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# Mark Borkowski on Joey Skaggs - 'the world's biggest prankster'

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Shares

**PR sage Mark Borkowski knows more than most about the art of the publicity stunt. Here, he shares his admiration for Joey Skaggs, the notorious American prankster who is heading to London to share some of his extraordinary experiences...**

Next week, the world's biggest advertising festival will hit British shores for the first time ever. With industry heavyweights including Sir Martin Sorrell, Lord David Puttnam and David Jones of Havas; the CEOs of Britain's major mobile networks and maverick thinkers like Trevor Beattie, Frank Abagnale (The Original Mr Catch Me if You Can) and Susie Essman (star of Curb Your Enthusiasm), this is the biggest sharing of ideas advertising has ever seen.



As part of this stellar line up, I've had the chance to introduce a little disruptive thinking into the mix, in the shape of Joey Skaggs – the man described as 'the world's biggest prankster', and the original 'culture jammer', responsible for some of the biggest performance art stunts the world has ever seen. From attaching a 50ft bra to the US treasury and running a 'celebrity sperm bank', to taking a portable confessional at the Democratic National Confession and setting up a combined funeral company, virtual graveyard and theme park, this man was responsible for some of the most audacious, and newsworthy, pranks of the late 20th century.

I first connected with Joey Skaggs in the late 80s. I was working in the arts, which was an absolutely excellent training ground for everything that came after, because that industry, perhaps more than any other, understands the importance of Word of Mouth. With so little money to spend on marketing activities, the arts have learnt to be wily and tenacious about how they get bums on seats. The might of the crowd is all.

Joey got it perhaps more than anyone else in my sphere. We struck up a friendship immediately, because he believed that the front page of a newspaper could be an artist's canvas. But whereas I was grabbing headlines for circus performers and pop stars, Joey had a different mission.

He understood the power of the story - the truth about humans that their love of a great meme will always transcend their need for cold hard facts. The establishment, he realised, were using this to their advantage: manipulating the headlines to determine the status quo. He began his work in the 1960s, when the significant issues of the day – Vietnam, race relations – were at best being ignored by the media; at worst, and most often, the media was being used as a propagandistic tool by the state.

Two could play at that game, Joey figured. That very lust of the media for a great story, no matter what evidence mitigated against it, drove some of his greatest stunts. It was glorious stuff, cutting to the quick of the media obfuscation. His earliest works in the late sixties protested the Vietnam War, when he built grotesque, warped Statues of Liberty, based on the injuries of Vietnam Vets in central Manhattan, and on Christmas Day mounted a Vietnamese Christmas Nativity Burning.

Later, when he noticed that middle class suburbanites were taking tours of the East Village to observe hippies, he responded by organising tours for hippies in the suburbs of Queens – highlighting the prevalent fetishisation of counter culture. Another work in 1976 predicted the unhealthy obsession with pets: Cathouse for Dogs (1976) saw him establishing a fictitious ‘pet brothel’, outraging ASPCA bods and landing extensive media coverage, including an ABC story that was nominated for an Emmy, until it was revealed the story was fake and the nomination was withdrawn. Often his pranks involved no more than a press release outlining his plans.

He’s pulled countless stunts like these over the years, inciting law suits and outraging the CIA and their ilk (although, it’s worth mentioning, he always avoids the illegal or ‘the vicious’, hiring actors where necessary rather than embarrassing the general public).

For me, it is characters like Joey that truly intrigue. That’s why he’s such a vital voice at Advertising Week. Big brands need to listen to the voices that interrupt – and contradict – what they want to hear, rather than those that reinforce their expectations. It calls to mind the title of Paul Arden’s book: Whatever You Think, Think The Opposite – it’s always struck me as a particularly good mantra for those in the comms profession.

As advertising spends nosedive, harnessing the power of the crowd is going to prove more important to brands than ever. With the advent of social media, good marketing and PR requires ingenuity, artistry and wit is far more important than big budgets.

Joey is coming out of retirement for Advertising Week, to share his expertise based on a lifetime of the most extraordinary experience. It is bound to be a fascinating historical perspective on inspiring the crowd.

**Advertising Week Europe runs from Mon 18th – Thu 21st March at venues across London. For more information please see [www.advertisingweek.eu](http://www.advertisingweek.eu)**

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