

ACCOUNT PLANNING : PHILOSOPHIES OR FUNCTIONS

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A CLIENT VIEW : PLANNING IN PERSPECTIVE

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Ever since I have been in marketing times have been tough, and increasingly competitive. I am not a MacMillan - marketeer : the you-never-had-it-so good days when perhaps even the worst ad. could sell plenty of product.

The oil crisis, the recession, high inflation, massive unemployment, own label, contracting ownership of distribution, and greater restrictions on advertising.

I share with the majority of you - careers in marketing and advertising which get tougher and more competitive, everything needing more and more fine tuning, often running faster just to stand still - I call it "the endless search for that extra edge". Today, it does not just mean striving for the odd point-gain in the market share, but also, all too often the difference between a business surviving or dying.

What intrigues me is that not only has this been my business environment, but also the time in which Account Planning has really developed. Spawned from the blunt instrument of the agency research department - and the increasing need for greater interpretive skills by account managers, and clients.

In the endless earch for that extra edge, Account Planning has developed as a means and a catalyst towards creating more effective advertising and communication.

There are a number of interpretations of the concept, the role, the benefits of Account Planning - they vary among different types of client - and different agencies.

It is these different perspectives that I want to examine further from a client's standpoint.

But whether a philosophy or a function, first of all I would suggest that the mere fact of its existence is a major step forward in the development of communication.

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For established marketing companies and agencies, Account Planning adds an extra dimension to fine tuning communication. To unsophisticated companies it can mean the start of real communication.

And I mean not just communication between advertiser and consumer - but between account team and creative team - and importantly between client and agency.

In the weeks since I was asked to speak at today's event, two different but related aspects of advertising were brought home to me talking to a client, and some agency staff.

The first was the Marketing Manager of a medium-sized service company. We started talking about development of advertising, and he told me that he had had enough of it. He always had problems because he could never agree with his boss on a campaign. Each thought they were right. In that great British tradition his boss of course was always right. I asked him if he had done any concept development, or any pre-testing. Maybe they could prove the case either way. The problem was that he literally knew nothing about doing such things - and his agency either didn't, or hadn't told him, perhaps for fear of proving the boss wrong.

The second concerns a certain airline - not British - which insists on using the same advertisement worldwide. Coincidentally, and unconnected to each other I talked with the agency for their U.K. business, and some people involved in their Far East business. The U.K. people were resentful of being told where on the layout the copy should be placed, and how many words to use. No consideration as to whether the advert would suit this market. The Far East people had exactly the same complaint, only worse. When it came to their market, they were told to place an advertisement for some package tours using prescribed layout, and rigid copy controls. What made it worse was that this is a totally alien and unknown concept in their area - where people had never heard of package tours.

Now I quote these two examples because they underline some critical factors relating to my speech.

Firstly, that I have only experienced some of these sorts of problems - my background has generally been in sophisticated marketing companies who understand a little more about advertising, the way advertising works - and how to fine tune it.

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My view is therefore not wholly typical - and therefore has to be A client view, not the client view.

Secondly, Account Planning exists in an environment beyond just the agency and the consumer - the client is critical to it as well. I want to develop this factor in a short while.

From my standpoint it appears that the creation, the development, and production of advertising involves client, agency, and consumer.

It is important to know and understand client needs and motivations. This conclusion comes from seeing different agencies adopt, adapt, or ignore the planning role internally and externally. The human relationships involved in it. The science and the art of it.

I will tell you now that my belief is that Planning should be wide ranging, continuous, rigorous, but adaptive and flexible.

I want to start by looking at some of the approaches I have seen as a client of various agencies - then look at the client input and effect on the role - then give you some other personal observations.

I have worked with, or had experience of, a number of large and small agencies; hot shops and monoliths; some without an account planning role; some in which the role is fundamental; some which only had research department and account men.

I have also been one of the sponsors of the setting up of a Planning Department in a particular agency.

Let me take a look at some of the approaches to Account Planning - or lack of them that I've seen - and the effects that I believe they have on the resultant advertising. I am not going to name names. But in terms of the results of their different approaches, it is surprising how similar results, successes, or errors emerge.

The first type is the agency which has no real planning role. There may be nothing or just a research department - integrated or run as a separate profit centre. Depending on whether or not my company has it's own research department or pet supplier - what this agency offers in this field is either satisfactory or useless.

This agency seems likely to be either very small or old school - usually it has a good highly experienced account man, who can work well with the client in general terms, and with the creative team.

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If highly technical demands are placed on him - say to do with briefing his creative team on sophisticated consumer motivation to purchasing - then he flounders. On the other hand he has not often got strong grounds on which to criticize creative work. The resultant effect of such an agency organisation and style is either what is described as the "Full Perm" creative job.

The creative man does not really understand what is required of him, he presents six scripts and maybe as many storyboards - and the client perms what he wants from these.

If not this result - then it is the single creative solution presented either aggressively - hard sell the client - or unconvincing passively. The chances of it being great advertising are okay, but the chances of it being really relevant or consistent are thin.

An unsophisticated client is perhaps more likely to buy it; a sophisticated client may well test it first, and then perhaps blow it away.

I think all of us are familiar with this approach - I think it works with enlightened, brilliant creative men, who have a real feel for the product field, but they are all too few. They can overcome the lack of Account Planning input - or have in the past been able to do so.

In the future, with so much competition, and growing client and consumer sophistication, this will become more difficult.

Another approach - the "research department under a different name". This approach is not that dissimilar in terms of net result. To call someone a researcher one day, and a planner the next, obviously begs the question of whether or not the agency is committed to the philosophy, the function or simply the fashion of the name. It can be the inevitable result of the transition of a non-planning agency into a planning agency.

If the so-called planner is not involved closely with the creative team, or with the client, and this still remains the sole function of the account man - then again there is a good chance of the role not working and the advertising being irrelevant, or becoming so.

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This may of course happen by design. The agency may believe in planning and be fully geared up for it - but have employed the wrong type of person. If Planner A does not have a real understanding, or capability for the role - if he is a researcher not an advertising man. Then he needs either to team up with an exceptionally good Account Man - to really train himself into Account Planning - or he should go back to research.

The third approach is sometimes complex. Really differences on a theme.

It is very much at the heart of the debate on the role of planning. I term it for our reference - the Dip-into, Dip out-of approach.

It is where planning is a part of the strategy development programme - creatively using basic research data, and possibly concept development. But it stops prior to or after, the briefing of the creative team.

Or, it is where planning is used for developing a campaign including, or excluding strategy development, briefing, and pre, and perhaps post, testing. But planning is not a continuing process. In other words it tends to be brought in and out of the cupboard only when an advertisement is required - almost a la carte.

My own Company had one or two interesting examples of the results of this some years ago, which for me exemplify the sort of shortcomings that can be experienced.

The intriguing thing here is that it is still possible to make major mistakes if the Account Planning role is applied over the totality of one campaign's development - but not the continued development of a campaign over time.

This therefore leads me to the final approach. Where Account Planning works alongside Account Management. Where it is involved with the account and client continuously, and across every aspect of the advertising and marketing mix.

From my experience of this approach the benefits are the most all-embracing. There is the most complete understanding between Client and Agency; the best development of relevant and most effective advertising; the least likelihood of making mistakes in the short or long-term; and the most chance of recognising, and capitalising on long term consumer trends both in general and within the product field.

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I have to admit, that the best example for me is that of the Paul Masson campaign. This is a wine which in three years has become the fifth largest in the U.K. retail market - and owns virtually 90% of the California wine market segment in the U.K. - having seen off all the major U.S. brands during three years. I don't claim it will always be in this position, but I do believe it would not have achieved what it has today without the full and uninhibited input of Account Planning.

I know this is true of many other brands, products, and services from companies in many different fields.

I shall refer back to Paul Masson later on.

Well, if those are some of the approaches, one key factor seems to fit in the equation all the time - sometimes not to a great extent, other times to an overriding extent.

That factor is the client. In the two problems I mentioned at the start of my talk the key factors were the client. If you don't understand the client, then all the effort you put into developing advertising can be lost.

Fundamentally, Account Planning has to be able to read the needs of three players - the client, the agency, and the consumer.

But if it is to creatively use and interpret data, in order to improve communication, it must be able to understand, and help the understanding of, client needs as much as those of the consumer.

If the creative team does not really know enough about my Company, or brands development, my marketing objectives, then they may not create advertising which is relevant to my objectives.

So let's take a look at the client. Account Planners cannot work in isolation from him, they should be in close contact. So they should also learn or develop the skills of the account man in dealing with him. The first of these is actually to get to know him - if you don't and no relationship develops, then on his business you may be a non-participant.

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Clients have very different styles and standards; varied levels of sophistication - they can be extremely competent; they can be seat-of-the-pants, aggressive, entrepreneurial, or passive pen-pushers - beware, for example, the so-called opportunity-negative client - he who has more to lose from failing, than to gain from success.

I once worked for a man who told me that first and foremost he wanted Product Managers who could "get on with people". But very often, these people did not have the wherewithall to say "no" - and consequently could lead an agency along a blind alley. Conversely, I have worked with people who could only upset account teams and planners wishing to talk face-to-face with the creatives - and could consequently end up with the wrong creative work.

It is important to get to know and understand the clients strengths, weaknesses, motivations, and doubts, almost as important as getting to know those of the creative team you are briefing.

Clients also have very different businesses : be they service companies, food companies, drink companies. Some of course are far more interesting than others - some are extraordinarily complicated. The growth in micro-computers creates a real problem for planners, account men , or creative teams in terms of understanding the product field. But it is necessary to go beyond this.

To understand their competitors; their customers, if they are not end-users; their trade structure. I have been amazed how many agencies do not endeavour to understand - and have experienced difficulties therefore in being able to communicate, and particularly to create relevant advertisements as a result.

The other problems that arise from this are also that the client may not understand his own business - what it really is; what factors really influence it. They may not know their own consumers.

Consider how many clients will tell you that they know a good ad for their product when they see one. But they do not purchase within the product field themselves. And they have not talked to their consumers. How many clients do you know for instance who attend group discussions - or who have done so recently.

Clients must understand their own business in order to understand the advertising you create - and you must understand their business in order to produce relevant advertising - and help them to understand their business.

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Clients have different and varied organisations and structures. Some have evolved over time, and never been questioned; others are streamlined and efficient.

Some are "full service", others very lean. There may be a Marketing Department, even a Research Department - there may be nothing. Account Planning has of course to be flexible enough to cope with the organisation structure as it exists - to adapt to it where necessary. If Account Planning is to be allowed to fulfil its role by the client - the account planner has to be sensitive to the structure of the client company, and the evolution of that structure.

Clients may also have rules. Understand them. They may have to test concepts, copy, or commercials in particular ways. This generally is more true of international companies. Every company I have worked for, has had set procedures of one form or another. Local affiliate management may not want to use all the procedures or techniques, but they may be obliged to - very often it is for the benefit of corporate management who, after all, maybe travelling in the Far East one day and the U.K. the next.

If they get involved in advertising or new product decision-making, they want to talk the same language in Tokyo and in London. You may not like it - maybe local client management does not like it - but it helps that you know the rules and apply them. There is nothing worse than an Account Planner who perpetually tells a client that using a particular research technique is garbage - and his company should change its whole international rule book. The chances are, that the client would love to do so - but he can't. Neither can you.

The other key difference in types of client companies and their perspective of planning is related to that company's own objectives - this of course is dependent on the type of business, the industry, the size of business, and cost and profit pressures.

Often the business objectives, let alone the marketing or advertising objectives, have not been clearly defined, or they have not been clearly explained. Are they going for growth at the expense of short-term profitability? - Are they seeking to maximize R.O.I.? What?

Similarly, the objectives may be difficult to understand, or accept - for example, why an international corporation may choose to run an international advertising campaign.

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The Account Planning role needs to understand what a client is trying to achieve as a business - not just what brand objectives are.

The Account Planning process therefore falls out of this in two ways - firstly, its scope and secondly its timescale. As I've said, I have worked with agencies who simply plug in so-called Planning at the stage of development of an advertisement - not before, nor after - and I have worked with agencies who run it as a continuum. But I have also worked in companies which involve their agencies in the total marketing planning, and those who phone up when they simply want the next ad.

Undoubtedly, the Account Planning role helps under any of these circumstances - however, I do not believe it works as well, and I believe it runs risks of making many mistakes if used on a dipping-in and out basis.

Account Planning needs to have scope for it to be most effective - from what I have seen the role contributes most to effective advertising and communication where it is fully involved, and used; and where this happens on a continuous basis - it is therefore as much a role for helping direct a creative team in the long term as in the short term.

But additionally it is involved with and part of the whole client input into advertising - helping to understand the client, as much as helping to understand the consumer.

They should be creative users of data. They should be advertising people first and foremost - and they should work as part of the team alongside Account Managers.

Part of the team which works with the client, part of the team which briefs the creative group.

In the changing role of the Account Manager, which inevitably must happen as Account Planning evolves, Account Planners will find themselves relating more and more with the sophisticated Marketing Manager - and Marketing Managers will become more sophisticated, partly as a result of this.

In my view, he does not supercede the Account Manager, who is ultimately responsible for the running of the account, the briefing and strategy development. But in many ways, the Account Planner may have technical or scientific knowledge which is closer to the client than the Account Manager, and therefore has a close a relationship with the client as with the Account Manager.

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The role should be involved in the development of strategy, of brand positioning - and personality development. From these on to development and fine tuning of advertising concepts, and finished development.

The role should also be a continuous process which does not simply mean going from A to B, but keeps returning to A, and asking again some of the original questions - recognising that market and consumer trends are consistently moving - new user groups emerging - attitude configurations altering - segment shifts - as they say : different sorts of people are coming off the production line. This must be tracked, recognised, and understood. - sometimes the client will do it - very often not. So Account Planning has to be responsible in order to ensure understanding by all those concerned - and particularly by those who are writing this seasons advertisement.

If planning is a philosophy, a belief in a means by which one seeks to improve advertising effectiveness, then it is responsible for using the tools which are available, to achieve this object. It must be pragmatic in terms of adapting to new techniques and different clients requirements. Above all it must use them. Different people have different views on techniques - resulting from experience; from banks of norms; or simply because they want to keep pushing forward in their understanding.

The acid test for Account Planning has to be whether or not the technique does add to understanding.

This may mean using new techniques, using the new technology such as micro-computers pre-programmed and on-line to central processors - or it may mean going back to basics.

To me it is mandatory to screen concepts, to pre-test animatics of TV commercials; to pre-test rough press ads, or posters. Also it is mandatory to pre-test finished commercials. When a client is spending tens of thousands of pounds on T.V. production, he has a responsibility to spend a few thousand testing animatics or at least storyboards, to ensure that the commercial is going to communicate the right message to consumers. The finished commercial should then be tested as a final check. I would add that in the real world there is often not enough time; but I do believe time should be made. From there once advertising has broken, it should be tracked.

Post testing, using tracking studies is surely also an essential part of the measurement of effectiveness in the marketplace - and measurement against the prescribed advertising objectives.

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The Paul Masson example is a very good one.

To get to this commercial we pre-tested a number of concepts - for California wine we nearly fell into the trap of being generic - one of our competitors did with an advertisement that almost exactly matched a concept we rejected. His brand failed.

We tested in animatic - and screened over a dozen presenters before selecting Ian Carmichael. Consumers remember our brand name first - and our presenters name later - not so one of our competition whose brand name consumers do not remember so well - although they remember the presenters.

The continuous use of Planning has also allowed us to avoid making a massive mistake in the development of a follow-up commercial.

We continue to test - always screening animatics, always tracking afterwards. We run fewer ratings than our competitors - yet we have higher awareness and content recall, and repeat purchase rates than any of them. The Account Planning role has helped - plus of course great creative work.

So to the future, I would make some small observations - Account Planning is about communication - and clients communicate with consumers through other forms besides advertising. It should be having input in P.R., promotions, and sponsorship projects to ensure a synergy of communication. To ensure that none of the messages being delivered to consumers are competing with each other - confusing the consumer - and undermining the advertising.

Account Planning should involve itself in media planning for the same reasons. Helping the media people to understand fully the brand or product and the consumer who is purchasing.

You should always remember to look for the angle that no-one else has found - to take a lateral approach to data. In the same way you expect copy writers or art directors to find new angles.

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You can take heart from a new book published by David Ogilvy, which finishes with him predicting 13 changes in the future of the advertising business.

The first of these predictions is that the quality of research will improve, which will generate greater knowledge as to what works and does not, and creative people will learn to exploit this knowledge and improve their strike rate at the cash register.

Afterall, that is what it's all about.

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"Perhaps it was because Nero played the fiddle, that they burned Rome".

If this hadn't been said by one Oliver Heford, a number of years ago, I'd like to think that it might have been suggested by an Account Planner.

Because in the final analysis, this is what the role requires - to keep asking questions : to look for new, or different interpretations - so as to increase understanding, and relevance.

Perhaps if Nero had had an Account Planner he would not have made the mistakes which led them to burn Rome.

And perhaps with committment to, and use of, Account Planning, clients and agencies will not fiddle while Rome burns.