before the emergence of "vintage" watches as eagerly collected assets and before anyone talked about their "watch wardrobe."

Among these ads are timelessly elegant works and some completely time-capsule moments. They remind us that America was – and still is – an array of very different regional markets and that Patek Philippe sold in some of the best local and regional speciality stores. Until the late 1950s, its advertising portrayed a microcosm of the U.S. and its regionally varied ways of being rich and successful. The imagery is a gift for the social historian. The layouts and typography echo every smart thing going, from Hollywood Regency to Deco Moderne.

It's great stuff, but it didn't fit the developing rules of luxury-brand marketing. The rules (you could call them the three Cs) were: Consistency – the brand says the same things about itself in the same style (a visual identity) wherever it's presented; Control – the marketing is controlled absolutely by the brand owner, not by retailers or intermediaries; and Continuity – the brand reworks certain themes and promises over time, even if they're advertised differently and supplemented by all

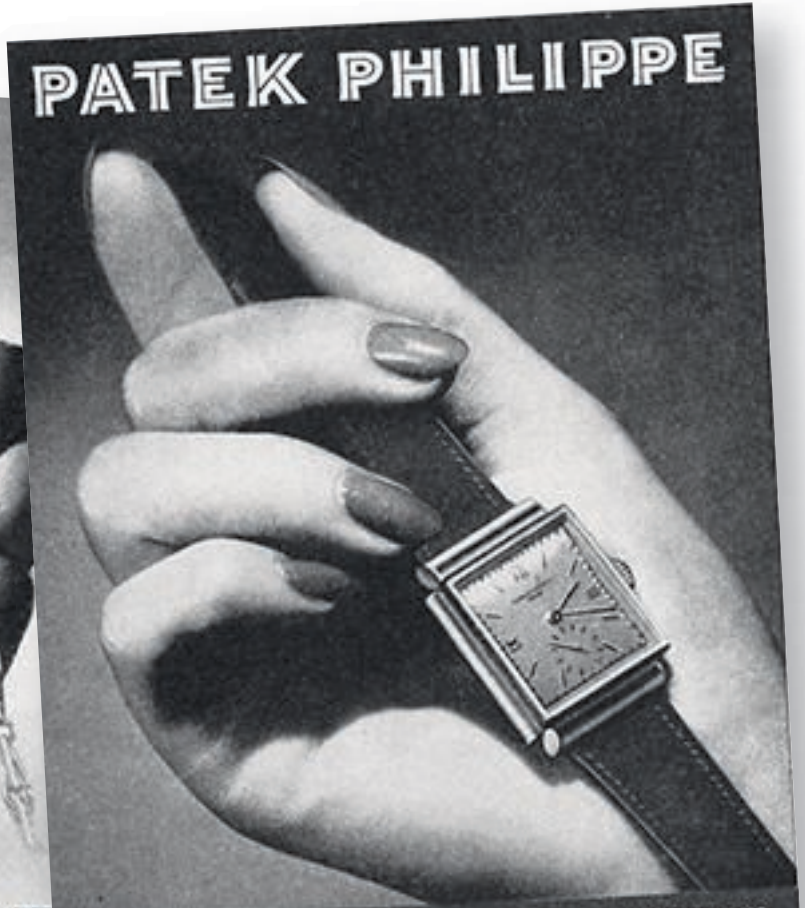




**PATEK PHILIPPE**

630 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK • GENEVA, SWITZERLAND  
ESTABLISHED 1839

THE WORLD'S FOREMOST WATCH



**PATEK PHILIPPE**

630 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK • GENEVA, SWITZERLAND  
ESTABLISHED 1839

THE WORLD'S FOREMOST WATCH

*Distinctive*

Specially designed and made in our own shops by our skilled craftsmen, for ensemble wear. Of natural gold and platinum. The watch is a world-renowned Patek, Philippe. The price of \$815 for the set includes inlaid platinum initials on the ring.

**BROCK  
AND COMPANY**

LOS ANGELES - 515 W. Seventh St. • BEVERLY HILLS - 9520 Wilshire Blvd.

**PATEK PHILIPPE**

587 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK 17, N. Y.  
1405 Peel Street, Montreal, Canada  
ESTABLISHED 1839  
Geneva, Switzerland

THE WORLD'S FOREMOST WATCH





**\$1700  
TRUST FUND.**

A Patek Philippe doesn't just tell you the time.  
It tells you something about yourself.  
And it will tell your great-grandson something about you.

**PATEK PHILIPPE**

For illustrations of other long term investments in superb timepieces, write 10 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. 10022





kinds of new tactical, topical stories. Latterly, there's another "C" to be added to this business-school view of how a brand should present itself: Cut through. Cut through means saying or showing something strong, surprising, something that can cut through the target audience's media overload and the clichés of the sector.

The Stern family, who'd bought Patek Philippe in 1932, started to think about awareness in the highly competitive U.S. market, suspecting that many rich and rising Americans didn't know the brand or the story. Confident of their product and its intrinsic strengths of technology, design, and workmanship – and its historic endorsement by everyone from Queen Victoria to Wall Street's titans – Patek Philippe's managers knew they had a powerful story, but they needed somebody who would tell it for them, who would make the experts' "best" watch the market's most wanted one.

America in the 1950s wasn't just the world's richest nation; it had the world's largest group of the super-rich. By a mile. That group comprised new and old money – and some very sophisticated members. But the U.S. was a country with a strangely schizophrenic attitude to European luxury brands and a pride in the "classless classics" – American mass brands with democratic appeal. In the nineteenth century, American mass production of useful affordable watches had surprised the traditional Swiss industry, as the advent of cheap quartz

technology would a century later. The Swiss learned and adapted, and played their hugely differentiated strengths of craftsmanship and design to advantage. But these affordable products meant that the U.S. market for super-premium watches was never as large as its European brand owners expected. So it was important that the people who *were* in the market for watches costing hundreds and thousands of dollars, even in the late 1950s, knew and valued the brand. That meant finding a talent and telling him (advertising, even advertising to women, still overwhelmingly had men in its leading roles in the late 1950s) to discipline and focus the brand marketing, to say something clear from the center.

The "finder" was Einar Buhl, then the president of the Henri Stern Watch Agency (HSWA), New York – Patek's wholly-owned offshoot responsible for U.S. sales and marketing. Mr. Buhl sought someone who could say something simple and surprising – an approach pioneered by that American genius of the modern advertising style, Bill Bernbach. He'd sold the Volkswagen – a most counterintuitive brand success – to New York, with advertising that looked and sounded completely different: arresting statements, bold modern graphics with lots of white space, and long, clever, witty copy.

Seth Tobias was the *Mad Men*-period genius Buhl found. He began by producing a series of bold, national press ads that paired big ideas and crisp modern



American retailers such as Brock were creating their own newspaper ads alongside Patek Philippe's brand advertising in the 1940s (page 81). But when adman Seth Tobias (above) was recruited, a new generation of advertising began. This 1949 ad (top left) carried the kernel of the future Generations strand, while Tobias' work from 1959 and 1969 (top, center and right) and 1968 (opposite page) cemented the themes of longevity and inheritance

layouts with long copy in, typically, double-page magazine spreads. In 1959 – the beginning of the fictionalized *Mad Men* years – this approach was both smart and radical: the strong, moody, black-and-white photography; the what-exactly-is-going-on-there, which demanded a second look, with the watch in sharp focus and the background blurred. The first of these showed the commitment to quality at Patek Philippe by revealing how “Mr. Pfister’s most important duty – as president of Patek Philippe – is to inspect 23 watches a day.”

The page of elegantly written copy that followed explained to Americans why Patek Philippe’s production methods were so different from their own. It’s the romance of extreme craftsmanship. Another in the same series addressed “the ninety-two women in America who will receive diamond-set Patek Philippe watches this year.” There’s a bit of watch science, a lot of romance, and some fascinating comparisons, like that with High Art – “It takes longer [to make] than to paint a *Blue Boy* or build a Stradivarius.” The watch, a tiny, jeweled icon of ’50s femininity, is held across a blurry white vertical – perhaps an evening glove? Another showed a ’50s designery jeweled bracelet “with 197 diamonds,”

High Jewelry in its own right at US\$25,000, that “flicks open” to reveal a watch.

This approach – which lasted into the ’70s – was completely different from the usual advertising for high-end watches in America, and notably different from retailers’ advertising, which looked old-fashioned in comparison, with a focus on product rather than brand marketing. During this period Patek Philippe advertising “fronted-up” – with notable themes and straplines – some key claims that are only occasionally or implicitly made in earlier work. One is the importance of the business as a technical and design innovator in the strapline, “Patek Philippe has left a deeper impression on the world of watchmaking than any other watch.” Another is the idea of a Patek as a long-term investment and heirloom with the arresting headline “\$1700 Trust Fund” underneath the picture of a blissfully ’60s oval gold watch with a blue face and a woven gold chain, bathed in a halo of light against an indigo background.

These important ads raised two crucial themes, that of identity – “A Patek Philippe doesn’t just tell you the time, it tells you something about yourself” – and of family heritage – “And it will tell your great grandson something about you.” The heritability

Opposite: artwork for Leagas Delaney London’s Generations campaign launched in 1996. In its 18th year, the series is notable for the pedigree of

the photographers that have contributed, including Peggy Sirota (top left and right, middle left) and Peter Lindbergh (middle right and bottom right)

theme dates back to an HSWA ad of 1949 with the headline “Your great-grandson may wear this watch” and the strapline “The world’s foremost watch for one hundred and ten years.” What Tobias had been doing in an inspired way was what admen call “interrogating the brand till it gives up its truths.” He’d clearly been to the Swiss factory before writing his first piece – and registered its difference from the American manufacturing model. And he’d absorbed the history of the company and its enthusiastic aficionados, then translated his findings into stories, compelling headlines, and big emotional ideas about love, identity, and what philosophers call “serial immortality” – living on through your children.

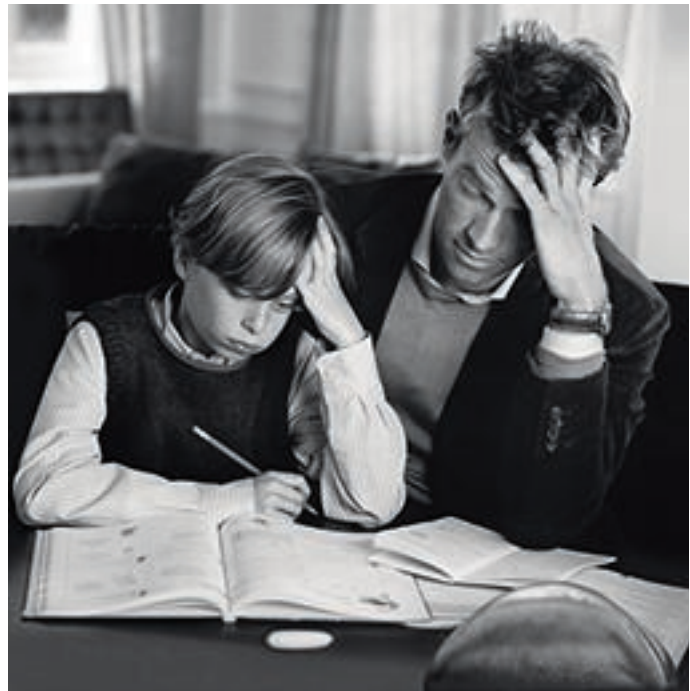
After the distractions of the 1970s, one long-standing theme, heritability, emerged as the global brand message in the familiar work we see today from the London agency Leagas Delaney. No one’s forgotten design, build quality, or innovation; they’re all there in the photographs and the exhibitions, the retailers, and the experts’ minds. But they’re all subsumed and assumed in the glorious idea that your family is “built to last.”

For more on this subject see the exclusive content on Patek Philippe Magazine Extra at [patek.com/owners](http://patek.com/owners)

Introducing a new dramatic element to the company’s advertising, the steel Nautilus was likened to a sword for slaying boardroom dragons in this ad (right) from 1978. The timepiece went on to star in an unusual campaign in the early 1980s, where each ad recorded “A second in the life of a Patek Philippe,” with the watch as protagonist (center). It wasn’t until the mid-1980s that René Bittel, the creative director at the Geneva-based agency Bozell, launched Patek Philippe’s first global campaign, which ran from 1985 to 1996 (far right)







PHOTOGRAPHS: PRE-1985 ADVERTS COURTESY OF JOHN REARDON. PORTRAIT OF SETH TOBIAS COURTESY OF STEPHEN TOBIAS. COURTESY OF PEGGY SIROTA, PETER LINDBERGH, MARDEN SMITH