

**THE MEDIA BUSINESS**

**Advertising** | Stuart Elliott

**The Director Who Started A Revolution**

ADVERTISING is an industry impelled by the new, so it is no surprise that it cites active practitioners of the craft in a manner that other fields often reserve for posthumous tributes. The latest to be so recognized is Joe Sedelmaier, the director of some of television's best-known, most-honored commercials.

Tomorrow evening, Mr. Sedelmaier will be the subject of a seminar at the Museum of Television and Radio, at 25 West 52d Street in Manhattan. Through humorous spots like the fast-talking man for Federal Express; "Where's the beef?" for Wendy's, and a series for Alaska Airlines that spoofs the "flights from hell" of rival carriers, he has revolutionized the form and content of commercials. "Clara Peller would have been booted from 9 out of 10 casting calls," said Bob Garfield, advertising critic of Advertising Age, referring to the elderly actress whose bellowed query "Where's the beef?" captivated consumers and became a catch phrase in the mid-1980's.

Beginning in the 1970's, Mr. Sedelmaier (pronounced SAID-el-meyer), a former art director and producer for J. Walter Thompson and Young & Rubicam, gained notice for fundamentally changing the way television spots were cast and filmed. He replaced the actors who seemed like plastic, too-perfect mannequins with offbeat people like Ms. Peller, a woman "of a certain age," whose deafness caused her to shout.



John Moschitta was the fast-talking man in the humorous commercial, for Federal Express, part of the body of work for which Joe Sedelmaier will be honored.

And he directed them in a manner that emphasized exaggeration for effect — strange expressions; loopy, loping walks; speeded-up or slowed-down movements — doing for television advertising what directors like Preston Sturges did for Hollywood comedies.

"I've learned more from him than from anyone I've ever worked with," said Cliff Freeman, who joined forces with Mr. Sedelmaier on the Wendy's account during Ms. Peller's heyday.

So crucial were Mr. Sedelmaier's lessons to "have control over my work," Mr. Freeman added, "I even started my agency." Mr. Freeman is chairman and executive creative director of Cliff Freeman & Partners in New York.

Still, advertising must have been what Cole Porter was thinking of when he wrote the lyric "Too hot not to cool down." Campaigns are often pulled by clients and agencies that tire of them long before consumers do. And the

impetus for change means that directors like Mr. Sedelmaier, who work in a single, easily recognizable style, soon find themselves perceived as the flavor of a previous month. Today's cutting-edge creativity thus often becomes the subject of tomorrow's retrospective.

Diffusing the impact of Mr. Sedelmaier's work, Mr. Garfield says, is a spate of mimics who try to duplicate the look of his commercial casts and their exaggerated behavior.

"The complete Sedelmaier is far more than that," Mr. Garfield said, "but the gawking, slack-jawed, barely moving actor has been seized upon by imitators." Mr. Sedelmaier is philosophical about his clones. "Originality is the art of concealing your sources," he said in a telephone interview from Chicago, where his company, Sedelmaier Film Productions Inc., is based. One clue he offers to spotting fake "Sedelmaiers," as his spots have been called collectively, is that imitators have their actors do double takes, while "my guys play it straight."

Mr. Sedelmaier, who is 58 years old, makes it clear that while he is delighted about being honored by a museum, he is nowhere near ready to enter one himself. He continues to shoot about 30 commercials a year, for national and local advertisers in this country, like Alaska Airlines, the General Motors Acceptance Corporation and Timex, as well as for marketers in Britain.

At an average fee of \$45,000 to \$60,000 for each commercial, depending on complexity, Mr. Sedelmaier remains one of the highest-paid directors in the industry.

Mr. Sedelmaier is aware of suggestions that modifying his trademark style might be better for business. "You have to have a point of view," he said. "Some people go with that and some don't."

Agencies that don't, he added with a laugh, "just don't use me."