

# With sale, Legal Sea Foods' quirky advertising could be coming to a close

From 'fresh fish' that badmouthed commuters to 'Pescatarianism,' a New York agency created a long line of memorable campaigns

By **Jon Chesto** Globe Staff, Updated December 23, 2020, 3:52 p.m.



Legal Seafoods CEO Roger Berkowitz often appeared in commercials created by the New York ad agency DeVito/Verdi. LANE TURNER

As Roger Berkowitz hands over the keys to the kitchens at Legal Sea Foods to a new restaurant group, it's not just decades of family ownership that are coming to an end.

The era of those quirky Legal Sea Foods ads might be over, as well.

Ellis Verdi, president at the New York ad agency DeVito/Verdi, is preparing to say goodbye to a client that has been quite good for his business over the years, now that Danu Partners, through its US business PPX Hospitality Brands, has completed its acquisition of the Legal restaurant group. The relationship went both ways: Verdi recalls how his agency helped Berkowitz get his unique voice out to the world when the two started working together 15 years ago.

Verdi believes that no other client provided a greater volume of creative work for the agency. And landing the Legal gig helped open other doors for the New York ad agency in the once-parochial Boston ad market. Herb Chambers followed Legal. Then came Suffolk University, Fallon Health, Bernie & Phyl's Furniture, and Tribe hummus. Verdi's agency didn't take an offbeat approach with all of them. But the agency's "Sofa King" billboards for Bernie & Phyl's were hard to miss.

PPX isn't saying whether DeVito/Verdi will stay on. PPX chief marketing officer Kim Giguere-Lapine said the company is excited to "fully immerse ourselves within the Legal Sea Foods culture," and every aspect of the operation is being reviewed and considered.

If this is the end, Verdi and his team in New York at least know it's been a long, strange trip, with some great memories along the way.

**The Legal aquarium sign (2006):** For its first creative work with Legal, DeVito/Verdi opted for an unusual outdoor ad: a pair of unauthorized street signs installed between the New England Aquarium and the nearby Legal restaurant. One used the aquarium's name and fish logo, with an arrow pointing toward the tourist attraction. A second sign borrowed the fish logo, but also featured a knife and fork, and the restaurant's name, with an arrow pointing in its direction.

"Two of the kids that created it took [the signs] by van, drove them to Boston, at night, put them in there, and then left," Verdi said.

**Fresh fish talk back (2008):** Verdi's ultimate goal with his Legal work was not only to impress upon consumers the freshness of Legal's fish, but to do so memorably. This was taken to its literal extreme in 2008, when Legal paid to install signs of cartoon fish saying "fresh" things on cab rooftops and subway cars. We're talking humor of the sophomoric variety: Think "Bite me" or "Your mother's a blowfish," or "This trolley gets around more than your sister."

What got Legal in trouble was the sign declaring the T conductor had "a face like a halibut." The MBTA yanked the ad, and Legal hired a prominent First Amendment lawyer to intervene. Legal then ran a new set of ads poking fun at being "censored," and Berkowitz offered a tongue-in-cheek apology to T drivers. "Everybody registered the words 'really fresh fish,'" Verdi said. "That was the most important part of all of this."

**Save the fish . . . for eating (2011):** After T drivers, Legal trained its sights on environmentalists next, with a series of spots that lampooned public service announcements to protect marine life. The spots began by urging viewers to save crabs and trout, but then emphasized why: because they taste good on the grill.

Greenpeace was not pleased. But DeVito/Verdi had done its job by getting national media attention for Legal. Verdi remembers one TV reporter struggling to keep a straight face during coverage. The campaign featured a favorite tactic of Verdi's: the "misdirect."

"We're making them think it's a true environmental ad," Verdi said. "By giving them a misdirect, it hits you and you're surprised, which has always proven to give you increased memory and recall."

**The church of Pescatarianism (2015):** Organized religion was next up on Legal's target list for satire. With the "Pescatarian" ads, DeVito/Verdi employed the misdirect again: Viewers would think they were watching a religious ad, when really the religion being described was the fictional "Pescatarianism," ostensibly practiced at Legal Sea Foods.

“Jesus fed 5,000 people with a few fish,” the narrator intones. “We do that every single day.” The ad agency even created a website to support the new religion, Verdi said. “We caused there to be a feeling that ‘Pescatarianism’ is part of a cult,” he said. “Well, that’s not a bad cult for Legal Sea Foods.”

**Berkowitz for President (2016):** A presidential race is always ripe for lampooning, and Legal took the bait in 2016. Berkowitz appeared in ads favorable for legalizing recreational marijuana (“My first act in office will be to legalize seaweed”) and disapproving of the Mexican-border wall (“Who will enjoy our delicious fish tacos?”). There was the obligatory hashtag (#feeltheberk) and a joke about the size of Donald Trump’s hands.

But Legal might have gone too far with its print ad showing a photo of Hillary Clinton that likened her to “cold fish.” Verdi said his agency worked for Clinton on her first US Senate race, so he sounds regretful today about the cold fish ad: “That ad was the only ad in my history with Legal that I might have felt bad about.”

**Legal-ize it, don’t criticize it (2019):** As newly legal sales of recreational marijuana took off in Massachusetts, DeVito/Verdi saw another opportunity. This one involved psychedelic videos and print ads, with slogans that referred to Legal’s fish as “freshly baked” or “high . . . in Omega-3s.”

Verdi said Legal targeted consumers as they left pot stores with ads on their phones, and sent at least two emissaries to wear costumes while standing outside the first one in Brookline.

“We had someone dressed as a clam, and we had another person dressed as a lobster,” Verdi said. “The lines were lasting for so long, the poor lobster kids, they were on line for hours.”

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