

## *Interview*

“We never sit still –  
we are always moving.”

Out of the French advertising agency Publicis he forged the fourth-largest advertising group in the world. Although he has been CEO for over 20 years, he has never been content to rest on his laurels. THE FOCUS talks to **Maurice Lévy**, 66, advertising legend, curator of culture, gentleman, tribal elder and, for decades, a close friend of change.

PHOTOS: MARTIN LANGHORST



## RESUMÉ Maurice Lévy



**Maurice Lévy was born in Morocco to Spanish parents in 1942 and today is considered one of the last of the world's great advertising executives. At 22 he took part in a competition and won a place in an IT training program at the University of New Jersey in the USA. On returning to France, he began his career in advertising as IT director at an agency called Synergie, where he discovered his interest and talent in customer acquisition and the creative side of advertising.**

**Lévy switched to Publicis in 1971, once again as IT director. He quickly became a favorite of company founder and director Marcel Bleustein-Blanchet, who named him CEO of Publicis France when Lévy was 33 years old. In 1987, he named Lévy his successor as CEO and chairman of the entire Publicis Groupe, a position that Lévy still holds today. Numbered among his greatest accomplishments are the acquisition and integration of the prominent agencies Saatchi & Saatchi and Leo Burnett into the Publicis family. In addition, he has always fought stubbornly for major clients such as Coca-Cola, which, thanks to Lévy's efforts, the French agency was able to retain as a client despite the controversy over the war in Iraq. Often sought out in his office on the Champs-Élysées by corporate heads and French politicians, Lévy is known as a polite but uncompromising gentleman who pulls economic and political strings behind the scenes. Lévy is married and has three children.**

MAURICE LÉVY receives guests in his office in the agency's premises on the Champs-Élysées. As the story goes, when a fire raged through this building in 1972, he ran back into the offices, braving the roaring flames to rescue programs, data, tapes and discs of all accounting information. This impressed agency founder Marcel Bleustein-Blanchet so much that he went on to name Lévy, an IT specialist, his successor, making him the second CEO in the history of Publicis. Is the story true? Maurice Lévy leans back and closes his eyes for a moment, a modest smile playing on his lips. The interview can begin.

**The Focus:** Mr. Lévy, you have been with Publicis quite a while. What would you say have been the most important transformations in your career?

**Maurice Lévy:** When I look back I don't see one overriding change, but many. Following the fire, which was a disruption second to none, our organization went through a very serious crisis in which we had to transform ourselves. Since then, we have had something happening every three years or so, initiated either from inside or outside the company. Transformation is our normal state of affairs. I don't know what will happen to Publicis if we stand still one day. Transformation is the air we breathe; we constantly have to move with the times.

**The Focus:** For you personally, the retirement of Marcel Bleustein-Blanchet after almost 60 years as your predecessor at the helm of Publicis must have marked a watershed.

**Lévy:** That was probably the most important change both for me and for the company, because the organization was linked to his personality to an extent that would be unheard of today. He was much larger than life, one of the most powerful men of the 1930s and the kind of entrepreneur and innovator that you don't find anymore. During World War II he was close to General de Gaulle and was a prominent member of the French Resistance. First, to avoid his own radio station falling into German hands he destroyed it, and then he flew missions as a pilot for the U.S. Army. After the war he rebuilt Publicis by introducing innovations to the advertising world such as motivation research and semiology. He was the father of modern advertising, a mogul with close ties to all the CEOs in France. For a personality of this caliber, over eighty years old, to hand over control of the company to a young, inexperienced manager like me was an immense change for the organization, a genuine revolution.



**The Focus:** How can one prepare for such a change?

**Lévy:** One situation sticks in my mind, at the beginning of the 1980s. Monsieur Bleustein-Blanchet and I were having lunch with a client and all the people around the table were under thirty-five. After lunch he said to me, “Maurice, I am too old. Now it is your game.” That day was a turning point for him. Immediately after that lunch he decided to hand over the title of President (Chairman and CEO) of Publicis France to me. It was a symbolic move, because this was a title he’d had since he founded the agency. He started to give me increasingly more responsibility, and then he began to build closer ties to my family. He wanted to know more about my wife and kids. He started calling our house on Sundays.

**The Focus:** He called you at home?

**Lévy:** Yes. He would call every Sunday morning. He would say he had forgotten to tell me something – but that wasn’t true, he never forgot anything – and then ask what we were having for lunch. Then he would join us for the meal. He wanted to know more about the way I lived, the kind of man I was, how I behaved with my family, etc. Values were of the utmost importance to him. He prepared for the handover in a very intensive, personal way. What he didn’t do quite so well was prepare for the change inside the company. He didn’t start that until a few months before the official handover. There were probably two reasons for this. First, he didn’t want to forfeit one ounce of his power or be seen as a lame duck after announcing his successor. Second, he wanted to keep his options open until the last minute. I was very conscious of that and found it quite reasonable.

**The Focus:** When he announced his decision to the organization, how did people react?

**Lévy:** It was not such a surprise for them. I had been learning the ropes since 1984. I was in charge of all the key clients and investments, and key decisions were always endorsed by me. So it was a confirmation, not breaking news. But Marcel Bleustein-Blanchet had a strong sense of decorum and introduced the change in his unique style. He went personally – and he was eighty-one years old at the time – to see each CEO of our top twenty clients, and some other important ones as well. He said, “This has been my agency. I have been blessed by the relationship we have had together and you have trusted me for so long. Now I want to inform you in person that my successor will be Maurice Lévy. I ask you to trust him and support him and to continue the

**“A degree of instability is necessary in order to keep people on their toes.”**

relationship with him.” One of these CEOs, who was in his forties at that time, told me later that he will never forget the elegance and style with which old Marcel Bleustein-Blanchet came to see him and personally introduce his successor.

**The Focus:** Following this transition, Publicis found itself in a constant process of transformation. This is an extraordinary asset in today’s world, where things move at such a rapid pace. How do you maintain the motivation for change within the group? Is there some sort of recipe or secret?

**Lévy:** A degree of instability is necessary in order to keep people on their toes. I mean, nobody should be thinking, “Okay, the jury has reached a verdict, we can sit down now.” We never sit still – we are always moving. When a company is committed to transformation, it can keep pace with the changes constantly taking place in the economy, technology, and society. In our industry, it is relatively easy to have a philosophy of change – easy because we have no factories and because our job is to help a wide variety of clients get their message out. Our work is based on managing different kinds of political, economic, and technological issues, reacting to the needs of the consumers and dealing with a world that is changing all the time. This environment forces us to constantly transform our standards and the way we work.

**The Focus:** This openness to change is an exceptional skill. People normally feel more comfortable with continuity.

**Lévy:** You are absolutely right. And even for us – people who work in the advertising industry – this openness can be a difficult thing, because human beings are and have always been creatures of habit. In this context, the experience that left the deepest impression on me occurred after the fire in our agency offices. In the two years immediately following the fire, we had to split up our employees into ten units that were scattered around Paris because we didn’t have a building that offered enough working space for all of them.

## “You have to build something that is stronger than any contract.”

**The Focus:** What did that teach you?

**Lévy:** First, that the natural system of human organization is disorganization. What do I mean by this? Although our company no longer had a home office, each group of employees built their own cocoon and felt at home there. It worked very well, which has led me to believe that a good organization must strike a balance between strong centralized control and massive disorganization. You should give as much freedom as you can to your people, but maintain strong ties and control from the center in order to make sure that core policies and values will be respected. You have to control your assets because when people walk away, they walk away with everything – sometimes including the clients.

The second thing that I learned following the fire is that organizations are fragile. When it comes to major transformations, formal contracts are of little use. The only thing that can hold an organization together is an emotional link, a family feeling that everybody shares – a feeling that they are part of the same thing. You have to build something that is stronger than any contract.

The third lesson came when we moved back into the unfinished building. It was like being in a tent. Nobody had an office, everything was totally open and we all worked together. What I observed during this time was that people are territorial. Even though we had no walls or partitions, each person started to reclaim their territory and carve out their own space. To this day I remember being surprised when I told someone to work at a certain desk and he refused. I told him, “Listen, we don’t have time for this – it’s just a desk.” And he replied, “It’s not just a desk. I spend nine hours a day working. I want to choose my own space.”

So in terms of the organization, when I look back, I recognize that people, no matter where they are, need their own space and considerable freedom far from the center. So we need systems and organizations that can support and at the same time control. The classic hierarchical model of organization doesn’t work because it’s not in keeping with human nature. A more natural model is a kind of confederation of tribes. I came to the conclusion

that what makes our agency and our company very solid is that we recognize the natural, human needs of our employees. You have to find the right balance between their desire for independence and self-determination, their longing for stability and their fear of the breakdown of order. Like a good home, the company has to be a place where they feel both free and secure. This is especially important for creative individuals.

**The Focus:** The tribal model is very powerful, especially in today’s world where hierarchies are being deconstructed by technological developments such as the Internet. But when people are focused on their tribe, they might not see the big picture – and perhaps lose sight of how the tents are placed. How do you reconcile that?

**Lévy:** I’m not sure if we are doing a great job at this, but we are trying. It is an ongoing process. There are many people who are interested in moving from one branch to another, and there is a family spirit which is quite widespread throughout the whole organization. We have centralized most administrative functions – accounting, legal, human resources – in shared services. This is a way to reduce costs, but it is also a way to ensure that we have common policies as well as some guarantee that we are all following the same rules. It is not always easy, and it can be divisive. There are a lot of people in the company who would be very happy to have their own shop with their own bookkeeper, running their own show. And that form of organization does have some merit – it is flexible, easy, and profitable. But there are also drawbacks, particularly when you are a listed company. There are many things within our organization that unite the Groupe. So even if we are organized like tribes, we are strongly connected. The big picture is one of a single tribe, a family.

**The Focus:** The professional environment for advertising agencies has changed dramatically in recent decades. Pressure from the market, pressure from clients to be efficient, new forms of advertising. If you compare the way you work today to the advertising business in the 1970s or 1980s, what has changed?

**Lévy:** Everything has changed. Everything. And at the same time, some things have remained the same or can only be changed with great difficulty. A good example of this is technology. There have been enormous advances in this field, and they have brought with them a whole new way of working. You can see this technology, you can explain it and people understand it. But this









## Publicis Groupe S.A. A mature pioneer

**Publicis Groupe, commonly referred to as Publicis, is a French advertising group that today constitutes the world's fourth-largest communications network (behind Omnicom, WPP, and Interpublic). Renowned advertising agencies such as Saatchi & Saatchi and Leo Burnett are owned by Publicis Groupe, which has a presence in 196 cities and 104 countries worldwide. The group has over 45,000 employees. Publicis was founded in Paris in 1926 by Marcel Bleustein-Blanchet. The company soon developed a reputation for innovation and was a trendsetter in areas such as radio advertising, market research, and international expansion. In 1971 Bleustein-Blanchet hired Maurice Lévy, and in 1987 named him his successor and the second CEO in the history of Publicis. Today Publicis counts numerous major international corporations among its clients – Renault, Procter & Gamble, Nestlé, Coca-Cola, and Deutsche Telekom, to name but a few. With revenues of 5.8 billion dollars (2006) and a double-digit EBIT margin, Publicis is known as the industry's most profitable player. Ten percent of the agency and a larger proportion of voting rights belong to Elisabeth Badinter, daughter of the company's founder. In recent years Lévy has pushed two strategic developments: promoting the group's growth in emerging regions such as China, India, Russia, and Brazil; and the expansion of the company's digital business.**

doesn't mean that they are actually going to use it. The thing that is most difficult to change is the way people think – to break their old habits. Another example is teamwork. Some very good people still work in the traditional way. As we say, they like to write in their silos; they don't want to share and they don't like to work with other teams. It is hard to change their habits. You have to teach, explain, and talk to them again and again.

**The Focus:** What do you do when the environment is changing more quickly than the people, be they employees or clients?

**Lévy:** You can only be persistent and try to persuade them of the advantages of change. There is an old virtue that is useful to the organization in such a situation: generosity. This may not sound very rational, but people need to be generous and they need to share, because if they don't, they will not grow and change. I believe in generosity within an organization, not competition. It is essential to convince people of the importance of sharing both responsibilities and difficulties. We can only benefit from being inclusive, bringing people on board and not to trying to do everything on our own. This applies to employees within the organization, but also to our clients. If they are very secretive and don't share their true goals and problems, if they are not actually convinced of the relevance of something new, we will never be able to initiate major change, let alone successfully implement it – regardless of how many innovative ideas they have.

**The Focus:** Is the growing importance of the digital world a threat to traditional advertising?

**Lévy:** First of all, people always say that nowadays modernity is represented by the digital and that anyone working with analog media is considered traditional or old-fashioned. I don't agree with this point of view and I dislike the word traditional in this context. I'm not being traditional; I use both analog and digital media. After all, analog is both widespread and modern. The reality is that between eighty and ninety percent of our business still comes from analog media, and therefore it is genuinely valuable to us.

Marcel Bleustein-Blanchet always said that modernity is just a state of mind, and he was right. Some people are already very old in terms of their behavior and mentality at the age of twenty-five. There are people who are forty-five, fifty-five or older who are still very young and capable of looking at the world differently. The same

goes for the Internet. Some things that are happening in the digital world today seem quite old-fashioned; some things that are created in the analog world are highly creative and innovative. So the changes brought by the Internet are not an inherent threat to classical advertising. It is simply a new medium, one that we must use if we want to keep pace with today's changing world.

**The Focus:** What is the key to remaining flexible and adaptable?

**Lévy:** I think diversity is the key. Beyond that, it is a question of personality and how you see the world. There are people who hate changes, hate disruption and are afraid of anything that might threaten or alter their nice orderly lives. However, there are also people who welcome change. You know, there is a classic saying about the word for crisis in Chinese – you can read it as “crisis” or as “opportunity”. There are two sides to the coin. What is the difference between an optimist and a pessimist? Only one of attitude – they are born and die the same way. The only difference is how they live.

**The Focus:** Is the glass half full or half empty?

**Lévy:** Exactly. It always comes down to that. The beauty of my job and what makes me really enjoy life is that I get to meet, know and work with a lot of people, and each one of them is an individual. To lead these individuals you sometimes have to give them a push or be a little tough, but you should never forget that what is right for one person may be wrong for another. There is no one system, no single recipe. When it comes to managing people, you need to have a relationship, an understanding of what is driving each person. It can be very complicated.

**The Focus:** Do you still have the time to treat people as individually as you've described?

**Lévy:** I can't know forty-five thousand people personally. But I hope that people do know each other at each level of the organization. I try to treat the people with whom I have direct contact as individuals. To be honest, however, I must say that I probably don't succeed all the time. I'm very demanding and sometimes a bit tough.

**The Focus:** Are you patient with people? Do you give them time to change?

**Lévy:** Yes and no. I am both very patient and very impatient. I always give people time, and very often there are people in my organization who say, “Maurice, that guy

should have gone long ago.” I let them stay because I always want to treat people as fairly as possible – perhaps it is something genetic, but I am very quick to feel guilty. At the same time, though, when I am working with someone who is not doing their job as well or as quickly as I would like, I often get impatient. I have even been known to raise my voice, but then five minutes later I start to have doubts: Did I give clear instructions? Did I give people enough time? That's when the guilt cuts in.

**The Focus:** You are both the central force and the custodian of values at Publicis. Have you thought about what will happen when you step down? How can you institutionalize this spirit so it doesn't leave with you?

**Lévy:** Succession should not be about replicating or imitating your predecessor. Marcel was Marcel; I am who I am. We have to accept disruption. The day I'm out, I'm out. I will not be on the board and I will not hold any other position in the company where I can look over the shoulder of the person who succeeds me. No, my successor should have a free hand and room to maneuver. If he has to destroy what I have built, so be it – even if it is painful for me – because he has to act in the way he believes is best for the future.

We have many different kinds of people in this organization. Some of them are extremely good, but no two people are the same. Can they do the job? We will never know unless we let them try. Most importantly, when you put somebody in charge, you have to assess that person based not on what their predecessor achieved, but on the goals and tasks that are essential for a prosperous future.



The interview with Maurice Lévy in Paris was conducted by (from right) Daniel Tournier, Egon Zehnder International, Paris, Dominique Laffy, Egon Zehnder International, London, and Ulrike Mertens, THE FOCUS.