



Mike Diccicco

Walk into the Horsham offices of Diccicco Battista Communications and three things are immediately apparent. There's a very friendly receptionist to greet you.

There are a couple of penguins keeping you company.

There are framed pictures of the two owners over seeing the situation.

After about an hour with **Mike Diccicco**, the president who is one of the owners, you begin to understand things about the agency which aren't immediately clear. It is a friendly place. (Everyone was excited and wearing special T-shirts for their annual picnic. It felt like a party I'd like to attend.) It's an agency which has a mascot. (A big, stuffed penguin.) It's a place where the principals, Diccicco and his partner, **Richard Battista**, don't take themselves or the agency too seriously. (The pictures are not those stuffy photos you see in board rooms. They're light-hearted pictures actually making fun of the bosses.)

Refreshing. It's a welcoming place. Now for the interview.

"Before we start," says Mike, "I want to tell you that I have the best partner a guy could have." Later on, Richard Battista spent a few minutes with us and the warmth between them was palpable. Nice people who like each other and, apparently, work well together.

Mike Diccicco grew up in what seems like an unlikely place, Birmingham, Alabama, in the 1960s. It was a decade when integration changes were on a fast track. Mike remembers well a particular bus ride after the law was struck down requiring African Americans to sit in the back. Because Southern whites would not think of sharing a seat with a black person, Mike climbed aboard and confronted a huddle of white people standing near the driver — and a bus of half-empty seats, one African American to a seat. Mike pushed through the cluster, and sat down next to an elderly black man. Then he looked to the front and saw every white person staring at him. "It was like that famous last scene from the Graduate," he recalls. "They gawked at me as if I were mad."

One of eleven children, Mike was the first National Merit Scholar from his Catholic high school. His scholarship helped him to enter La Salle University where, coincidentally, his Mother and Father had met and where, eventually, he met his wife, **Fran Jacob Diccicco**. "I was the first person in my immediate family to graduate from college," he says. That was in 1971 and ever since then he has been a big supporter and a hard worker for La Salle. He loves the place and sees it as a very important element in the Philadelphia community.

Diccicco says that his family is a microcosm of American Society. "Eleven marriages, six divorces, 2.2 kids per family. I have a sister who also has a college degree and is a successful professional as an environmental engineer. I have a brother who fought his way back from crack addiction. We're a little bit of everything."

He isn't quite certain when or why the advertising business became his focus but, somehow, it was clear and he "went for it." Maybe it's because he was an English major at La Salle and has always felt himself to be a "pretty good" writer. However, he needed a job when he graduated from La Salle and found one as an ad production assistant for Gimbel's Basement Store, not the most prestigious or most promising position. However, he was so excited about landing it that he had to ask his boss on the first day of work, "Do you know what I'm being paid?" Whatever it was, it wasn't enough to qualify him for a Gimbel's credit card. He was turned down when he applied.

The job wasn't enough for him either. After reading **David Ogilvy's** book, he knew he had to be in the ad business and in 1972 he landed a job with **Ed Letven** who owned a small agency in the suburbs. He did well there and learned two things — that he could be pretty good in the ad business and that he loved it.

An opportunity came his way from Levi Strauss. He accepted the job as Ad Manager of its in-house agency. There he also learned two important things — that the client side was different and important to understand and that he wasn't emotionally right to work for a big company.

Back to the Letven organization but this time in a different role, ownership. He bought in. His investment might not have made good financial sense at the time but his ownership and leadership have been the platform for the growth of that agency into the present, successful, respected entity, Diccicco Battista Communications.

Enter Richard Battista, former VP at First Pennsylvania Bank and later an Executive VP for a local food service company where he was a client of the agency. Even though he fired the agency at one point, Richard was well respected by Mike.

CEO to CEO

Richard joined the agency in 1987, became a part owner in 1990 and is 50/50 with Diccicco today. An ad man and a banker. Makes perfect sense for good service, good strategy and good business.

Question: Why do you think you have been successful in this business, Mike?

Answer without hesitation: "Well, I think I have a pretty good understanding of marketing. Took a grad course at Temple but it's mostly been on-the-job learning. I enjoy writing and usually write well. I am a voracious reader of books and magazines about our industry. I attend a lot of seminars on marketing/advertising subjects. I like people, especially the people I work with in the agency and at our clients. I guess it's just that I love what I do every day so it's rather easy to be seen as successful."

Diccicco and the agency are disciplined about positioning as a key element in their tools for successful marketing programs. In fact, he prefers to think of the agency as a "Brand Communications Organization." "Our focus is clients whose success is dependent on their brands." Asked for an example of such a company, he says, "Geico." Think about its gecko and its message: 15 minutes could save you 15% or more . . . and his choice makes good sense. (No, Geico isn't a client. It's an example of the kind of client DB covets.)

When asked about his hopes for the future, he responds with a serious tone in his voice. "We have goals for our company. We'd like this to be THE place where everyone wants to work." He adds, "We want to have respect for our clients and for each other. We want more fun for everyone. We want to be sure not to take ourselves too seriously." He says these things with conviction and you believe him!

While Mike Diccicco first seems like a typical "hail fellow well met," a perceptual change takes place as you learn more about him. He starts to seem heady, almost deeply intellectual. Clearly, he's a thinking person. He worries about our political environment, about education standards and about both business and non-business challenges.

To satisfy his need for the agency to be excellent, he is very careful to continue to monitor how other successful agencies work. His agency is part of ICOM, an international consortium of independent agencies who share best practices with each other. That drive for excellence also influences their decisions about the people they hire, train and nurture as co-workers. The morale at Diccicco Battista is good and according to its president, it needs to be good for its work to be excellent.

As for non-business concerns, Diccicco spends a lot of time and energy in support of his alma mater, LaSalle University. He also encourages pro-bono activity by employees. The agency has become involved in many charitable efforts including past communications work for organizations such as the American Heart Association and the Philadelphia Food Bank.

Immediate family is close and supportive. Wife, Fran, has been a Spanish teacher at — no surprise — La Salle College High School. Daughter Mariliz is a graduate of Penn State University and is developing a career in contract administration at Premier Research. Son Michael is following in his Dad's professional footsteps at Wieden & Kennedy, a global agency headquartered in Portland.

How about fun outside the office? It's a long list of simple pleasures and sophisticated adventures. "Fran and I love to play gin rummy. We have a contest going and she's nipping at my heels. We love to travel and have become good friends with the owner of one of the ICOM agencies, a woman in Istanbul, Turkey. And we have many friends in Spain. We also have a little condo in Sea Isle City and we go there often. Fran has six brothers and sisters so we have a lot of good times with family. And I do love baseball and the Phillies."

Sounds like he has plenty of fun, maybe not enough time to take advantage of all of it.

Not so much fun is his concern that "Every year there are fewer and fewer people who truly respect what a good agency can do for their companies."

There you have it. An interesting guy who is a natural for the ad business. Simple and complex. Light hearted and serious. Locally focused at La Salle and internationally focused as part of ICOM. A strong leader and a determined, committed partner. A gin rummy player who worries about politics. Seems to me that he, all by himself, might be a microcosm of our country. At least for the good side of the ledger.



With partner, Howard Rice, Allan Kalish founded, managed and sold Kalish & Rice, a full service agency. Clients included WaWa, Pep Boys, Philadelphia Electric, Strawbridge & Clothier, First Pennsylvania Bank, Terminix, Armstrong World Industries, Trump Castle Casino and many others. Today, he is chairman of WorkZone, LLC which markets WorkZone, an easy-to-use collaboration extranet and Project Tracker for both agencies and clients. He was President of the Philly Ad Club, served on its board of directors for many years and was named as its Person of the Year in 1988.

