RALPH REVEALED.

Ralph Ammirati. Founder, co-chairman and creative director, Ammirati & Puris, one of the most respected advertising agencies of the decade. This quiet-spoken son of Queens, N.Y., has become a king in the creative world -- and a thoughtful, articulate voice for the enduring strength of the exceptional idea. Here, from a recent conversation, are Ralph's views on the art of advertising.

On beginnings:
"As a child, I always loved to draw. I took an advertising course in high school and was pretty good at it. After two years in the Marines, I went to work for Erwin Wasey doing paste-ups. I did mechanicals during the day -- and went to Pratt Institute at night. I'd take the subway in, attend classes, go back to Queens to sleep, then start all over again the next morning."

On early days:
"My first few agency jobs were with delightful people -- but the advertising fell a bit short. Then in 1966 I joined Carl Ally. That's where the light went on: this, I knew, was where I belonged. It was that rare intersection between dreams and reality, an agency where the quality of the work came above all else. At Ally, I teamed up with Marty Puris. Over the years, the two of us talked about starting our own agency. It happened in partnership with Y&R -- although that didn't last, since we wanted the same kind of accounts Y&R wanted."

On the big break:
"When BMW called, we had enough cash for another 14 days. Sure, we were lucky to get the business before the money ran out. But we were smart, too. From the start, we said that if we didn't get the right kind of business, we'd just chuck it. We didn't want an agency with 200 clients, billing $25 million. Our aim was to be a blue-chip agency."

On agency size:
"When we won BMW, we were less than a dozen people. Size wasn't the issue, or we wouldn't have beaten two major agencies for the business. We had two things going for us. First, enormous import car experience -- Volvo and Fiat. And, second, the client knew we'd do the work. That's our strength: better talent, more involvement from the top, a commitment from the top people."

On BMW:
"The car owns performance. But BMW has to reach for the higher end, to sell the upscale audience that wants luxury. The import market is fierce; brands nip at us from below and above. So there's a need to move faster, get results quicker."

On the cost of advertising:
"Good ads cost no more than bad ads. The difference is the strength of the idea. Good ideas are rare -- you don't see many in any medium. Look for the good idea. That's what makes the medium worth the money it costs."

On the good stuff:
"The good stuff explains, clearly and simply and persuasively, what the product is, what it does, what it means to the consumer. Few ads manage to do this. Even rarer is the good campaign, the one that does it, time after time, year after year."

On creative discipline:
"Start with the right strategy. And follow that strategy relentlessly. We don't have a bunch of people just doing ads. We are structured and disciplined -- and every job follows a step-by-step procedure. The client? Our partner in the process. So when we present the advertising, there's no surprise in terms of direction and strategy. Those have already been agreed on. What's new is the execution; the style, the personality, the feel of the advertising."

On chemistry:
"Chemistry is 50% of the agency-client relationship. When it's wrong, the relationship won't work. Not long ago, we won an account over five or six good agencies. We followed our process. But when it came to execution, we and the client were worlds apart. So we said, 'enough.' The issue isn't who's right or who's wrong. If the chemistry doesn't work, you have to recognize the fact."

On The Wall Street Journal:
"When we have an important announcement to make for a client, The Journal is the perfect place to be. For our clients, it's simply the fastest way to their most important customers. From a creative point of view, The Journal has enormous strengths. And it's so clean and beautifully designed -- well, it's one publication where you don't feel as though you're walking through graffiti. That's why it's the only place I'd want to do a horizontal half page. Journal quality is no accident. It's obvious. The Journal's
accident. It's obvious the journal's people must be as fanatical about providing their readers with a great publication as we are with providing our clients with great ads.