

An abbreviated version of the following story originally appeared in the Winter 1998/99 issue of our club newsletter. It chronicles Lucille Ball's long association with the Philip Morris company and profiles its "living mascot," Johnny Roventini.

While it is not our policy to "editorialize," we admit to having mixed emotions about this topic: we acknowledge that *I Love Lucy* might never have happened had it not been for Philip Morris' sponsorship of the show, but we also find it hard to forget that both Desi Arnaz (in 1986) and Lucy's second husband, Gary Morton (in 1989), died of lung cancer... Or that Lucy herself died (in 1989) of heart disease. Both ailments have long been linked to smoking.



Johnny Roventini: Unique *and* Euphonious!

When CBS and Desilu completed the pilot for *I Love Lucy* in March, 1951, everyone assumed General Foods, the sponsor of Lucille Ball's radio show, would buy it. GF, instead, quickly turned it down -- and the network hawked the project up and down Madison Avenue, hoping to find another sponsor. Finally, advertising mogul Milton Biow bought the show for his client, Philip Morris cigarettes. The tobacco company would sponsor *I Love Lucy* exclusively from its premiere on October 15, 1951, through Christmas of 1954, then share sponsorship through June of 1955 with Procter and Gamble.

From the beginning, Philip Morris made *I Love Lucy* its own. It commissioned artists in New York to create animated stick figures of Lucy and Desi that would interact with Johnny Roventini, the diminutive bellboy who for nearly two decades had been belting out PM's advertising slogan, "Cal-I-I for-r-r Phil-lip Mor-ray-ssss," Indeed, Johnny's voice and/or face was often the first thing one heard/saw on Monday evening as *I Love Lucy* opened:



Like the series itself, Roventini owed his fame to Milton Biow. The Biow Agency landed the Philip Morris account in 1933, and immediately began scouting for a new way to promote the product. Because the cigarette had a man's name, Biow thought it might be a novel idea to have a commercial built around a bellboy "paging"

Philip Morris. He visited New York's Commodore Hotel and asked for the best bellhop in town. That was simple, he was told -- Johnny Roventini, a 22-year-old who worked at the Hotel New Yorker.

At 4 feet tall, Roventini was already billed as "the world's smallest bellboy," and even had his picture on postcards. (A pituitary gland disorder had halted his development before his voice changed, and left him with a 12-year-old's body for the rest of his life. His boyish, perfect B-flat voice made his "paging" a delight to hear.)

Biow gave the naive youth a dollar and asked him to page Philip Morris.

"I went around the lobby yelling my head off," Johnny recalled later, "but Philip Morris didn't answer my call."

Biow, charmed by Johnny's performance, offered him \$100 to do a radio commercial. (The young man had been making \$15 a week at the hotel.) The rest, as they say, is history. Roventini made his radio debut a short time later, accompanied by "On the Trail" from Ferde Grofe's "Grand Canyon Suite." The music worked so well for Philip Morris that it, too, became a trademark -- and was used well into the *Lucy* era. (The half-hour show often opened with a few strains of "On the Trail" -- and Johnny's famous call -- before Desi's orchestra chimed in with the *I Love Lucy* theme.)



Philip Morris invested heavily in radio advertising throughout the 1930s and '40s, often having two weekly programs on competing networks. The first, a variety show that ran for twelve seasons (1934-47) and combined musical and dramatic elements, was called *Johnny*



Presents, essentially giving Roventini "top billing" above all the big name guests that appeared on the broadcasts. The cigarette company also sponsored *Philip Morris Playhouse*, a dramatic anthology series that lasted 14 seasons (1939-53), finally switching to television. Throughout it all, Johnny was a walking public relations campaign, reminding people of the product wherever he appeared. In exchange for \$20,000 a year, Johnny promised never to appear in public without a bodyguard, and never to ride the New York subway during rush hour. When his salary rose to \$50,000, PM insured his voice for the same amount. "Johnny" ads were prominent on billboards and in magazines. Always in his red bellhop's uniform, he was seen "stepping out on storefronts all over America" to remind folks to smoke Philip Morris.

When *I Love Lucy* became part of the PM family, Lucy and Desi joined Johnny in many of the company's magazine print ads -- and artist's renderings of the threesome were included on Philip Morris cigarette cartons at Christmas time. PM also issued a "Lucy Notebook" (filled with recipes and household hints) and a Lucy Rag Doll as product premiums:



Philip Morris banners were draped throughout the Desilu soundstage on which the *Lucy* programs were filmed, and one episode, "Fred and Ethel Fight," had a Philip Morris sign (and Johnny cutouts) clearly visible on the back wall in the drugstore in which Ricky and Fred munch a sandwich.



On February 18, 1953 -- a month after the birth of "Little Ricky" in a program that garnered what was then the highest rating in TV history -- the Arnazes signed a new 2 1/2 year \$8-million contract with Philip Morris. In the photo below, Lucy and Desi are congratulated by producer Jess Oppenheimer (left), Harry Ackerman of CBS, and Harry W. Chesley, Jr., vice president of Philip Morris:



Contract or no contract, Lucy's career and future were threatened the week of September 6, when columnist Walter Winchell and various other news sources accused Lucy of being a Communist. The accusations were untrue, but newspapers around the country had a field-day reporting the story. Philip Morris weighed the evidence and stood behind its star 100 percent. A week later, Johnny Roventini was at Desilu in person to underscore the sponsor's commitment to *Love Lucy*. It was a gesture Lucy never forgot.



In February, 1954, the Arnazes visited New York City on a publicity trip to promote the release of their new motion-picture, "The Long, Long Trailer." Philip Morris invited the stars to visit their home office on Park Avenue. An industrious public relations man hung a huge "Welcome Lucy and Ricky" sign in the building's lobby -- and attracted hundreds of people from neighboring offices. By the time the Arnazes arrived, the lobby was jammed and Philip Morris had a record number of visitors to its 4th floor offices. While there, Lucy and Desi (and Johnny!) visited with many of the company employees:



By late 1954, however, Philip Morris sales were on the decline and the company decided an all-new marketing strategy was in order. It elected to share sponsorship of *I Love Lucy* with Procter and Gamble, and to use many of the spring telecasts to introduce a new cigarette brand, Marlboro. Neither the Arnazes nor Johnny appeared in those ads.

PM relinquished sponsorship of *I Love Lucy* at the end of the 1954-55 season, and bowed out of TV altogether for a short period. It moved its advertising account from Milton Biow's agency to N. W. Ayer and Sons, and looked for new ways in which to sell its products. When the company came back to TV, it was not with Johnny or *Lucy* or even the original Philip Morris brand. Rather, the spotlight switched entirely to Marlboro and other subsidiary brands. Johnny was

out; the Marlboro Man was in.

PM, however, gave Johnny a lifetime contract and continued to use him sporadically for special events. Such an occasion was "Lucy Day" at the 1964 New York World's Fair:



Lucy and Johnny were reunited one last time in April, 1984, when the Museum of Broadcasting (now the Museum of Television & Radio) hosted a special dinner for the comedienne at the St. Regis Hotel in New York. The gala launched a week of one-woman question-and-answer sessions by Lucy for the Museum and a five month retrospective of the lady's work in TV. Appropriately, Philip Morris picked up the tab.



Johnny Roventini passed away on November 30, 1998, at the age of 88. He had devoted much of his retirement years to enjoying such hobbies as sports cars and the cabin cruisers he kept in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. His original uniform (red ushers jacket, piped trousers, black pillbox hat and white gloves) was

donated to the American Ad Museum, in Portland, Oregon.

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