

# THE WAY I SEE IT

# Chuck Porter

Chuck Porter, 65, is chairman and founding partner of Crispin Porter + Bogusky. Joining the firm in 1988, he's overseen its transformation from a small Miami-based agency to a major player. CP+B's clients include Microsoft, Coca-Cola Zero, Old Navy and Domino's Pizza. The agency held the Burger King account for eight years, developing campaigns such as the *Subservient Chicken*. He tells *Diana Goodman* about firing clients, losing clients and buying fat dogs...

**I was christened 'Charles', but when I started** playing football at about age nine, my brother said, "Charles is a terrible name for a football player", so he started calling me Chuck. Since he was six years older than me and brought really cute girls to the house, I figured he knew everything. By the time I grew up and started thinking 'Chuck' was a little cheesy, it was too late.

**I've been married to the same person for 36** years, much to my surprise. Her name is Margit. She's from Denmark, so she's thin and blonde, but she doesn't have much of a sense of humour.

**I have three kids who all went to good** universities and are not in jail or rehab. My two daughters, Kristin and Annie, both live in LA and are in commercial production. My son, James, just graduated from college and took a job in commercial real estate in New York City.

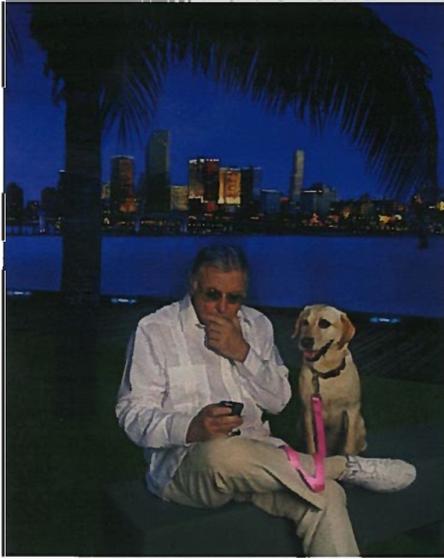
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**I try not to describe myself – it seems so 'me,** me, me'. Although I guess if I had to come up with a description, I'd say I'm wise, helpful, smart, inspiring, funny, caring and charismatic, and that I don't always tell the truth.

**We live in Miami Beach in a house we've had for** almost 20 years. It has a lovely dock on the water where the last boat I owned sank one night. We also have a house in Boulder, Colorado where we hang out a lot in the summer. The dog likes it. And I have a place on a lake in Minnesota close to where I grew up. I go there to hang out with my old friends who don't give a shit about advertising.

**Hanging out with people you knew as a kid is** the best, because they know you in a way that no one else does. Everyone sheds the baggage they've collected over the years and becomes the person they were. It's incomparably liberating. ▣





"I try not to describe myself – it seems so 'me, me, me'."

**I wish I had a story of struggle and strife,**

because it makes better drama, but I had a pretty normal, happy childhood. My father died when I was still in high school, but I had two older brothers so I had good role models. Also, my mother believed the most important thing you can give a kid is confidence so I got an undeserved amount of praise as a kid. I always thought I could do anything, except maybe calculus.

**My parents were in the restaurant business.**

My father would buy restaurants, renovate them, crank up the business then sell them. They owned, I think, six different restaurants while I was growing up. It was wonderful for me. I think I knew what a chicken cordon bleu was before I knew about peanut butter.

**My father was mostly at home in the mornings**

because he worked in the evenings. I remember him as being enormously generous and beautifully dressed. If he was still around today, he'd have a show on the Food Network.

**My first memory is taking a cab to kindergarten.**

My parents bought a hotel with a restaurant on the ground floor and for about three years we lived in a hotel suite. The cab drivers in this small town would wait in a line in front of the hotel and my parents knew them all, so when I started kindergarten, I took a cab every day. I had a more luxurious life at the age of five than I ever did again until I was 60.

**In Minneapolis, everyone went to public schools**

because they were great back then. My high school had lots of achievers who went on to big-deal universities, but I decided to stay at the University of Minnesota because of a girl. A typical dumb thing for a 17-year-old boy to do, but it turned out great. The girl and I actually got engaged, but decided we were not ready to get married. Then I moved to Miami and that was that. She ended up marrying one of my best friends, joining the Peace Corps and moving to Fiji.

**I was in college during the Vietnam War and**

pretty much everyone did some kind of service. I joined the army reserves and did one weekend a month for six years. And I'm proud to say that, during those six years, not one armed Soviet soldier set foot on American soil.

**I was majoring in English and planning on**

going to law school when I took an advertising copywriting course. It was so much more fun and so much easier than writing essays on Chaucer that I switched my major to journalism. I did still go to law school, but halfway in I realised, here's this job where they actually pay you for being glib and funny; why on earth should I do anything else?

**While I was still in law school, I got together**

with a couple of guys I had known in the advertising school and we decided to start an agency. It was called Watkins and Porter. We were clueless, but we had one account: Watkins' dad's company. They made pre-stressed concrete panels and they advertised in architectural magazines. I wrote 20 headlines about how these panels helped architects achieve great things, with copy about Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe. We presented them to my partner's dad and he actually laughed. He said: "Achieve great things? These are cheap, they're for low-cost, low-budget jobs." We said we were sorry, but we'd already spent \$300 on typesetting. So he ran the work. It was a good lesson.

**My partner, Jim Watkins, actually went on to**

invent microwave popcorn. That's a true story.

**The first ad I remember that knocked me out**

was the VW ad that came out right after the first moon landing. It was just a picture of the moon lander with the line, "It's ugly, but it gets you there." Further proof that, arguably, nobody has ever been as good as Bernbach.

**I quit law school and decided to move to Miami.**

There was a team of freelance writers there, Rick Breen and Joel Werblow, whom I had read about because they won lots of awards. I went to see them and told them I was a wonderful writer and my samples were in the mail. Of course, there were no samples but I think they liked me because they said they'd try me out. For a week.

**My first assignment was to do a billboard for a**

bank and I wrote probably 200 lines. One of them they loved – and one was enough. They hired me and the board got produced. I went out of my way to drive by it every day for a month. That's when I learned that there's almost nothing cooler than having thousands of people looking at something that started as just an idea in your head.

**Sam Crispin had asked me for a few years to**

come to his agency as creative director, but I loved freelancing so I wasn't too tempted. Then we were in Jamaica, where we had just done a presentation, and Sam said: "Write down on this pad what you'd want to come to the agency." So I said, I want my name on the door and this much money and control over who the clients are. And he said 'OK'.

**I did fire clients. One of the first serious brands**

we got was Del Monte. We only did B-to-B work, but still, it was a brand my mother had actually heard of. We did some interesting stuff that won awards, but they had a management change and it became clear the new guys were never going to buy the kind of work we wanted to do. It killed me to fire them, but keeping them would have killed the agency. We've resigned a few other clients since then, but I don't celebrate that. You can't work with clients who destroy agency morale, but failed relationships are still just that: failures.

**We started out as a little agency in a little**

market with little clients. We had to do things fast and cheap, and since we had small budgets we had to learn to get attention with imagination instead of money. So we began to get really good at what they called 'guerilla marketing' – using everything as media and using traditional media in untraditional ways. When the time came that mainstream clients started wanting that kind of thinking, we had a great head start.

**I think 2004 was a catalytic year in US**

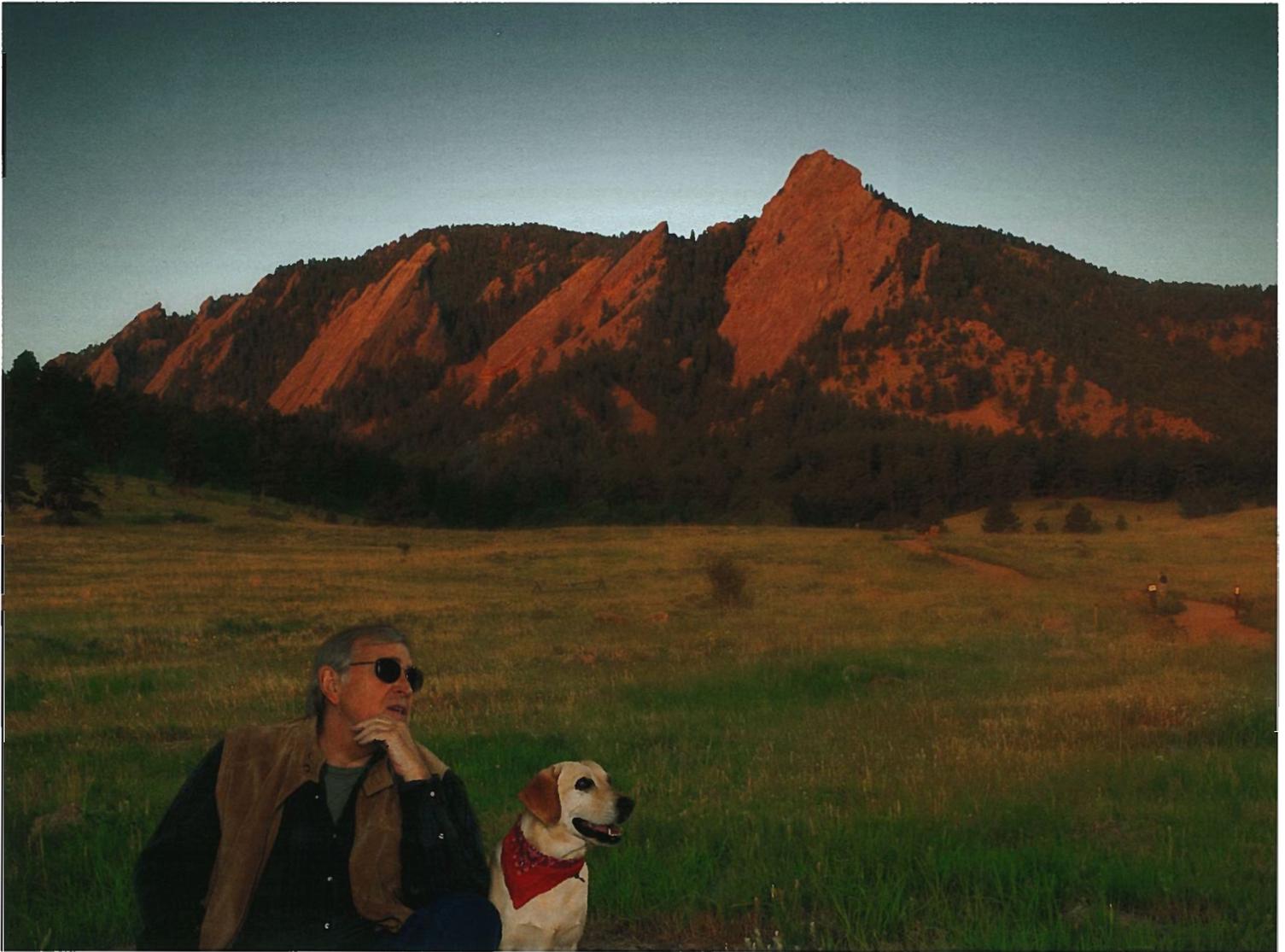
advertising. That's when, among the young male audience, the time spent online actually surpassed the time spent watching TV. The headlines were saying the TV spot was dead, and clients panicked and started hiring firms of 22-year-old techies in garages to make them digital stuff.

**At CP+B we were lucky, because when the sea**

change started we were small and not afraid of revolutions – in fact, we kind of liked them. We never saw digital or any new medium as an add-on, but as just another tool. It's been an integral part of the agency for a long time.

**The worst experience in advertising is not**

getting brilliant work produced. When you have one of those once-a-year ideas that you know will explode in the marketplace and make everyone famous but you just can't get it sold to the client, that's depressing.



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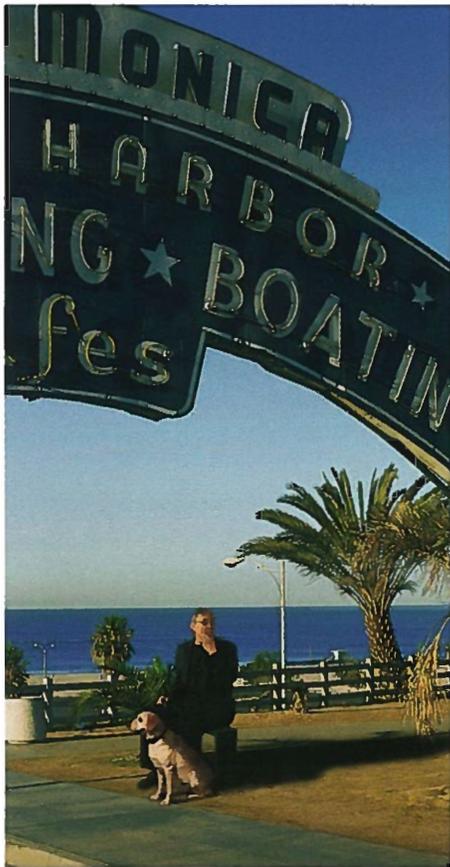
**How much of a blow was it to lose the Burger King account?** Accounts come and go. When we got BK, the consensus was that we’d keep it for maybe eight months. We had it for eight years.

**One heartbreaker was when we were pitching Ricola.** I went to Switzerland to meet with them, but I didn’t go to the pitch. Anyway, they’re Swiss, right? So they specifically said to us, please be absolutely punctual. Well, the pitch was somewhere in New Jersey and our team got lost, got there way late, and pretty much pissed off everyone. By the time the pitch was ending, half of their team had left and the maintenance guy had begun vacuuming the room.

**Patience is definitely not my greatest strength,** but I try really, really hard to be nice to everyone at our agency, all the time. Life is hard and this business is tough and the last extra problem anyone needs is a boss who’s an asshole.

**I’ve always brought my dog to work with me,** and I’ve always thought everyone else should be able to as well. When we were negotiating the lease for one of our offices they had the standard thing that said no dogs, wild animals, guns, whatever. I told them, this is a medical necessity for us. There are numerous studies that prove that dogs help reduce stress and anxiety among mental patients, and we need dogs.

**There are a few ads I am proud of, but a long,** long time ago I did a TV spot for Palm Beach tourism that won a Clio and an Andy and a bunch of other stuff. It was our first TV ad that won major awards and it cost like 20 dollars to produce. It was a spot to run on some wedding-planning show for women. We shot 30 seconds looking straight up at a ceiling fan. The track was *As Time Goes By*, which we got someone at the agency to sing, and the voiceover at the end of the spot just said: “If you’re planning a honeymoon, remember this – Palm Beach has some of the most beautiful views anywhere.” We also did the shot sort of bouncing the camera up and down, but that seemed a little heavy-handed. □



"I've never had therapy. But I did watch Oprah once or twice."

**My advice to young people entering advertising** today is: get a job at a place whose work you really, really love, find the smartest people there and spend a year listening to what they say.

**Alex Bogusky left CP+B because he's an** enormously passionate guy – that's why he was able to do so much brilliant work while he was here. He has some causes, including global warming and sustainability, that he feels he really wants to devote much more time to. We were great partners for 20 years. I miss him.

**The best advertisement I've ever seen was a** one-shot newspaper ad that was taken out by a group of African-American clergymen. There was an interest group campaigning for Ebonics – or African-American dialect – to be accepted as a recognised form of written and spoken English. The clergy felt this would only perpetuate negative stereotypes so they took a shot from behind of Martin Luther King speaking, with the headline, 'I has a dream'.

**Awards are a good thing. In a well-judged** awards show, everybody's equal – whether you have 50 worldwide offices or you're two people in a Starbucks. The best idea wins and that's cool. As a judge, I look for something I really, really wish we had done.

**The products I would never work on are tobacco** and cheese. No, wait, I love cheese.

**As a consumer, I'm not influenced by advertising.** I do my research, think for myself and make informed, enlightened decisions. Now, when do I get my M&M's like I got in the other focus group?

**My principal interests outside work are travel,** history and Hadrian's Wall (which is kind of a nice combination of the two). Also, I like cathedrals a lot. I sort of collect them.

**The people I most despise are Hitler and Stalin.** Of all the flat-out evil sons of bitches in history, probably none caused more human suffering than Hitler and Stalin.

**I have a great interest in World War II because it** was the seminal event in modern history. Virtually the whole world got drawn in and took sides. Entire cultures focused all of their energies on a single mission – whether you were American or British, German or Japanese. And almost everyone who lived then has a story. My wife's great-uncle was executed for smuggling Jews out of Denmark. That story is close to me, but there are a million like it.

**The person I am closest to is definitely my wife.** When we were getting our last dog, her one request was that we get a small one. I got a fat, yellow Labrador and she still didn't divorce me.

**I don't feel there is a stigma attached to working** in advertising. All the stigma out there has been taken over by the politicians.

**Actually, I can't really tell the difference** between politics and entertainment any more. In fact, I'd say my favorite politician right now is Tina Fey playing Sarah Palin.

**Have drink or drugs ever been a problem for** me? Drink is no problem at all, especially in Boulder. There are great micro-breweries here, particularly New Belgium. I wish they were our client. And despite living in Miami forever, I never really got into drugs. I think I'm too much of a fraidy cat.

**I've never had therapy. But I did watch Oprah** once or twice.

**I judge a person mostly by their sense of** humour. It's kind of shallow, but you end up with a lot of funny friends.

**What makes me really angry is hypocrisy** – people who scold everyone about climate change and then fly around in Gulfstream Fours, that kind of stuff.

**In terms of regrets, I wish I'd gotten serious** about advertising and started an agency 10 years earlier than I did. And I wish I'd bought Microsoft stock in 1986.

**I cry in movies all the time; I teared up at the** end of *Win A Date With Tad Hamilton*. It's the combination of pictures and music; there's nothing like it to produce emotion. Maybe that's why TV spots will never die.

**When we had our first two kids, I thought I was** immortal and bullet-proof so there was no anxiety, just pure, sheer joy. A few years later, when we were going to have another baby, that's when I decided I'd better start taking my career a little more seriously.

**I think marriages, if they're not a total disaster,** help make kids secure and confident. So I think it's worth working at. If you don't have kids, it's probably not really all that relevant.

**I'm not really afraid of dying. I mean, I used to** be afraid of dying young but I don't have to worry about that anymore.

**I'd like to be buried at a little Lutheran church** in Southern Minnesota called Red Oak Grove. Originally the services were in Norwegian and there are people in my family who have been going there for 100 years. I'm figuring on a huge monument in the churchyard so the farmers in the neighbourhood can drive by every day and wonder who that guy was.

**If I could change the world, I would put all the** fanatics of every stripe in one place so they could deal with each other and leave the rest of us alone.

**If I could relive my life, I would have moved to** LA the day I got married and gotten into the movies. Directing movies is the best job on earth.

**What gives me real pleasure is hanging out with** my dog. Really, hanging out with any dog. They don't care if you won ten Lions at Cannes. Actually, I don't think they even like lions.

**In the end, what really matters is: in life – your** family; in business – having a job that you'd do even if they didn't pay you. A great pro ball player, Satchel Paige, once said: "I ain't ever had a job. I always just played baseball." That's kind of the way I feel. I always just played baseball. [S]