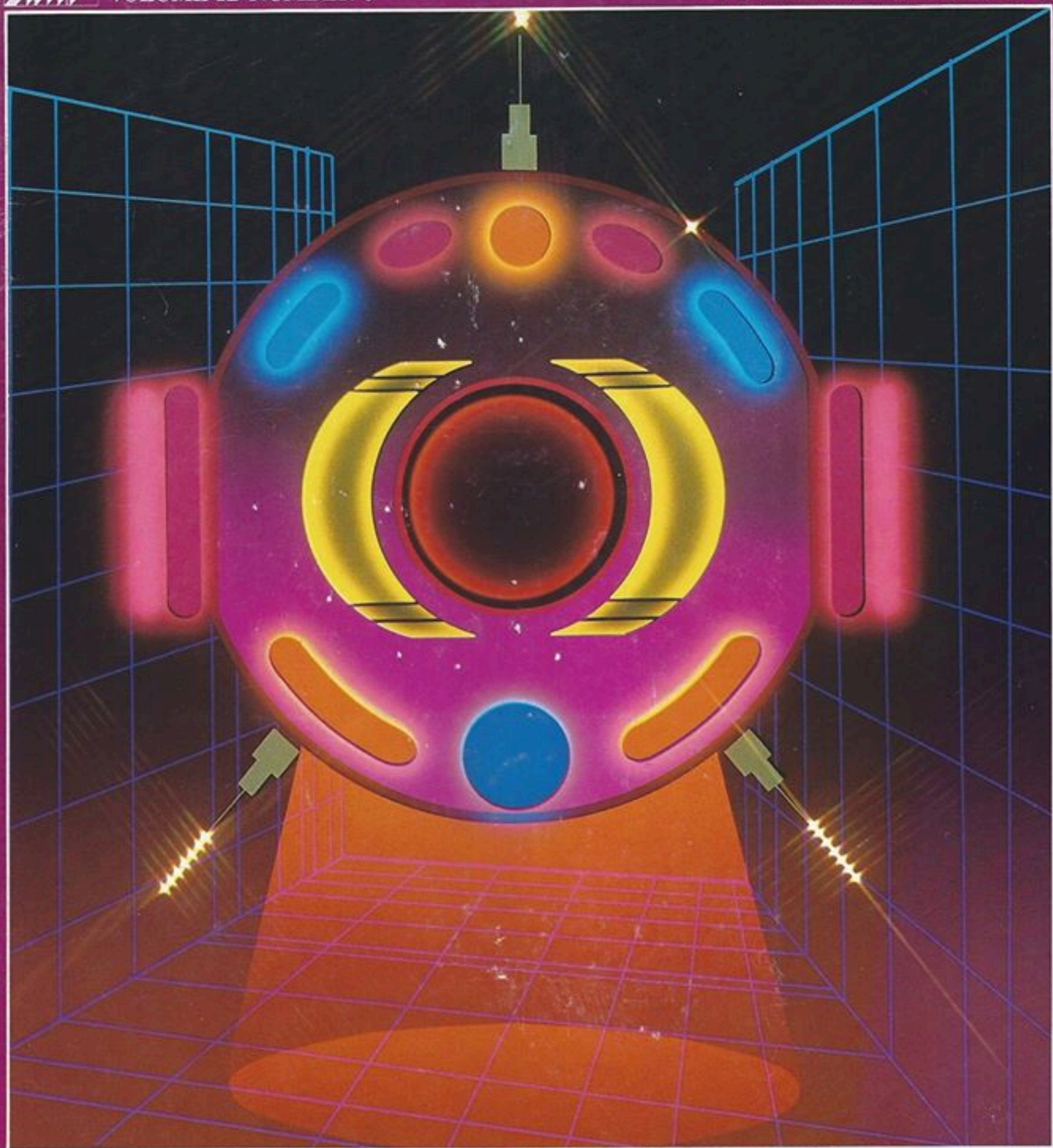


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THE GLOBAL VIEW

Northern Lights: AVC, Sweden's Bright Success

BY JUDY ROLAND

Until last May, Scandinavia was unknown territory to me; then I visited Stockholm, hoping to discover a bit about what was happening to communications (including multi-image) in Sweden. I had a dim memory of the country's main tourist attractions, left over from my days as a travel writer, and I'd formed a vague idea of what life might be like there: high standards of living; smorgasbord meals; well-designed furniture; people who were clean and charming; but not really in the "mainstream" of the Western world. It wasn't much to go on, but I wasn't worried about "adjusting."

After all, culture shock isn't what one expects when traveling from one part of Europe to another. But even as I unpacked my bags, I was confronted with the unsettling realization that here was a country that was probably *better* attuned to international communication than the UK, where I live.

I had expected to find quaint provincialism. Instead, the radio in my room offered a choice of Swedish, English, French or Arabic language stations; a copy of the international *Financial Times* was delivered to me without asking every morning. On television were films from Japan, France, America and Australia. I learned that any foreign national who emigrated to Sweden could take Swedish language courses — at the government's expense. I couldn't imagine that kind of thing happening in Britain.

So, when I went to visit The Business Communications Group, Sweden's oldest, largest and most-successful multimedia organization, I already had acquired a new humility, and high expectations of their productions; just as well, as it turned out.



AVC produces shows for more than 100 clients, including the top 20 Swedish companies.

How to Corner A Market

"AVC was the first production company in Sweden. Almost all of the people who work for our competitors have at one time worked for AVC. Without AVC, no one in this country would know what a rostrum camera was." The words are those of Lars Hellquist, who is both the production manager and a senior producer with AVC AB, the original core company of the group, which now forms part of BCG.

What his statement hints at is that 15-year-old AVC "cornered the market" and set the standard of Swedish screen communications for most of its corporate life. That advantage undoubtedly provided not only the breathing space to experiment and develop, but the profitability they would need to take them through the "crunch" that was to come.

Reaching for the Stars

During the early years, growth was rapid, and specialized functions were hived off into separate profit centers within the BCG family (AVC Film and

Video, and AV Huset, which handles equipment and staging). But Sweden's rigorous and complex corporate taxation system posed a tough challenge to BCG's "founding father": should they go on expanding, and if so, how could they do so without effectively handing all the profits back to the government?

They opted for growth, but recognized the need for a sound business head to monitor their progress. So, in 1980, Håkan Bertilsson was hired as managing director (today he is financial director of BCG and manages AV Huset). By 1981, turnover stood at around \$2 million a year. Two more key people were hired: Lars Hellquist and Bo Ströman (present managing director of the group). The work continued to pour in; turnover doubled and then redoubled, *but what about the quality of the end product?*

Coming Down to Earth

"At that time, we produced on the level of our knowledge of rostrum work. We thought we were very good," Bo Ströman explains. "But we saw some shows at a Stockholm festival by our competitors that made us feel we had to improve. Sometimes, we had involved an American, English or French person to produce our shows. But they all have different ways of working, which meant that we couldn't educate our personnel."

It's important to understand how crucial this moment of truth was for AVC. It was doing phenomenally well in pure business terms and got nearly all the plum jobs by default. In spite of a growing number of small competitors, there was every indication of a very comfortable future. It would have been the easiest

(Continued on next page)



The Business Communications Group Board meets in their Stockholm headquarters.

thing in the world to be complacent. To its credit, BCG wasn't. Having seen that someone was doing visually superior work, they committed themselves to equaling or exceeding that standard.

Sadly, none of their free-lance creatives provided the right guidance, until 1984, when Douglas Mesney was asked to work on a Saab show. Kurt Hjelte, creative head of BCG comments, "He started to demand things that we couldn't produce. He requested from his experience and on how he produced shows. The stuff that he wanted our rostrum camera people to do, they didn't know what he was talking about. It was another world to them."

When I visited, Mesney still was providing free-lance consultancy to BCG. (He has since started his own Stockholm multi-image company, Epic Productions, but still cooperates/consults with BCG on some projects.) Mesney continues the story: "In the course of doing the Saab show, I identified various problems. The biggest was that production techniques and technology were absolutely archaic. Nobody knew how to make a Forox shoot one-to-one. They had a fabulous gridding system to communicate between the art department and the camera department, but the people in the camera department were using it in such a way that nothing would line up. The processing was either done by hand or with a machine that was probably built in 1910. So, the lack of production technology was holding down the creative opportunities."

This was "the crunch." The choice: stagnation and a steady decline in com-

petitiveness, or growth and improvement. The cost: a quarter of a million pounds (\$375,000) and a complete turnaround in working attitudes and practices.

Breaking Free of Limitations

"It had to happen" is what everyone at BCG says now about that heart-stopping moment when they decided to risk it all. As Ströman says now, "What we had to do in one year was to make investments that should have been done five years earlier, all in one go." If the flow of work had dipped even temporarily, could the group have survived? "Probably not. We invested everything," he said.



Kurt Hjelte, the founder of AVC, is according to his colleagues, "a shy, creative genius."

The result is as close to perfection as you will find in any production house that I have ever seen: automated processing for every stage of production; an accurate registration system throughout; two more rostrum cameras with a refined grid system; plus advanced software systems to monitor and control production, produce sophisticated graphics and communicate throughout the group; everything right down to a proper clean room for mounting slides.

"With the new 'factory,'" adds Mesney, "the learning curves shot up like a rocket." It has proven to be an ideal environment for training, too, and the group is using its new facilities to develop skills of students from Sweden's relatively new communication colleges, which also should prove to be a good investment.

Getting Ready for Tomorrow

Was it all worth it? Those at BISFA '85, who saw "Our Forest," or the centenary celebration program for *Svenska*



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AMI News Update

Dagbladet, or the silver-winning Saab show (voted "Best of Festival" by the audience) know the answer. So do any of you who saw AVC shows at this year's AMI Festival, and so do international visitors to IBM in Kista, Sweden's "Silicon Valley." There, BCG has carried out one of the most-impressive installations in the world. Worth more than \$3.5 million, it is the largest private contract of its kind ever made in Sweden, and it involved BCG's total expertise: from architectural and interior design consultancy through providing leading-edge technology and control systems, and several multi-image shows for IBM's prestigious training center. But that is another story, and deserves its own article.

The point is this: with only minor exceptions, the Business Communication Group has its act together. Faced with the toughest international standards of examination and competition, the



AVC shows have been honored with awards in a variety of international festivals, including the 1986 AMI Festival.

company has proven itself equal to the challenge.

And the next stage? With the top 20 Swedish companies on its client list of more than 100, BCG literally has outgrown the confines of the Swedish market. Now, through the infant AVC New York (at the moment only a 'contact' address) and a variety of European initiatives still in the planning stages, they are getting ready to roll out their success to the rest of the world.

Yet, just think what might have happened to them if, only two years ago, at the peak of their success, they hadn't had the humility to admit that they could be *better* — and the guts to try.

Judy Roland is a free-lance writer based in Wiltshire, England, and also is marketing director for Images Images International Ltd. in Wiltshire.