

Duncan/Channon

BORN TO ROCK. BORN TO RAISE...SALES

by Sam McMillan

Every great agency has an essence. Think of the homespun straight talk from Riney. The provocative wordplay of Fallon. The in-your-face, take no prisoners irreverence of Della Femina. The emotion of Chiat/Day. The surreal iconoclasm of Crispin Porter + Bogusky. When it comes to San Francisco-based agency Duncan/Channon, its essence can be boiled down to a single word: *guanxi*.

Pronounced *guan-SHE*, it is the essential ingredient in the secret sauce. And like most good spices, it infuses everything Duncan/Channon does, from its crystalline graphic design for Clos Du Bois—that took the winemaker from 700,000 cases to over 2 million—to its visually stunning national advertising for online bookmaker Blurb. Guanxi informs Duncan/Channon's embrace of digital for the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority. Driven by geolocated Twitter posts, the campaign features tweets posted to the hashtag #getyourvacationon. A favorite submission: "Invented a new drink. Gin & pine cones. Makes you immortal." At Duncan/Channon, you find guanxi influencing the clients it takes on, the way it decorates its office, how it hires creatives and, especially, how the agency has fun. And believe me, this agency has made fun one of its first orders of business.

Never heard of guanxi? Don't beat yourself up. Actually, Duncan/Channon had been doing business for years before a German machine tool salesman explained it to them late one night in a bar in Shanghai. At its most basic, guanxi means relationships. In the business world, it signifies trust, dependability and understanding. Interpreted by Duncan/Channon, it's the bond you build with a client after three days of business meetings followed by three nights of drinking. By day four, you've established a magnificent hangover and, if you've done it right, a sense of guanxi. In co-founder Robert Duncan's words, "It comes down to the three C's: Camaraderie. Compassion. Creativity."

Or as executive creative director Michael Lemme says: "Your personality is your brand. At Duncan/Channon we let it all hang out. That's who we are, and how we do our best work."

Letting it all hang out is obvious from the minute you step off the elevator on the fourteenth floor of the Prohibition-era Adam Grant building in San Francisco's financial district. The elevator doors are wallpapered in orange-tinted posters of Duncan/Channon staffers captured mid-party. The receptionist sits behind a gleaming stainless steel engine cowling of what looks like a DC-9. The time warp continues. A glance at the magazine on the glass coffee table reveals Cheryl Tiegs in the

Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue. She seems to be holding up remarkably well until, upon close examination you realize the magazine is dated 1983. And in the ultimate homage to retro-heritage, one flight up, on the fifteenth floor penthouse, Duncan/Channon maintains its own speakeasy, called The Tip.

Decorated in black-and-white wallpaper, a burnished pressed-tin ceiling, and featuring a fully stocked bar, The Tip has room for 100, and leads out to a garden where Duncan/Channon hosts Roofies, roof top concerts by its up-and-coming roster of recording artists. Yep, the agency has its own fledgling record label, Top of the Tip.

For Duncan, The Tip is "the temple of guanxi." It's where employees can kick back, bring clients and engage in what he calls "a little creative ferment." The Tip hosts a speakers series called Toast of the Tip, which has featured cultural luminaries such as wine revolutionary Gary Vaynerchuk, Lynda Carter (aka Wonder Woman) and Laura Duncan, sex researcher and authority on teledildonics. The frame of reference is wide, the topics are eclectic and the only thing not on the menu is conversation about advertising and the industry. As Duncan notes, "We're after a deeper strain of cultural engagement."

Before you think it's all fun and games at Duncan/Channon, Andy Berkenfield, general manager, is quick to point out, "We're a grown-up agency. We have real account people, media people and a planning infrastructure. We have a process."

Caption information supplied by co-founders Robert Duncan and Parker Channon.

Right: "After a century of success in Europe, **Danish clogmaker Sanita** introduced their shoes to the US market and, minus a marketing campaign, landed with a resounding thud. After researching this venerable brand, we felt that the story of Sanita could best be summed up in a single Danish word: *hygge* (pronounced hue-guh). Loosely translated, *hygge* means 'making everything cozy' and it's a big part of life in Denmark. With a local Copenhagen photographer, we took a series of portraits of comfy Danes in classically Scandinavian settings. Then paired them with *hygge*-infused headlines across print ads, posters, bags and brochures. Sales spiked 639 percent." Anne Elisco-Lemme, art director/creative director; Parker Channon, writer/executive creative director; Andy Berkenfield, strategist; Morten Bengtsson, photographer; Jacqueline Fodor, senior integrated producer; Sanita, client.

"**The Western Railway Museum** offers something most others don't: It's seriously kid-friendly. That's because you can actually ride the old electrical trains. Ergo, ads that look like vintage railway tickets and a message that lets you know that this is anything but a dry day shuffling past static exhibits." Anne Elisco-Lemme, art director/creative director; Parker Channon, writer/executive creative director; Anna Bjeldanes Hindley, photographer; Jennifer Moe, production designer; Western Railway Museum, client.

We eat mashed potatoes with bacon. We know about comfort.

Sanita
the original Danish clog

Some countries make proton accelerators. We make clogs.

Sanita
the original Danish clog

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				MAR	APR
RIDE	VINTAGE	ELECTRIC	TRAINS	MAY	JUN
				JUL	AUG
RIDE	VINTAGE	ELECTRIC	TRAINS	SEP	NOV
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RIDE	VINTAGE	ELECTRIC	TRAINS	MAY	JUN
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				NOV	DEC

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Duncan/Channon

Let's dance

The process was years in the making. Twenty-one years ago Duncan was a frustrated creative director at Foote, Cone & Belding Direct. With the backing of a former client, he went out on his own from a garage in Fairfax, a town noted more for its aging, tie-dye-wearing hippies than its advertising.

His first hire? Parker Channon, perhaps the world's worst account coordinator in history. And, at the time, one of the best undiscovered writers in the industry.

"I went into advertising because I heard I could get a job that didn't require wearing a necktie," executive creative director and co-founder Channon says. "Unfortunately the job I got was as an assistant account executive at FCB. Which meant I did actually have to put on a necktie. Even worse, I was terrible at the job. My boss was so frustrated with my performance she took me to lunch one day and broke down in tears."

Over lunch at City Lights Books in North Beach, Channon divulged his secret wish to be a copywriter. Duncan, who could see Channon struggling in the account department, tried him out on a spec project. "The work was so good," Duncan remembers, "I asked, 'Who helped you?'"

For the next year at FCB, Channon became Duncan's "go-to" copywriter, until Duncan left to start his own fledgling agency. A year later, and with more work than he could handle, Duncan reached out to Channon. Apparently just in time, too.

"He kept shoving invoices from vendors behind his desk," Duncan laughs. "Nobody was getting paid, the vendors refused to do any more work, the whole system was grinding to a halt. I hired him about a minute before he was going to be fired."

"Duncan saved me," Channon says.

Twenty years ago, Duncan says, "We were writing, doing all our own production. We were an 'integrated' agency because we did everything ourselves." Channon continues, "We never wanted an 'interactive' department, any more than we wanted a 'print' or 'TV' department. We always wanted all the creatives to do all the creative work."

Lemme elaborates, "Our clients know digital is expected of



them, and of us. Our job is to articulate the heart of the brand story and then extend that into every aspect of the company. The work can come in from any door. A client might need a new identity or TV spots. At the core we want to make sure the brand story is strong, then find the right solution, whether it's digital, print, broadcast or social media."

Today the 68-person agency still does everything itself, with the exception of hard-core coding it outsources to trusted partners.

You may ask yourself, well, how did I get here?

When asked what transformed Duncan/Channon from a small shop in Marin County to an agency doing work for global clients, Duncan has a two-word answer: "Hard Rock."

Seven years ago, the company whose brand image had grown so lame it was mocked in the film *Ghost World*, Hard Rock had a new CEO, a new chief marketing officer, and was in desperate need of a top-to-bottom brand refresh. Invited to pitch by the CMO, Duncan remembers thinking, "We've been waiting for this all our lives." That insight was followed by the realization, "We had a business in spite of ourselves."

The pitch to Hard Rock included a hardbound brand bible simply called "Word." The little black book of Hard Rock was distributed to 500 property managers at their yearly leadership conferences. Positioning rock 'n' roll as a religion, and Hard Rock as its place of worship was the key insight that led to a revisioning of a stale brand. Instead of selling burgers and trinkets, Hard Rock turned to the essential energy of rock itself to provide nothing less than a transcendent experience for its visitors. Bold? Hell, yeah! But it worked.

A year after the brand book was distributed Duncan says, "We heard our own words coming back to us."

The next steps included making the holy relics of rock 'n' roll

This page: "A not atypical afternoon in The Tip, the agency's penthouse lounge." Anne Elisco-Lemme, art director/creative director; Timothy Archibald, photographer; Faye Champlin, studio artist.

Right (top left and bottom): "Blurb, a service that lets users create and print their own books, needed to distinguish itself from competitors. This campaign positions it as a real champion of photographic and artistic expression. Featuring beautiful and engaging images from photographers around the globe, the ads gently remind readers that they probably already have several books' worth of their own material—from weddings to family photos to travel shots and more. Why not choose the company that offers the most creative freedom?" Anne Elisco-Lemme, art director; Parker Channon, writer; Michael Lemme, creative director/executive creative director; Eliza Lochner, strategist; Stacy Newgent/Richard Schultz, photographers; Faye Champlin, studio artist; Justine Barnes/Andrea Ho, agency producers; Jesse Perry Hankins, senior producer; Jacqueline Fodor, senior integrated producer; Blurb, client.

"We introduced **Blurb's ProLine** in the iPad version of *Popular Photography*. In addition to the messaging from our traditional print campaign, the ad also contained embedded video as well as links to social media." Andrew Pollak, designer; Michael Lemme, creative director/executive creative director; Matthew Higgins, interactive producer; Blurb, client.

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Duncan/Channon

accessible. “With Hard Rock,” Lemme says, “we started with a believable claim: They have the greatest collection of rock ‘n’ roll memorabilia on the planet. Mind bogglingly deep and unquestionably cool.” Unfortunately for most people the collection was, in Lemme’s words, “Conceptual. You couldn’t get at it. And they didn’t have a way to make it accessible.”

Access came in the form of a whizzy new technology Microsoft was about to make public, called Silverlight. Featuring a plug-in called Deep Zoom, Silverlight can display thousands of images at once, and zoom in and out to an almost infinite degree. The effect is astonishing and a perfect use of technology to serve the needs of a vast collection of visually-rich memorabilia. Instead of seeing the collection in pieces, by deploying Silverlight on the web, 1,100 separate items—just a fraction of the collection—of Hard Rock can be displayed on a screen. Just how cool was the feature? Launched at a Microsoft Live Developers Conference in 2008, the Hard Rock Memorabilia collection put eight billion pixels on screen at once, and brought the audience to its feet.

“The next big brand project we took on after Hard Rock was for Duncan/Channon,” Duncan says. “Our thinking was, ‘Let’s see if we can find a way to codify this thing without fucking it up. How can we create a sense of our culture without breaking it?’”

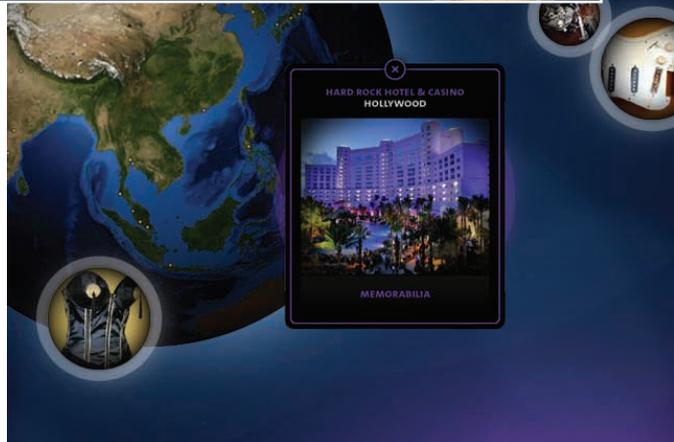
It’s only rock ‘n’ roll. (But I like it.)

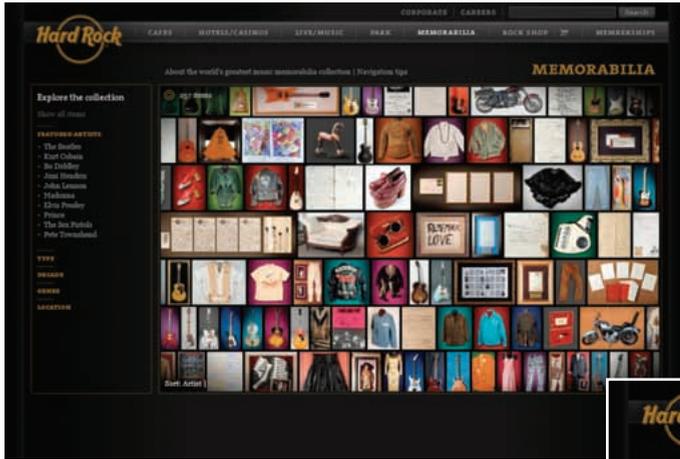
Today, Duncan’s office resembles a college dorm, but with better views. There’s a guitar amp stuffed in one corner and video tripods poke out of a mountain of debris. The walls are bare, except for a five-foot-tall shield made by Duncan’s wife, Ronnie Hoffman, who created it for a gallery show in Los Angeles called *New Heraldry*.

This page: “This **multi-touch, multi-user tabletop** is an extension of the Hard Rock memorabilia site, bringing a new level of fun to rock fans waiting for a table.” Michael Lemme, designer/creative director; Robert Duncan, executive creative director; Vertigo, software development; Hard Rock International, client.

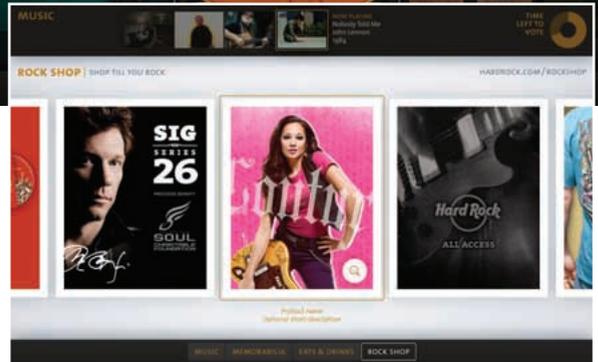
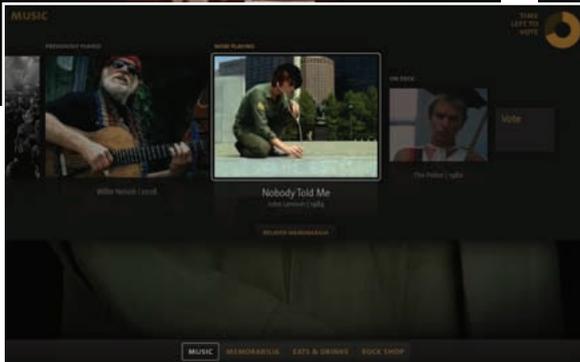
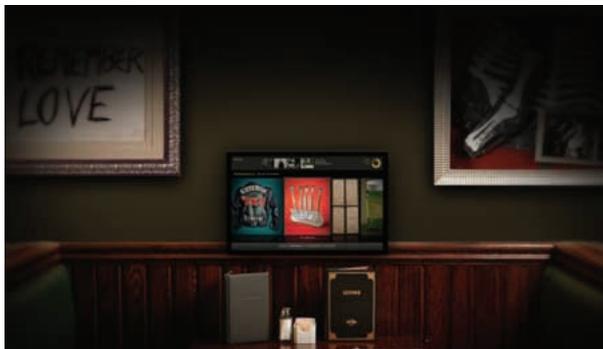
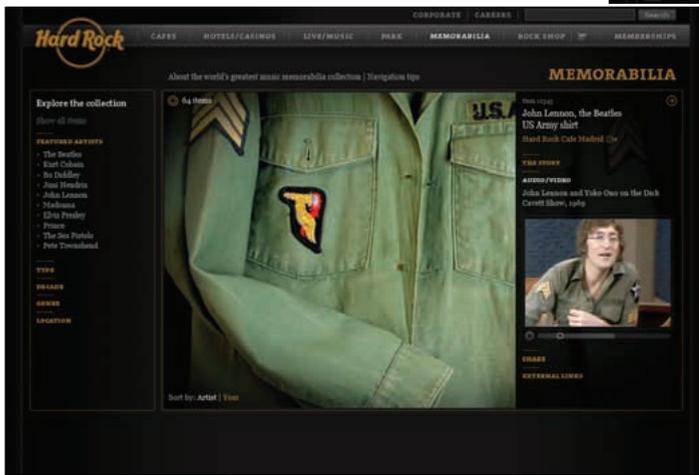
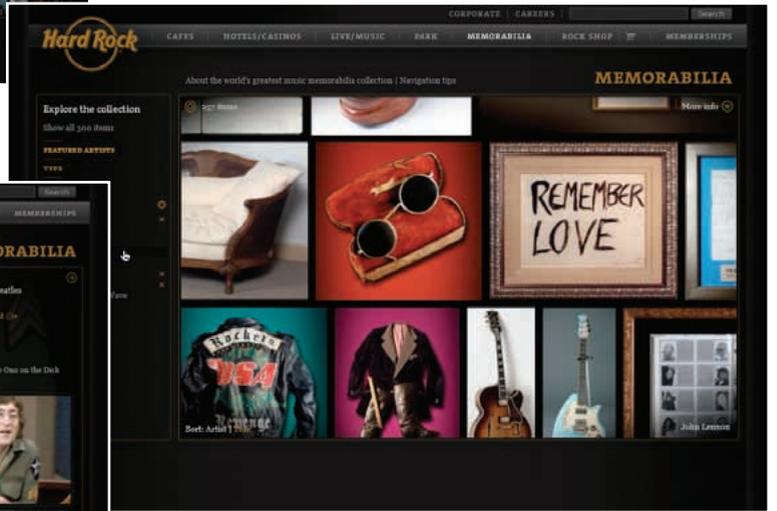
Right: “With 80,000 priceless pieces of rock ‘n’ roll history, **Hard Rock’s memorabilia collection** is second to none. It includes handwritten lyrics from Johnny Cash, guitars from Hank (Sr!), Jimi and Kurt and Bieber’s skateboard. Even a moderate fan is struck dumb by a trip through the memorabilia warehouse. The collection is the brand’s most unique claim to rock authenticity. But it was underexposed. This website and app reminded the world that Hard Rock could be really, really cool.” Robert Duncan/Jeff Nolan, writers; Michael Lemme, designer/creative director; Robert Duncan, executive creative director; Vertigo, software development; Hard Rock International, client.

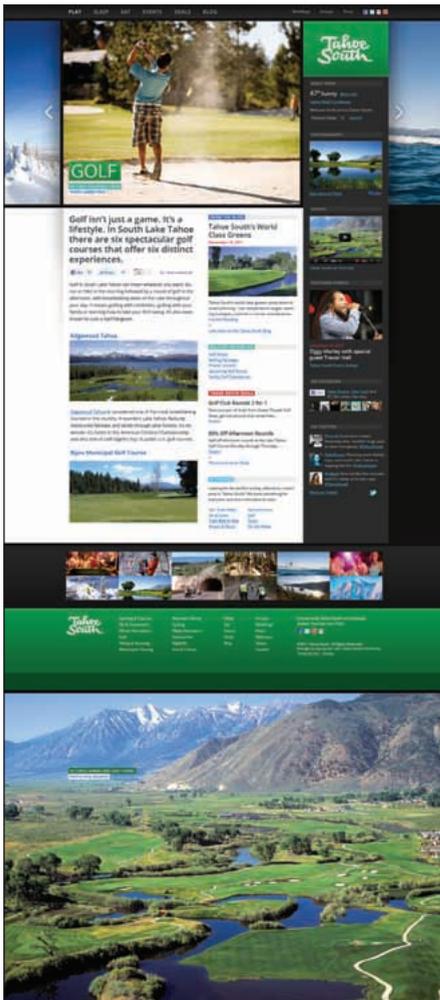
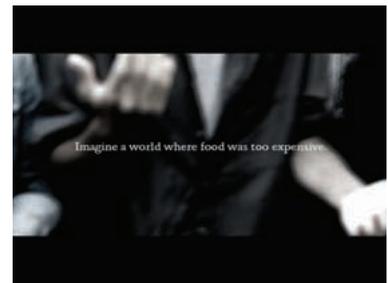
“Also based on the memorabilia website, this interactive screen, in the booths of **Hard Rock Cafes** around the world, shows off the collection and branches out to allow guests to vote on what song comes next on the A/V system or to shop the Rock Shop, for delivery at meal’s end.” Michael Lemme, designer/creative director; Robert Duncan, executive creative director; Vertigo, software development; Hard Rock International, client.





memorabilia.hardrock.com







Duncan/Channon

On a Friday afternoon, Duncan is getting ready for the latest Toast of the Tip talk. First, he has to change into an outfit that looks like it would be right at home in a *fin de siècle* bordello. It's clear he thrives on the culture of guanxi that he and Parker Channon have built.

"We guanxi all our new hires," Duncan says. "We tell them it's about building a relationship with each other, with the audience and with the client. They're just not going to be able to do great work without the client being involved. When a CEO says, 'I trust you guys,' that's how you get big." One of the images in the Duncan/Channon guanxi presentation to new employees is a photo of a wildly grinning Duncan in a headlock applied by the former CMO of Hard Rock Cafe. They look like they're having fun. **CA**

Left: "Unlike most tourism sites," **Tahoe South** (tahoessouth.com) offers a truly interactive experience. A Flickr module allows anyone to upload personal photos. A YouTube player does the same for video. There's a Twitter feed along with live webcams so visitors can see the very latest road conditions." Jesse Perry Hankins, writer; Gabe Ruane, designer; Michael Lemme, creative director/executive creative director; Andrew Peters, user experience planning; Sean Murphy, photographer; Underware, custom logotype; Nobe Studios, web development; Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, client.

"Hunger is a massive problem in this richest of nations. It's also amazingly hard to get people to pay attention to it. This pro-bono spot attempts to convey the misery of hunger and poverty in a new light: Imagine if you went to the grocery store, and prices had dramatically skyrocketed—way beyond your budget."

"Desperate" :30

(Open on a vending machine on the outside of a motel where all of the prices are obscene—\$14 for a bag of chips, etc. A bakery truck drives by. Cut to a butcher shop—the prices are again astronomically high. The bakery truck again passes by. Cut to a 'specials' sign out front of a restaurant—\$350 for a chicken dinner. Cut to a supermarket and the prices of several items—apples for \$11 per pound, chicken soup for \$22 a can, lettuce is selling for \$17 a head)

SFX: Loud people chanting in the distance.

(Cut to the outside of the grocery store where dozens of people are picketing, carrying signs and protesting the high prices. The bread truck from earlier pulls up to the store. The group sees it, and begins moving towards it. As the crowd does, riot police take positions around the truck to guard its contents)

Super: Imagine a world where food was too expensive.

(Cut to a woman, poor, but not homeless, inside the store. She looks at a loaf of bread, realizes that she can't afford it, and puts it back. She walks away)

Super: For 36 million Americans, it is.

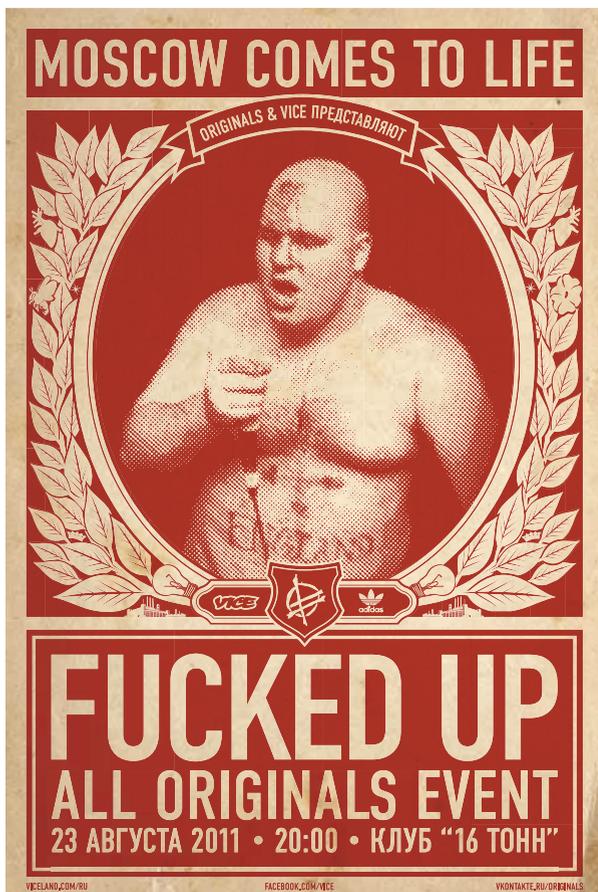
Title Card: Why. WhyHunger.org

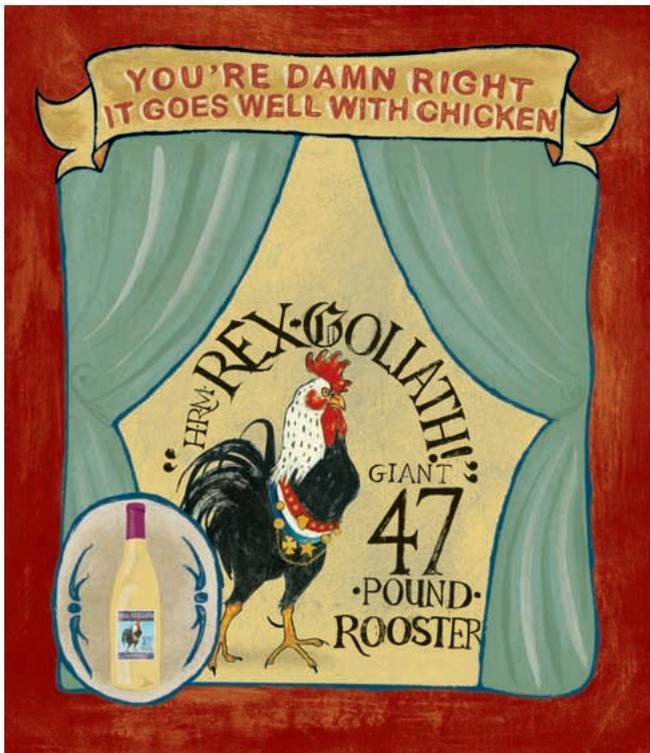
Anncr. (VO): Join us in the fight against hunger and poverty at WhyHunger.org.

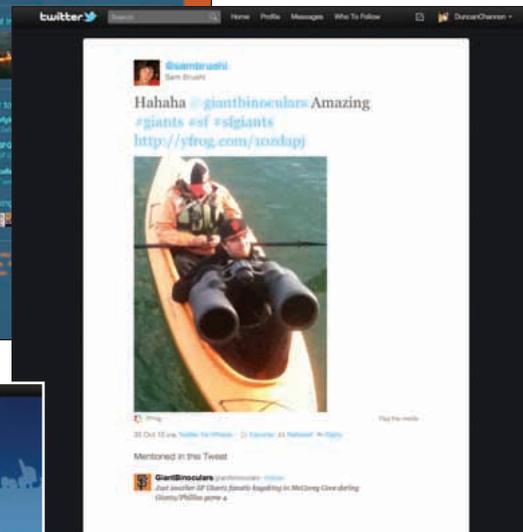
Ken Hall, art director/associate creative director; Dave Knox, writer; Robert Duncan, executive creative director; David Adam Roth, director; Ben Guzman, producer; Marc Hochman, agency producer; Boxer Films, production company; WhyHunger, client.

This page: "What's the fastest way to say '**rock 'n' roll restaurant**' in dozens of languages? It turns out the heavy metal horns (first displayed in a rock context, according to rock historians, by the late Ronnie James Dio) are the Esperanto of hand gestures." Ken Hall, art director/associate creative director; John Munyan, creative director; Robert Duncan, executive creative director; Jacqueline Fodor, senior integrated producer; Hard Rock International, client.

"The iconoclastic global brand has a new division in Russia that's an ongoing D/C client (it's a long story). On the heels of its 'punk rock opera' *David Comes to Life*, the band Fucked Up came to Moscow for the first time for a **Vice-promoted, Adidas-sponsored concert**. The poster boy is singer Damian Abraham. The color palette is echt Russian. The show sold out." Jennifer Moe, designer; Robert Duncan, executive creative director; Vice Russia, client.







Left: “The vineyard for this **new high-end wine** from Kendall-Jackson occupies the site of a nineteenth-century farrier’s shop, where nineteenth-century customers would spend long hours reading the newspaper, waiting for their rides to be repaired. Hmmm, newspapers.” Patrick Nistler, art director; John Munyan, creative director; Robert Duncan, executive creative director; Jessea Perry Hankins, senior producer; Farrier, client.

“It’s safe to say that most everyone knows **Birkenstocks** feel good. Our job was to demonstrate that they now look good as well. This series of print ads stayed true to the brand’s earthy associations while highlighting the sandal’s newfound stylishness.” Anne Elisco-Lemme, art director/creative director; Parker Channon, writer/executive creative director; Andy Berkenfield, strategist; Amy Guip, illustrator; Faye Champlin, studio artist; Jacqueline Fodor, senior integrated producer; Birkenstock USA, client.

“Rather than focus on varietals or terroir, this campaign puts the spotlight on the brand’s namesake: a legendary (possibly fictional) 47-pound rooster aptly named **Rex Goliath**. The ads celebrate both the big, bold bottle as well as the big, bold wine within.” Anne Elisco-Lemme, art director/creative director; Parker Channon, writer/executive creative director; Dennis Clouse, illustrator; Jacqueline Fodor, senior integrated producer; Constellation Wines, client.

This page: “Using a classic B-movie technique called forced perspective, this TV spot highlighted the rather large downside of securing tickets the old-fashioned way versus StubHub.”

“Binoculars” :30

(Open in a suburban den. In the foreground, in focus, a pair of binoculars sits on a table. In the blurry background, a man is about to go out) Anncr. (VO): During the big game, you’ll never miss any of the action with the Berkenfield QR76 Binoculars. The QR76 features fluorite prism lenses, an ergonomic focus and diopter controls. (The man walks towards the table to pick up the binoculars, which are massively oversized) Anncr. (VO): All of which you’ll need because you didn’t buy your tickets on StubHub. (Cut to three guys using StubHub for tickets) Anncr. (VO): For ten years, StubHub has been the place to find great tickets to sports, concerts and more—even on the day of the event and even if it’s sold out. (Cut to the stadium. There are two tunnels—one that reads ‘Field Level’ that heads down, and the other reads ‘Upper Level.’ The three StubHub guys and the man carrying the huge binoculars pass each other on the way to their sections) Title Card/Anncr. (VO): StubHub. (Cut to the man with the binoculars climbing the endless staircase as birds squawk) Anncr. (VO): Where do you want to sit?”

Ken Hall, art director; Dave Knox, writer; Parker Channon, executive creative director; Steven Diller, director; Christine Gomez, executive producer; Station Films, production company; StubHub, client.

“As an adjunct to our binoculars TV spot, we orchestrated a **social media stunt** where we followed the travails of a fan trying to secure tickets to the Giants/Phillies playoff game. After failing, he ends up bobbing around McCovey Cove with giant binoculars in hand.” Dave Knox, writer; Parker Channon, executive creative director; StubHub, client.