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GORDON COOKE

The Bloomingdale Interviews
by Estelle Ellis

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GORDON COOKE
Interviewed by Estelle Ellis

Side 1 - 1
November 5, 1986

Q. We're talking about Marvin Traub.

As you know, Mr. Cooke, he is being awarded a ...Very simply, he is the man who we say makes the difference. He is one man who makes a difference. It's one thing for us to give him the award, and it's another thing to get people to tell us what makes him that man who makes the difference to them.

A. Well, in speaking about Marvin...I've worked for Marvin now for nine years. I've known him for a lot longer than that, but I've had the pleasure of reporting directly to him for the last nine years. The quality, I think, which sets him apart...I've worked for Abe Finkelstein, who was the first recipient...I think what Marvin does is he's willing to take a chance on virtually anything; that he is willing to roll the dice. He is not afraid of failure, he is not afraid of something thinking it might have been a silly idea. He is just absolutely willing to stick his neck out and take any opportunity for risk and innovation, if it keeps Bloomingdale's in the forefront of retailing. And I think he's... his percentages have been very high in being successful at that. He encourages his staff to look to see what is happening in the world; to find out what the trends are and to interpret those trends into merchandising. People Magazine, I think, declared Bloomingdale's as having...being the only

store with an independent foreign policy. Marvin is...

Q. I never heard that! That's wonderful!

A. Oh, yeah. It's a wonderful quote...

Q. It's a wonderful quote. He was quoted at the time that Bloomingdale's signed the trade agreement with China, prior to the United States having signed a trade agreement with China. So...

Q. Do you remember the New Yorker cartoon that showed these two men with the factories behind them in China?

A. (inaudible)

Q. Yes! I love it, I love it.

A. Yes. Well, that quote came out and we really (although we laughed because it's funny), to a large degree we really do think we are the symbol of American retailing for the rest of the world, and we do our country promotions, which were a result of Marvin's inspiration, and are indicative of how we took it beyond putting a travel poster on the main floor of a store and buying the products that already existed and bringing them into the country. I think that Marvin wanted (to his credit), when the Bloomingdale entourage goes overseas (and they laugh about us as 'pouring out of buses' one after another, not believing how many of us there are), one of the things he tries to make sure to do is make sure that we travel together. And the reason is that he feels that the home furnishing people should be looking at what the fashion people are doing, and the fashion people should

be looking at what the home furnishing people are doing. An example, I think, of this, is when we were in Ireland, we were going to a traditional knitter of Irish sweaters, and the home furnishing people were in tow. And I think any other store would not have probably (what they thought would have) wasted their executive's time to do this duplicated effort. But the home furnishing man looked at the looms and asked if there was a potential that they could possibly loom bedspreads and use the traditional knits but do the size of a bedspread. And the man, who had never ever done that before, said he thought they could, and we ended up introducing hand-knit bedspreads for the Irish promotion. I think would never have occurred if we wouldn't have traveled en masse and seen what was going on in the other people's areas. So, Marvin is very much of the fact that not only should we do this in a commercial sense, but we should be doing this in a cultural sense. And that when we travel, we're the first group that's into the museums and wants to know what shows are happening, what is the newest restaurant, what are the trends in design?

Being in the advertising area, I can tell you he encourages us to find out what is on the cutting edge, whether it be old masters, who are doing things that might be new (shopping bags are great examples. Michael raised a shopping bag for us last New Year's which was by a very contemporary Village Greenwich artist), so we're willing to take someone who has no name who has something we think is unique and

wonderful, or we're willing to go back to a photographer like Horst and get him back into doing fashion photography, which he had really not done for 30 years, in terms of commercial.

Q. Your first lingerie, a first collector's item.

A. Well, or Guy Bordin, for "Sighs and Whispers," a very difficult man to work with, highly creative. We took the chance with Guy Bordin, because in that case he did not allow us to look at the photography prior to the printing.

Q. Or even to hire the models, as I remember...

A. We were not allowed on the shoot, we had nothing to do with it. He sent the prints directly to the printer, and we were printing a book that we did not know what it looked like. It was controversial, it did go out in a brown wrapper, in the mail. And yet, you know, luckily, it was a phenomenal success, and probably revolutionized the apparel industry.

Q. It gave Limited an idea of why they should get into the lingerie business.

A. Right. And it has changed, I think, the whole look of the industry in total, from just designing it as a basic wear necessity into being a fashion industry, and it spawned our lower level--where lingerie was at that point in time--into fashion.

No, Marvin I think is one of the most highly creative people I've ever worked with, and the fact is that he encourages an environment that to the industry looks very unstructured, a little bit unruly but allows for creativity

and innovation to exist.

We have one of the largest staffs of non-buying people in our home furnishing and apparel fashion departments. Julian Tomchin and Kal Ruttenstein head up two very, very large divisions of people whose responsibility is to go around the world and find out what is happening and how to interpret it and...

Q. What are their titles?

A. They are both senior vice presidents of fashion for home furnishings and for apparel. And in most stores, you would be lucky if you had four or five people in total. I believe their staffs number somewhere between 30 and 40.

Q. Well, that's a critical difference.

A. And that is the main difference, I think, in terms of the exclusivity of product, of our ability to not just buy from lines but to develop...

And I think the other fact is that although they report to general merchandise managers, I like to refer to it (it's probably bad for the archives, but), the Bloomingdale regime is something of a benevolent dictatorship. Marvin likes to be involved in everything and he has an eye for almost everything. And I think one of the advantages of a benevolent dictatorship is that a division like the fashion office or a division like sales promotion has much more clout in Bloomingdale's and authority, and many of the things that our fashion office people find in other stores would be killed

by the merchants because they were too conservative and they wanted to protect the gross margin, and they were worried about profits, and they did not...would not allow the fashion divisions to dictate to them what was happening, and to be on that cutting edge, and to take the markdowns if necessary. Bloomingdale's, because of Marvin, allows people like Kal Ruttenstein, Julian Tomchin and myself to have a little bit more authority and power. And as such, the merchandise division listens to us, and we take the chances and we take the risks, and on occasion we take the markdowns. But it's all done with knowing that up front. And I think that, again, in retailing today, too many stores are becoming similar, and there are very few pioneers that are left in the industry. Abe Finkelstein obviously was one. His characteristics and talents are somewhat different than Marvin's. But Marvin is definitely one of the last breed of entrepreneurs that... You know, the store is in many ways a reflection of his own style and personality.

Q. Talk about his style and personality.

A. Well, he's very hands-on. He likes to read my smallest ads and look at my largest campaigns. He cares what wine is being served at our black-tie galas that we open our promotions with, how many bars we have, how many bartenders, what the sound system is like. He is very detail oriented without losing sight of the big picture. Sometimes I think that people who are very detail oriented do not understand,

you know, the total project. Marvin has the amazing ability to look at the total project and then study every minute detail. He is tireless, and he has a reputation in the industry of that. He gets up earlier than all of us and he goes to bed later than all of us. And seems to enjoy every minute of it. So he has an incredible energy.

Q. And a sense of concentration. To focus on what he's doing.

A. Oh, yes. He spends a lot of time with his direct reports in meetings, to say this is where we're going and this is what we're going to do. And while he gives us the freedom to do it all, at the same time he doesn't let us feel that he isn't conscious of knowing what we're doing and where we are.

Q. I'm curious about something. Barbara said it, and you have said it in a different way. And, perhaps, a kinder way. You said you work...you move in groups and you go into a country in groups. And she used the word "we work as a team." And, you know, that word is often a signal that says consensus, mediocrity, averaging out, no one taking responsibility for any real star difference.

A. Right.

Q. What's the mystique here? How do you work as a team and not create a camel?

A. Well, I think the team is really the fact that as a group we push off in a direction, and we're together at the critical point at which an idea is engendered or a project

is begun. But once that has started, and we're a team at doing that, we really go out on our own and then one month later meet back and say, "Well, what have you done?" And what have you done and what have you done...

Things as...You know, in country promotions there is usually an overall design that ties into the country. The product people need that very early on because they're going to incorporate it into the product design. Well, the sales promotion division may be going off on one tack of a design that they have in mind, the fashion office, both home furnishings and apparel may be going two different directions for their...Marvin may have one direction....Someone, in terms of the next meeting, will come in and have...be in the leadership position of having the best design at that point. I think that, because we're all somewhat equal, we go into these...And I think our egos are not in the way of who wins, and I think Marvin helps...It takes a great leader to be able to massage the egos of a lot of creative talent. And I think that what he feels is that the...You know, good design and good things shouldn't be at the expense of egos and we should work together to see that we're not afraid that somebody else's idea, although it came from an area that's not ours, you know, and we should have it, that we shouldn't be offended by that. And that takes a great amount of tact. It's not easy, but we do touch base from time to time through the process to see what else is going on. Display may have one direction of what they're doing and we may

have one. Somehow it has to tie together. I think the team effort is really the fact that we're all on board and we're all focused on what the attempt, the final result is going to be. But we definitely work independently while we're getting there.

Q. What's the difference between what used to be conceived of as the international connection that Nieman Marcus was able to achieve, with what started with its French Fortnight, and which they made a classical part of super promotion retailing? And your approach to the whole international scene?

A. Are you talking just on the country promotions?

Q. No..

A. In any part of them...?

Q. No, in terms of what we're now talking about, which is bringing to the store the best of a country...What's the difference?

A. Well, I think much of our day to day business is done in international fashion, so we are bringing countries to our departments every day. We focus on a country and pick a country or group of countries because we feel that if we concentrate on something we're going to find a tremendous number of new resources. I think when we did Ireland, out of the 350 resources that we utilized, 175 of them had never exported to the United STATES before. Not just not sold Bloomingdale's, but never exported to the United States.

What we're in effect doing is creating an industry.

And if we didn't have a focus of 180 Bloomingdale people traveling to the country over a period of five or six months, you would not have that kind of concentrated effort and get that amount of newness and innovation happening at any given time. And it multiplies on itself. We are continually looking around the world to find new ideas and new products and new manufacturers. But to be able to concentrate on one small region of the world for a very short period of time...When Bloomingdale's sets all those resources that it has, and the quality of it at one time, we just get tremendous end results. And one of the reasons we had done the country promotions initially was that it made our store, in effect, look like Christmas for a 6-7 week period, initially in the spring, for the first two promotions we ever did. But we transferred the major one quickly into the fall, to occur in mid-September to November, and in the competitive retail scene, mid-September, Bloomingdale's looked like a Christmas store, and the traffic level started to increase dramatically. The first country we ever did, where we had not done one before, was China, and we saw a tremendous increase in the traffic level and in the sales level, and we realized, in effect, we were setting up our stores with display and promotion that in the past stores had only allocated to the Christmas season, the month of December, or post-Thanksgiving. And that was we felt a great edge we had on our competition.

Unlike Nieman's, which does a fortnight in one store--

they only do it in their downtown store and they do it for two weeks--We do a seven week promotion in 16 stores. We open them all with galas. We have major presentations and exhibits in all the stores. That is very different than what Nieman Marcus does.

Q. Had done.

A. And is doing. There is rumor that their last fortnight is their last fortnight. That they will not be continuing the fortnights.

They used it primarily as a public relations event getter and news vehicle. We did not look at it that way initially. We looked at it as a means of developing new, exclusive product, and to continue to utilize these resources over a period of time. Bloomingdale's gets knocked off very quickly, as we all know, and it is very difficult for people to come in as quickly as we do and it takes time for them to get int. By the time they're in, we're moving on. Out of the 175 new resources that sent products to the United States to Bloomingdale's from Ireland, I think we did the following year business with 50 of those 175. So...It became an ongoing. Now, that number may be smaller now, because you can't just keep multiplying resources, but in every case, a few resources and manufacturers stick with us. So, maybe we ended up with five new ones from Ireland and five new ones from China and five new ones from Japan and five new ones from the Philippines, so over a period of time...And we've done, oh, about 15 country

promotions now, if you've got five new great resources in each of those countries you're talking about 75 new resources for the Bloomingdale family, which most American stores have not picked up on. That's the edge that we feel we have in both merchandising and promotion.

Q. Has someone kept a tally on these 15 countries?

A. No.

Q. Because that would be a critical part of a presentation in which you're talking about 15 countries, how many people went--talk about archives!

A. Right.

Q. How many people went? How many resources were developed? It's like working with a developing country.

A. Oh, sure.

Q. And then what remained? I mean that, historically, would be...

A. Well, there's one story that another person found. It's a Bloomingdale story but Peter Glenn, who is a great motivator and student of the retail environment, decided to come in, unbeknownst to us, and study our Japanese promotion that was going on, because he's a fan of Japanese design and creativity. And, for a presentation out in Chicago to 1,500 retailers, he had done a study on Bloomingdale's, and he came in with his little camera and he had studied everything...He had asked at one point, when he had taken a picture of Howard Goldfeder eating a pear that was in its own gift box and

wrapped in paper, he was fascinated by this item and he decided to try to find out how we had developed the pear in its own gift box. And he went...He asked me and he went to the person who...Bill Hyde, who is in fact the fashion coordinator for food. And his job, not direct buying, but to go around and develop new food products and packaging them for the food department.

He had gone to Japan and had looked at all the products he could bring in and found that, literally, he could get no fresh produce or fruit brought into America; that he worked for six months on getting anything into the country. And that was his job, day in day out, trying to get fresh product from Japan in. Finally, after six months of negotiating in Washington with the trade, he was allowed to bring in a pear. And he didn't...At that point...To the Japanese, you know, giving food is a great symbol and a great gift, and he decided that it would be put in tissue and be wrapped in a box and it would have a story. I think it sold for \$2, for one pear to bring in, and I think we had ordered...I think the most we could bring in was something like 2,400, and they were sold out in the first two days.

But this man, who spent six months working on anything, was proud to get a \$2 pear. Now, if you're in a typical retail store, you will not allow your people to devote that amount of time and energy to the end result being a pear. At Bloomingdale's, it was considered a success to have achieved

that. So there's a great difference here in how Marvin (and the Bloomingdale management) evaluates a person's contribution to the store. Being able to bring into it things that create a difference is a reward in itself. It does not... Eventually it will be bottom line. We are a public corporation, we've got to earn money. But, there are many ways in which to do that, and our way is to keep doing the things that make us a store like no other.

Q. And that is the central thematic.

A. Absolutely. Well, a "store like no other" at first (which was a line that Marvin originated, a line). When, I think, I first joined Bloomingdale's, and it had just started to be used, I didn't fully understand because to me it sounded like an ad cliché and I was a little skeptical of utilizing the line in promotion. I still may even be a little skeptical about how often we use it. However I got to know that it was actually the way we ran our business; that we believed we were a store like no other; that it was an awful bit of bravado to have to live up to. And to have to set that out in stone and then say how do we achieve it, which is our ongoing mission, we do believe in change for change's sake. I mean, not many people do. We do.

We are highly criticized for not having a standardized format in advertising. We're very proud we do not have a standardized format in advertising, because we believe that each message we are putting forth deserves to be treated as

an individual message. We do not...

Q. It's more expensive to produce that way.

A. Extremely. We don't run anything twice. We don't have a standard layout and design. We have a style. A definite style.

Q. Let's talk about the style. What is the criteria. What is the aesthetic? What is the style? What is the unique thing that sets it apart?

A. I think that, like a lot of stores, we do believe in quality. A high degree of quality in our advertising. By which I mean to say we will use only what we consider the top photographers, the top artists. We want ones that are...We give them a creative platform from which to operate. We don't dictate to them what they have to do. We tell them the objective, and we tell them we're hiring their talents to resolve the problem. It's obvious that that doesn't happen with many of the retail stores with many of the creative people, because we find them very eager to work for us, where they don't work for other clients, and that's because we involve them in the creative solving of the problem. And they don't get that from other people. They get "We want what we've seen you do already." We're willing to let them change. We're hiring them for their talent. We want to listen to them. We just give them what the objective is, and then we work with them to see that it comes about. And they're willing to do things with us they would never do with anyone else, because we

give them that leverage.

Q. You do the same thing with your own people.

A. Oh, definitely. I think Marvin, with his direct reports, and I think most of us, that are his direct reports, treat our own people that way. We very much are willing to let them take a chance and make mistakes. And we do make mistakes. But I do think that, you know, the style we have is we want to be the first to try something. Always want to be the first. Not in bad taste, we do not want to try something in bad taste. It has to be high standards, high quality, but we like to be very innovatative. We like to find out what is happening out there and can we be the first to experiment with it. It became clichéish only because of the success of it. But when we did....I'm blocking it out..."Chariots of Fire." That movie was only in one movie theatre in New York when it first broke. It was done by a commercial photographer-director from England. We happened to see it one day and we just decided to take the entire ad department over, because we thought it was a great artistic piece.

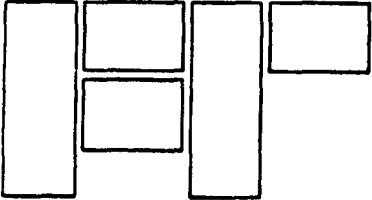
So we took them over. My creative director decided that the men's division should see it. So we arranged a private screening for the men's division. We then said we wondered if the stars would be willing to model in it. At that point it was an unknown movie. No one knew about it. And we did Ian Charlson and Ben Cross....

Q. Great.

A. And then we said, "Who should photograph it?"
Lord Snowden.

 Now that, in retrospect, looks like a bandwagon, because if you didn't know that we had seen it prior to the movie ever being nominated...The campaign ran prior to the movie ever being nominated and before it was released across the United States.

 Well, we wanted to know what was happening, and we just are out there at every moment to find out what trends are occurring and can we pick up on it? . . .
(speed distortion on tape becomes impossible at this point...)



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