example of how an animator, through talent and self-sacrifice, can create the samples needed to begin a successful new career.

When a script comes in from an ad agency, the first thing PES does is assess the materials and decide if he's interested in the project. "The most important thing to me is a strong core idea, something that interests me creatively. I also look at the project's budget (which is usually sent with the materials) and decide whether or not I can deliver the kind of film that I want to make for the money or whether it will be a long road of creative compromises due to financial constraints. Lastly, I look at the budget to know how much money I can hope to make from a project and how much work it will require from me (two weeks? six weeks? three months?). Only then can I make an informed decision about whether or not an idea is worth my time and energy," the director says.

When a director decides to engage on a project, the first thing his producer does is set up a conference call with the ad agency, which includes the agency creative team, the agency producer, maybe a creative director, and even some account people. PES explains that this is an important call because it is when he gets to talk to the agency for the first time about the idea and ask questions that he thinks are relevant to the project. "Sometimes I test their receptivity to some of my ideas, trying to determine what kind of people I am dealing with. Sometimes, if I don't like what I hear and start seeing red flags, I pull out of a project and say simply, 'Thanks for considering me, but I don't think we are on the same page creatively.' At the same time, on this call, the agency is feeling me out for the first time as a director. Do they like me? Do I have good ideas? Do we connect or not?"

PES' description of how a producer and director test their compatibility is relevant to just about anyone seeking a job in animation. The

working relationship is always a two-way street. I'm reminded of one of my dad's experiences on a job interview in advertising some decades back. My dad was already an accomplished and successful art director when he found himself at a job interview where the prospective boss concluded a job offer with, "For the next three months we'll be watching you to see if you're the kind of employee we want." My dad replied, "And I'll be watching you to see if you're the kind of employer I want." My dad didn't get the job, but the honest exchange at the meeting helped both parties suss each other out. The best time to do this is always before both parties decide to work together.

"There are hundreds of judgments made on these preliminary phone meetings, mostly unspoken, that help move the project forward or not," says PES. "As the saying goes, you only get one chance to make a good first impression. You've got to be able to read people and have good instincts, know how to respond to situations and think on your feet. So, good people skills are an absolute requirement. You must not only communicate your ideas clearly and succinctly, you must know when to talk and when to listen. Many directors never get the hang of it. It can be a real stumbling block." PES' experience effectively bears out this book's message that people skills are at the heart of any successful animation director, helping one not only direct a crew to complete a project, to a set vision, and schedule, but also to, perhaps, secure the job in the first place.

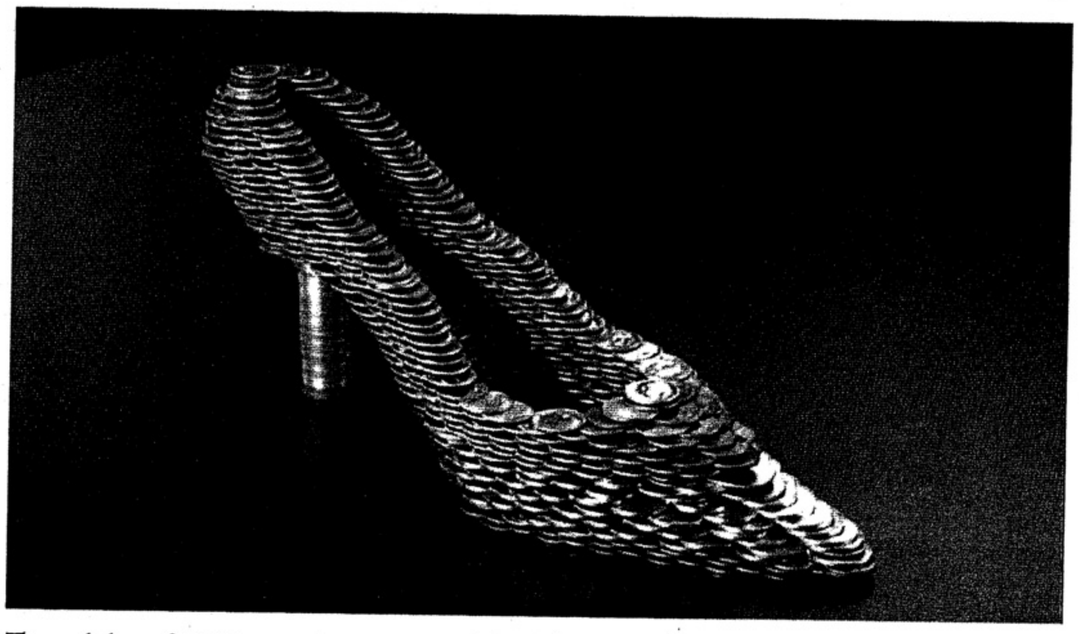
The next step, assuming the conference call goes well, is for the director to write up a treatment or pitch. PES defines this stage as a written explanation of how you propose to shoot the commercial, saying, "This written document is anywhere from one to twenty pages and sometimes contains visual references to help explain something—a mood for the film, a look for the lighting, an object to play a role, a location that you see as appropriate, etc. I usually get a few days to develop my ideas after

the conference call, so the treatment is where I crystallize my approach and lay it out for the agency to consider. I will get the job or lose it largely based on this treatment. So, a director can benefit greatly from being a good writer. It's a skill that is tested every single time you pitch on a job."

Sometimes a director is asked to show a short visual test as a treatment. It might be some finished designs, a partial animatic, or a bit of animation. Mike Overbeck prefers to pitch a short animation test because it gives the client an idea of what the spot will look like in motion. He adds, "It also tells me how much time each shot will take and what needs to be done to get each shot done." Sometimes when more than one animation director is bidding on the job, they will each be asked to submit a pitch to certain specifications. Depending on the situation, these spec pitches may be paid or unpaid. No matter what, the end result will not guarantee that the director will get the final job.

Pre-Production

Let's say you've won the agency over with your telephone charisma and dazzled them with your ideas on paper and they give you the job! Thus starts the pre-production process. The first thing you need is a crew. "As the director, you're in charge of hiring the right people and instructing them what to do. You're the guy that needs to have an answer to every question. If you don't know the answer to a question, you must figure out who you need to talk to," says PES. "No one on a commercial production does anything unless you, the director, tell them. All those millions of dollars are riding on your shoulders, so don't fuck it up. They'll never hire you again if you don't deliver. Worse, they'll tell other agencies how bad you were and those people will never hire you. Welcome to the pressures of being a director. You'll get paid well, but you'll work your ass off for it and you'll shoulder most of the responsibility."



The end shot of PES' innovative commercial for Coinstar. Laundry money never looked so good. Image courtesy of the artist.

Being in pre-production also means that you now have to further develop your original treatment. Mike Overbeck explains that going through an agency, you are often given a pretty specific art direction, a script, and sometimes rough boards. "But, sometimes you're given a script with [the note] 'just make it look edgy,'" he says. In PES' experience, in pre-production, you work out your ideas about what shots are necessary to shoot. "You lay out the film, possibly restructuring it to incorporate new thoughts you have. You hire a storyboard artist to hash them out on paper so you can explain yourself visually to the agency—you must get them on board with your approach," he says. And, once again the oft-repeated "people skills," rear their ugly head, as PES describes needing them to build trust with the agency and convince them that your ideas are solid and well thought out.

The director is not alone in being responsible for all creative execution on a commercial. The agency creative team (usually an art director and a copywriter under the wing of a creative director) will have ideas of their

own that they want to add. "If you don't like their ideas, PES adds, "you will have to try to explain to them why you think they don't work and propose something different . . . always being diplomatic about the way you communicate. In the end, sometimes you will win this tug-of-war, sometimes you will lose. Just because the agency has hired you as the director doesn't mean they automatically think you are right. You'll have to convince them over and over and over again . . . the concept for the commercial is their idea, after all, not yours. You're just captain of the ship, not the owner."

According to J. J. Sedelmaier it is in the interest of the director to talk and collaborate with everyone involved because it can help avoid being confronted with eleventh-hour opinions that may result in unnecessary revisions. And before I can say "people skills" (say, this could be the start of a really fun drinking game as you read this book), PES reminds, "You have to be good at bringing people around to how you see things without them knowing it. You have to be clever and sometimes crafty. And you have to be nice or you won't get far. I believe one of the essential skills in directing commercials is being able to break down your creative 'battles' into 'A battles' and 'B battles.' Know which points of creative contention are really worth fighting for, and which ones are battles that you could lose and still shoot a good film." He elaborates, "For instance, you might be willing to compromise on the color of a set wall since it won't really affect the overall impact of the spot, but not willing to abandon that close-up shot you feel is necessary to give the story some comic relief."

PES has been a frequent guest in my School of Visual Arts career class, where he has been helping to inspire class after graduating class. One enlightening story I always ask PES to tell regards a switcheroo he did on a commercial in order to preserve his vision. A prop he'd made filthy was purposely going to provide comic relief but he had a gut feeling that the

client was going to ask him make the prop less filthy, thus rendering it much less funny. PES made the prop even filthier to start in understanding that the client would see it, ask for it to be toned down, and thereby give the director exactly what he wanted. That's just how it played out and the resulting scene in the nationally aired commercial never failed to get a laugh, making a fine example of PES delicately bringing the client around to see things his way, with the end result ensuring that the commercial was the winner.

"You must not be afraid to stand your ground and push back a little—as long as you do it diplomatically," adds PES. "Commercials are compromises. Your job as a commercial director is to try to prevent catastrophic compromises. You must be prepared to lose several battles in an effort to win the war. And you must keep your cool despite the frustrations and setbacks. If you are looking for 'artistic' satisfaction in this process, then you may have the wrong impression about what it means to be a commercial director. Directing commercials is a business, not an art," he warns.

The next stage, once the agency has agreed with your creative approach to the commercial, is to draft a set of detailed shooting boards which demonstrate the shot list, camera angles, and any lens notes (for a live-action element). PES says shooting boards are an important creative tool for you, the director, to work out the kinks, but it also serves the important role of solidifying exactly what you intend to shoot so that everyone on the agency and client side are 100 percent in the loop. "And this is important because, come shoot day, the last thing in the world you want is to have creative discussions with the agency and client about what you are shooting," he cautions. A shoot is similar to the meter running in the world's most expensive taxicab so, according to PES, you simply cannot afford it: time is precious if you are to come in on budget. "You've

had weeks to toss ideas around with the agency. The shoot day should simply be about executing the idea, getting the shots in the can. There is no space for second-guessing and you must be careful not to let the agency's comments throw you off your feet," he says.

PES explains the next critical component of the director's job is the management of the dozens of people you've employed along the way during pre-production to help bring the idea to life—(in a spot that includes live-action, these crew members can include prop builders, model-makers, production designers, location scouts, wardrobe people, stylists, and so on. J. J. Sedelmaier says that he tries to sniff out any problems early enough so the crew isn't jerked around. He calls it guiding stuff into place as it is happening rather than changing or redoing the work. PES adds, "These are your people, your team. There can be dozens of them all preparing different aspects of production leading up to the shoot—building things, painting things, sourcing things—anything you can think of. And every single one of them will be looking to you for direction. You'll need to be able to inspire them constantly, excite them, make them want to give you their best work, and help them deal with setbacks and frustrations."

Not only is the crew standing by to execute your vision, it can also be a source of other valuable ideas. But, PES explains, it's ultimately your job as director to decide which ideas get into the film and which ones don't; which ones improve the idea and which ones weaken it. "My personal approach is to surround myself with people I trust and who generate good ideas, but who don't take it personally if I reject those ideas. Rather, they go back to the well and offer up new ones. Emotional types do not last long in this business," he says.

Describing his stop-motion commercials with a live-action element, PES says, "As the pre-production process intensifies, you will have more

meetings with the agency to keep them informed of all the progress. Meetings, meetings, meetings . . . You'll need to talk to them and keep them in the loop. If you fail to manage expectations properly, or [if you] thwart the communication process, you will often be repaid with trouble from the agency and client: distrust, suspicion, and lack of confidence in your ability to pull it off. They will kill all of your best ideas basically because they don't trust you."

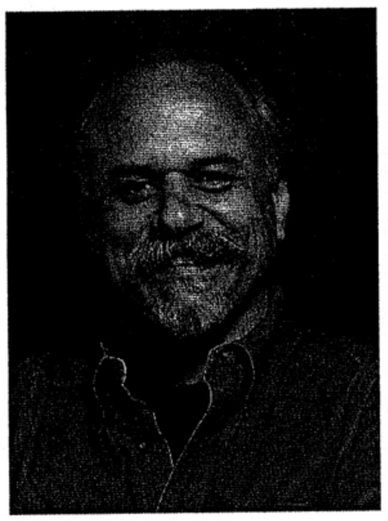
All the while during the pre-production process, and maybe even increasing near its end, the client and ad agency will ask for creative changes and you will need to be prepared to respond immediately to all the requests. In PES' experience, he sometimes needs to push back depending on whether it's an "A battle" or a "B battle.'" In general, he notes, the parameters on a commercial shoot change constantly and you need to adapt quickly. "A client will tell you one thing one day and then a different thing the next. They will say things that make no sense to you but you will need to figure out how to respond appropriately. Being rigid and inflexible is not a trait of the best directors; being clever in getting your way and quick to find alternate solutions is," he says.

Before production, or a shoot, there will likely be a final meeting to present your game plan to the big clients. PES says this is called the pre-production meeting, referred to in advertising parlance as the PPM. He explains, "This is a meeting usually held at the advertising agency a day or two before the shoot and may be with as many as ten people from the client side. As a director, you must be able to explain the reason for every single creative decision you've made along the way. In general, clients do not speak the language of filmmaking so you must now explain your plan to them in a way that they can understand. They want to feel that their millions of dollars are in safe in your hands. They may grill you on specifics or they may not. You may find they are some of the nicest

people you've ever met, or you may find them to be miserable, distrusting types who think their dog can do a better job than you. Every job brings a different cast of people. The most important things are to be prepared for this meeting, be professional, and to be yourself."

The Production/Shoot

As a studio, J. J. Sedelmaier Productions, Inc., often has several different productions going on simultaneously but at different stages, causing Sedelmaier to shuttle around the production room and make sure that the projects are proceeding on the right track. "Most importantly, you make sure you're aware of happy evolutions or even mistakes that happen so you can take advantage of them and incorporate them into the work. You want to have a plan, but you don't want tunnel vision that cuts you off from potential 'pluses,'" he says. And, while production should allow for those natural "pluses," to happen, it should not depend on them. The production stage should be where the road map and preparatory work of the pre-production stage show their benefits.



J. J. Sedelmaier, animation director and co-founder of J. J. Sedelmaier Productions, Inc. Photo by Jim Escalante.

If there is a key theme to this book, it is attempting to honestly depict the human side of working in this business, especially since most animation books concern themselves with history or technique. In the spirit of showing the reader what it is like to spend a day in his shoes, PES shares, "The night before the shoot you are lying in bed telling yourself you have to get some sleep or else you are fucked. You can't start an eight-day shoot with no sleep. Ironically, you're keeping yourself awake thinking about this stuff. If you're lucky, you'll fall asleep

and wake up to a buzzer at 6 A.M., but it may be as early as 4:30 A.M. depending on where and what you are shooting. Everyone will arrive on set and get breakfast, then stumble up to the studio to work.

"With the shoot, preparation is everything. That's what the pre-production was all about: getting to this day and being 100 percent certain about what you're shooting. If I've done my job right, when my crew steps onto the set, they know exactly what they are doing without me having to tell them again. I hire responsible people who take pride in their jobs and aim to deliver beyond expectations. A director has to oversee so many aspects of the production and communicate with so many people (crew, agency, and client) during a shoot day that it makes it extremely difficult to animate at the same time. I rarely animate on a commercial, even though I do animate my own personal films. I learned early on that there are lots of talented animators out there, and if I do a good job directing them I can get exactly what I want. Using the shooting boards as my blueprint, I know I always have a guide about exactly what I'm shooting. I put these boards up for the entire crew to see, so everyone knows what we're doing at any given time. The shooting boards give me the security of knowing I've already done the hardest part: deciding what shots we need. This frees my mind up on set to really focus on making each of these shots feel right, look right, move right.

"For any given shot, I first choose the lens and put the camera where I want it on the set. I frame the shot up until I am happy. This is the beginning of the process for me. My director of photography (DP) is with me at this point. The DP is responsible for lighting the set and making sure that the lighting scheme compliments the idea of the film, supports it, strengthens it. In pre-production we've spoken about this and now we are on the same page. Does the scene take place at midday, at dusk, or at night? Does the scene feel open, closed, mysterious, creepy, surreal?

Lighting affects the look and feel of the final film and sets the tone immediately. The DP's job is to create the appropriate tone for the film and to make sure the light is consistent in the final film from shot-to-shot." Of course, in a commercial production not including live-action or stop-motion, lighting issues are part of the design process and can be changed and enhanced throughout a production.

The DP works with PES' crew to light the scene, which "can take an hour or two depending on the complexity of the shot. At some point my DP will come to me and say he's ready with the lights. Together, we take a final look to make sure everything's right. Sometimes we tweak it a little. I then run everything by the agency one last time to make sure they are onboard. I then bring in my animator. I explain my ideas for every shot to my [stop-motion] animators (how long it should be,

Director PES kneels over the subject of his commercial for Sneaux Shoes, *Human Skateboard.* Image courtesy of the artist.

what marks need to be hit, how fast everything should go). Usually we have already spoken about these details in pre-production, maybe even done a test to make sure it's working. Also, I have to trust my intuition about the strengths and weaknesses of my animators when deciding which shots to have each animator do," says PES. Keen observation skills assist a director in getting to know what each person does well. For instance, PES says, "One animator may be better skilled at rigs and precise, mechanical-type shots, while another might have a better sense of comic timing and a more 'human' touch. Directing is a little bit like being a baseball manager and deciding which pitcher—or even which combination of pitchers—is required to get the job done. I must allocate my resources wisely in a way that will make a difference in the final film. It all comes back to making the best film possible for the time and money. You don't want to get to the edit room and discover that you wasted six hours on a shot you don't even need."

During animation, PES monitors the progress constantly via monitors (showing various camera set ups) placed throughout the stage. Depending on the length of the commercial (fifteen, thirty, or, sixty seconds) and the complexity of the shots, he might decide to have multiple cameras shooting at the same time on different sets. He says it's his job to make sure the shot is coming along to his satisfaction, sometimes interrupting the animator to review frames or make a change to the animation. "Also," PES adds, "Since I often have several animators working on different shots in the film, I have to make sure their styles are compatible: I can't have the film look like it was animated by three different people. It's ultimately my responsibility as the director to make sure the shots cut together and that the film feels cohesive." PES' shoots average about four days, with eight days being the longest shoot he's had. Each spot will have its own needs and help dictate to its director the best way to execute the production.

Editing/Post-Production

Although post-production has been forever tainted with the phrase "we'll fix it in post," editing and post-production are where all the elements of a commercial are combined. There is a lot more to this final stage of production, however, than just putting a puzzle together. PES labels post as a "creative process" and he explains, "There is nothing better than kicking back on my editor's couch the day after my shoot wraps and watching the film come together for the first time. Experimenting with the sequence of shots is exciting and usually reveals something new and unexpected. This is where the film truly gets made. Good decisions in the edit room are every bit as important as all the little decisions you've made along the way leading up to this point." Of course this won't always apply to a 2D or 3D animated commercial because the animation will be planned to the exact length without having extra coverage in the footage.

However, PES reminds, directing commercials is a work-for-hire operation, and you may not be invited to be part of the editing process. "It is typical in the U.S. for the advertising agency to edit the film. The director is off prepping and shooting another job. It seems ridiculous that it works this way since editing is where so many of the most important creative decisions get made, but that's the way it is. In the U.K., there is more of a tradition of director involvement through post-production. A director will show a cut of the film and be available to provide feedback at different parts of the post-production process (music, sound design, effects, etc). But even so, the director never has final say in the process, the client does," PES says.

He continues, "With my U.S.-based commercials I have found the experience to be generally welcoming of my creative input. For instance, most agencies are happy for me to work with the editor to create a first cut. Perhaps they give me this latitude because they like my previous

work; maybe it's because they have learned through the production to trust me as a director and value my vision. At any rate, they give me a day or two on my own with the editor, without interference. Many times they even allow me to choose the editor, so in essence they are working with one of my people, which does help me retain a bit of personal touch of the film."

Despite this involvement, the very best he can hope for is to show the agency the film he envisioned and hope that they will like it enough to fight for his cut with their client. "Sometimes they make no changes. Sometimes they make small superficial changes. Sometimes they take a hatchet to it. Sometimes they keep the picture exactly the same, but then slap an awful piece of music on top of it. So much of the final outcome depends on the agency's relationship with their client and the nature of the client . . . As a director, you have no control over this relationship. The agency may have built a solid relationship with their client over several years, one built on mutual trust and respect. Sometimes they are working together for the first time and are afraid of speaking openly with them. Some agencies—in general the top creative agencies around the world—will fight really hard for what they believe is the best cut of the film. They want to win advertising awards. This boosts the agency reputation and the quality of the clients they can attract in the future. Other agencies do not know how to manage their client and simply agree to any requested changes without pushing back at all."

The hard truth, he says, is that at any given moment the agency or any of those clients you met at the PPM (and some you never will meet) can change anything and undo your entire world. "If they don't like it, they don't even have to show the commercial on TV. It is their film, not yours. That's what 'director-for-hire' means—they pay you a lot, but they own everything. It doesn't matter how attached to it you may feel or how

much sweat you've put into it. The end goal of the commercial is to raise the profile of the client and to sell more products. All you can do is hope the final result bears some resemblance to the film you intended to make. On the brighter side, if everything goes down the tubes, you can always use the money you've made directing the commercial to help finance a personal project. It's important to remember that personal work—not commercial work—is your 'art'—the place for no compromises and deeper creative satisfaction," the director concludes.

People Skills Pay the Bills

A necessity for success in almost any field, with the exception of ice hole fishing, is people skills, which are particularly important in animation where so many of our jobs come through word of mouth. Not developing good people skills puts you at a disadvantage, closes off opportunities, and possibly burns bridges. "Although good people skills don't always go hand-in-hand with being a successful director of animated commercials, they are a major bonus," agrees Dave Wasson. "I can think of several directors who are very good at achieving a great result on screen but leave their clients, the agency, and their crews feeling like they were lucky to have survived the experience."

For Mike Overbeck people skills start with good communication, in that as a director, you have to be good at having a visual goal, keeping it simple, and communicating it to your coworkers and clients. "Keeping a cooperative atmosphere means acknowledging that you don't have all the answers. Making something better means working together and teaching each other," he says.

Many of my worst people-skills mistakes were made while I was still

in my teens as a shift manager at a fast-food restaurant. Back then, I was so undiplomatic that on one occasion a middle-aged couple threatened to beat me up (in what would have been one odd *ménage à trois*) after I implied that they made a mess in the break room. As a shift manager, I would sometimes work the closing shift when there was always a senior manager on duty. One night my boss was trying to get a leg up by shutting down the grill a half hour early. That way he could start cleaning the grill parts in the back sink and we could all get out of there a little sooner. Unfortunately, a final customer came in and ordered a burger. Since my manager was also the one working the grill that night, I had to ask him to make the burger. Reluctantly, he marched back to the grill with clean grill parts in hand and cooked the order. He was really mad and took it out on me, whining that I should have turned the customer away. In response I asked, "Are we in the business of closing the store or of serving the customer?" That was like pouring gasoline on a fire. He turned bright red and if looks could kill, my head would have been swimming with the French-fried potatoes. Back then, I simply said whatever I wanted to say, in any way that I thought to say it—and I was always right. Ah, the memories of a misspent youth. But the short-term satisfaction of a snarky comment or "proving" you're right is not the way to build healthy long-term relationships or foster an environment where every member of a team communicates and works in a trust-based atmosphere.

I'm grateful that my formative years spent working outside of animation taught me such valuable lessons that I could apply to this industry. J. J. Sedelmaier had a similar experience working in a restaurant (from busboy to assistant manager!) while going to college, calling this one of the most valuable experiences he ever had, if not *the* most. "It taught me the ropes of running a business by exposing me to dealing with people, from customers to vendors/suppliers, but it also taught me how to get