

## “Call for Philip Morris!”

Johnny Roventini (also known as John Louis Roventini and popularly as Johnny Philip Morris) (August 15, 1910 – November 30, 1998) was an American dwarf actor of Italian-American heritage. Less than four feet tall as a fully developed adult, Roventini was working as a bellboy at the New Yorker Hotel in 1933 when he was discovered by an advertising mogul, who had him perform a page, issuing a "Call for Philip Morris". He reportedly could always vocalize a perfect B-flat tone as he repeated those words, literally over a million times during his career, according to his own estimate.

He soon became famous as a product spokesman for Philip Morris brand cigarettes in radio, television and print advertising media. He was described by Philip Morris personnel as a "living trademark", and represented the company for over 40 years. He also played roles in the growth of broadcast media, most notably helping Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz with the initial success of their innovative *I Love Lucy* comedy series beginning in 1951.

The famous "Call for Philip Morris" advertising campaign predates Johnny Roventini's role and began during World War I. A drawing of a bellboy carrying a tray with a box of cigarettes on it was the original mascot. The campaign had been successful and was used for 15 years with artistic variations as the only significant changes.

In 1933, advertising executive Milton H. Biow was managing the advertising account of Philip Morris cigarettes. Biow had an idea to bring new life (literally) to the mature "bellboy with tray of cigarettes" campaign. He had heard of the distinctive voice and appearance of Roventini. Biow and Philip Morris executive Alfred E. Lyons went to the hotel where Johnny worked. They sat in the lobby and observed him, noting both his diminutive size and distinctive voice.

According to the legend, Biow approached him and paid Johnny a dollar to page a "Mr. Philip Morris" throughout the lobby. The small bellboy repeatedly cried out "Call for Philip Morris" in his distinctive high pitched voice, several times, not knowing that there was no such person. He did not realize that he had been essentially performing an audition. "I went around the lobby yelling my head off," Johnny recalled later, "but Philip Morris didn't answer my call. I had no idea that Philip Morris was a cigarette."

He is possibly best remembered of all his Philip Morris related-work for the *I Love Lucy* show. The show was enormously popular with the viewing public, and industry watchers reported that Lucy, Desi and Johnny had soon become fast friends while working together.

In 1959, NBC Radio aired a special half-hour program to celebrate the 25th anniversary of his career, describing him as "an advertising giant". In the years after tobacco advertising was prohibited in broadcast communications regulated by the FCC, Roventini made personal appearances for Philip Morris until he retired in 1974.

In retirement, he enjoyed sailing. He never married, and died in White Plains, New York, in 1998 at the age of 88. The cause of death was listed as "natural causes". "Johnny's fame as an advertising legend was enhanced by an ever-present smile and outstretched hand that won him friends wherever he went," Philip Morris eulogized. [<http://en.wikipedia>]

