

Perspective Rock of Ages

By Robert Klara Diamonds are nothing more than allotropes of carbon. Leave it to a marketer to make them all about a love that lasts forever.

Harry Oppenheimer had a problem. It was September 1938, and with war smoldering in Europe, market prices of diamonds—a commodity that had been cornered by his father's company, De Beers Consolidated Mines, Ltd.—were plummeting. Concluding that the company's survival lay in penetrating the American market, Oppenheimer came to Philadelphia and looked up the N.W. Ayer & Son advertising agency.

The result of the trip would be one of the most successful advertising slogans ever created.

Ayer worked the account for a decade—draping diamonds on Hollywood starlets, mostly—but struggled to find a tagline. Then in 1947, a young copywriter named Frances Gerety chanced upon a photo of two newlyweds on their honeymoon and scribbled "A Diamond Is Forever" along the bottom. De Beers adopted the tagline the following year. The 1957 ad at right is a classic early example of its use, and as the ad opposite demonstrates, the company has employed the phrase ever since (having added a "because").

Of course, kings and maharajas had made diamonds desirable for centuries. The genius of what Gerety did was to fuse together the idea of swooning, everlasting love with a sparkly rock. According to psychologist Robert Passikoff, who runs the consultancy Brand Keys, "people take certain signs of objects and imbue them with an unspoken meaning"—and thanks to De Beers, diamonds have come to be seen as a natural rarity, a precious embodiment of the marital pledge. In the early days, not all grooms (who make up 90 percent of diamond buyers) got it, and so the copy helped things along with lines like "Your engagement diamond, with noble fire, reflects the greatness of your love."

Eventually, the dudes glommed on—and they haven't forgotten. While both the 2011 ad and its 1957 forerunner use beautiful diamonds as a thematic centerpiece, the contemporary ad has dispensed with all explanatory copy. "Over time," Passikoff says, "consumers have a stronger perception of what the diamond represents, so you don't need the copy. The meaning has endured. Why screw with success?"

But the strongest proof of the efficacy of "Diamonds Are Forever" isn't measured in the endurance of the phrase, but its ability to cloud the heads of grooms-to-be (who drop an average of \$3,200 on an engagement ring) with a sweet-smelling, fictional mist. Not only are diamonds *not* rare (De Beers holds back so much supply that if all the world's diamonds were dumped onto the market, they'd be worth less than \$30 each), but what they symbolize isn't forever, either. According to the National Center for Health Statistics 43 percent of new marriages will end in the first 10 years.

So maybe diamonds aren't forever—but a good slogan sure is.

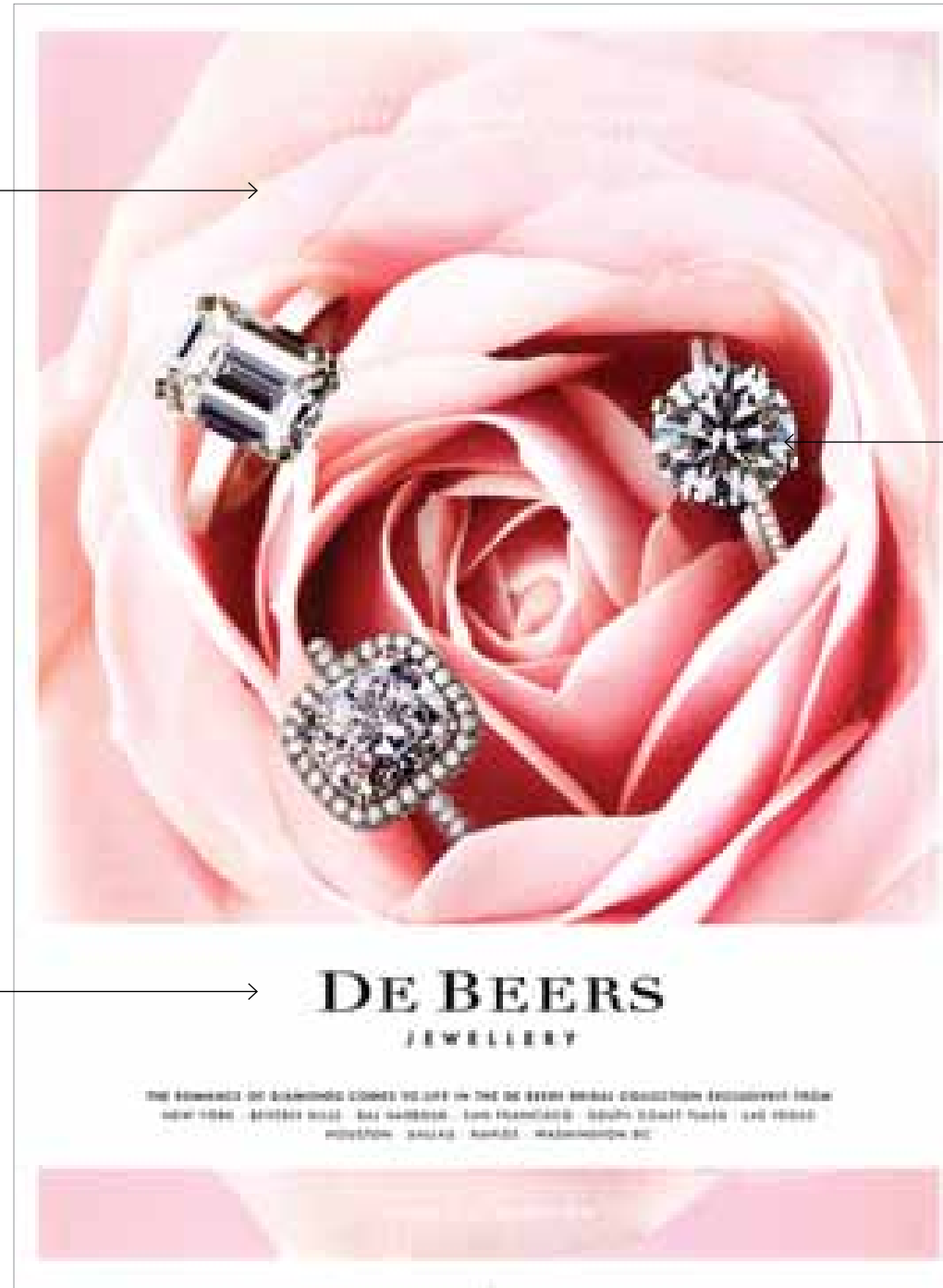


While the practice is verboten for luxury products today, back in 1957 De Beers did gents **the favor of printing actual diamond prices** (above, left). That 1-carat cost of \$600-\$1,210 was quite a doozy since the average American male took home \$417 a month back then.

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Robert Passikoff, founder and president, Brand Keys

Yet another symbol of love, the **pink rose acts as a visual cue** for any lunkhead who still might not get a branding message that's been around 63 years. "These days, nobody needs to whack you upside the head with a ring box to explain that diamonds are forever," Passikoff says.



A powerful syndicate, **De Beers dominated the supply side for decades**. But when new sources of diamonds challenged its supremacy, De Beers diversified and got into the retail business. It now has 11 diamond stores in the U.S.—and has had to brand itself accordingly.

In the 1950s, De Beers' task was simply to acquaint the buying public with diamonds and the brand-imbued symbolism of perpetual love. These days that education work is done—and **De Beers is after the girls by showing them the actual rings**. This ad comes from *Brides* magazine.