

"WORKING TOGETHER"

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Being asked to speak on this topic is a little like being asked to describe how to ride a bicycle. You don't really know. It's largely a matter of trial and error, balance and confidence, and suddenly you are doing it.

We have now had three years to master the technique - most of which have been spent with the appropriate part of our anatomy in the saddle.

Starting a new agency is an exciting and demanding experience,

Many open with an account or two already in the bag - whilst that can provide the all-important financial reassurance in the short term, it can bring difficulties later.

Not having an account with which to be immediately concerned provided us with a great advantage - the veritable blank sheet.

On this we could set down precisely what we stood for. What business objectives we wanted for ourselves, what kind of agency we wished to be and how we could best organise ourselves to achieve both our business objectives and the desired creative output.

We could look at others and learn from their winning ways as well as their mistakes. Most of all though, with only four of us, we ought to be able to implement our beliefs and principles.

Between the four of us there were years of experience of working in, and running some of the best agencies in town. Three of us represented what we believed to be the critical structural components for any agency - an account handler, a planner and a creative person. The fourth, the managing director, was there to keep us all in check.

I have yet to hear of an agency that doesn't want to produce creative work that is distinctive, relevant and imaginative. The number and variety of agencies in town, together with the fact that even the largest has only a relatively small share of market surely testifies that no one has yet unearthed the advertising equivalent of the philosopher's stone.

A dogmatic adherence to a specific philosophy or advertising model - be it Dagmar, the USP, brand image or whatever couldn't cope with the ever increasing variety of advertising problems with which agencies were now being

presented.

Means were clearly critical and we were in no doubt about the relevance of the planning input to the advertising process. The practical considerations of working procedures I will address shortly.

Our overriding concern was to create an environment where everyone, regardless of function, believed in the ability of imaginative advertising to change the fortune of brands, and moreover that no one should hold sole proprietorial rights within any function within the agency.

This may sound a strange prerequisite, after all doesn't everyone in our business believe in the end product?

We felt not. Such faith that existed was largely illusory, and tended to be overshadowed by their own rather parochial concerns. Media men were increasingly anxious about costs and new media opportunities, account handlers continued to agonize over agency/client relationships, planners were becoming even more neurotic about technique.

These concerns are in themselves legitimate, but not to the exclusion of a concern about broader issues. The industry was becoming myopic.

Putting commonality of principles and beliefs about advertising in general, ahead of specific skills we believed

would ensure that the best type of stimulating environment to achieve the desired goals was created.

It is the chemical interaction between a group of like minded individuals, each with a particular skill to contribute, and where these skills are universally appreciated, that will eventually create great advertising.

It could not be achieved by building strong functions alone, without regard to the subtle often complex way in which great work is produced.

Planners could not, and should not content themselves with writing the perfect strategy or great creative brief. Likewise a good creative person should not be regarded as the one who alone is required to come up with the veritable "big idea".

Creative people would require a new sense of responsibility, equally concerned with the planner and others about the appropriateness of a strategy, and would be encouraged to voice those opinions. Everyone was to be ultimately adjudged by the end product, not merely the creative department.

We recognised that it would not be an easy task to build a large agency quickly around such beliefs. What was achievable by four, would not necessarily work on a larger

scale. We were going to need the help of others - they too would need not only to understand our views but be able to implement them. We now have 60 people - we think we have been reasonably successful in finding and encouraging talent to adopt a less insular attitude towards their own specific skill or area of expertise. There have inevitably been some casualties along the way - the occasional client who finds the multi-disciplinary, inter-active approach difficult to cope with; people from very rigid agency backgrounds have also found the challenge sometimes beyond them.

There is no perfect way of producing good work. We like our approach, it is tough but it seems to work.

Given the broad agency requirement from everyone, what kind of planning did we want, or most relevantly, need.

We had all agreed the general responsibilities of the planner within our new agency - I think they are fairly conventional. Our major concern lay over the role that research would play in creative development, and how and by whom it could be best undertaken.

Whilst we agreed that strategy development could be undertaken through the use of creative work in some conceptual form or even highly finished material such as animatics, the resources of a creative department are best directed towards that which they do best - producing advertisements.

We were not going to use creative work to help planners fix, or refine strategy. To use creative time and effort to produce what is in effect simply research stimuli material is not only cost inefficient, but demoralising and unrewarding for those charged with its creation. It is also what probably created, or has helped stimulate a widespread belief among creative people that planners simply view them as producers of research fodder, and as a means of enabling others to sort their thinking out. Even worse they (planners) don't care about the real end product (an advertisement) but are obsessed with the minutiae of the wording and emphasises of the strategy statement, or research methodology.

This is not to say that the strategy cannot be developed or revised after the agreement of a creative brief and subsequent production of creative work. It can be, and is. What is important however is that there is total agreement to the strategy at the time of writing the creative brief.

Within the account group structure and headed by the account director, planners are given the specific responsibility of determining strategy and producing the creative brief.

To this end we make extensive use of all forms of research not merely qualitative, but undoubtedly this type of research undertaken sensitively yields the richest source of understanding so essential to writing the type of creative brief which encourages, enlightens and elevates those charged with responding to it.

There is no merit whatsoever in the tedious rewriting of the client's marketing strategy, changing the odd word here and there, adding the witty aside and believing that constitutes your best means of getting the great advertisement. It doesn't and it won't.

One's best chance of getting there comes largely from the controlled efforts of a team committed to the end product, and where the most relevant input should be coming from a planner charged not merely with checking out the consumer, what are his current thoughts and beliefs, but with the more demanding and invaluable role of assessing where they can be taken.

The task of assessing potential in terms of brand positioning, and the implication for advertising strategy requires not only good, sensitive research skills, and the ability to discriminate between what consumers say and what they mean, but a real willingness to bring about the desired change.

It is at this point that I would question the conventional definition of a planner who being charged with representing the consumer within the agency does best do so by representing the forces of logic, reason, analysis and so called "objectivity".

I do not believe he does bring about the intended change

most efficiently in this manner. How often do we see these kind of organisational charts in planning agencies?

Here we have specialists representing differing views and beliefs and all of which are fed into the advertising process.

The planner represents the consumer or the brand conscience, the account man, the objective business viewpoint. In our business there really is no such thing as pure objectivity in the setting of advertising strategy. There is only controlled subjectivity.

Planners do not faithfully observe the world stripped of any personal beliefs, feelings, attitudes or emotions. They assess what they see, read and hear through all of these, and produce strategies, briefs or creative assessments accordingly.

What we should surely seek to do is to ensure that those beliefs and attitudes are identical to those of the rest of the agency team, be they account men or creative people.

People in other functions are in exactly the same position. What is produced by the creative department must ultimately accord with the Creative Directors view of what constitutes a great ad. Again, there are no absolutes.



Planners therefore undertake strategy development research themselves. Not only do we reduce the number of unknown variables in the interpretation of data by avoiding the use of outside researchers, we impose upon them the onus of responsibility for strategy resolution.

It is incumbent upon them to strive for an advertising solution, and they cannot resort to such claims as "the research hasn't yet thrown any light on the subject", or even worse reap some grim satisfaction from telling others that "the strategy is wrong!".

Physically conducting research to develop strategy and eventually assess creative work, does in our opinion sharpen all of the planner's senses and commitment to the end product, in a way that spectating at, or second hand reporting of research can never achieve.

We encourage our planners to write their own concepts expressing them if they wish as crude advertisements, using whatever material they deem appropriate. A facility with a pair of scissors, a market pen and a tin of spray mount are invaluable assets! Even this basic involvement in, and personal appreciation of the creative process helps build a greater understanding of the problems facing creative people, and therefore improves the planner's chances of more effectively communicating with writers and art directors.

So much for advertising strategy; turning that into the stimulating document that a good creative brief should be is another matter. Our creative briefs are formulated around the principle of a core message, and are complemented by a reasonably short set of consumer responses.

Brevity for its own sake is not a formal requirement. We believe that a brief which distills and concentrates the creative focus is infinitely preferable to the portmanteau approach, characterized by its inability to omit any piece of information.

We find the notion of a one word brief difficult to accept but conversely find it equally difficult to accept that one of our own briefs produced in 1982 could not have been reduced from the original 21 pages!

To ensure a brief not only meets the account group's requirements, we also insist that every creative brief also receives the assent of the Creative Director and Planning Director acting jointly as guardians of the agency's creative and strategic output. Wherever possible the approval and discussion of the brief is done in concert.

We try and allow 3 months for creative work to be produced internally. The planner is on hand to offer help, advice and guidance whenever it is sought by the creative team. It is at this stage that planners begin to separate themselves into those that wish to merely impose their own ideas, and those that are truly helpful to the creative

team. Notwithstanding a belief in the notion of response objectives, it is salutary to note how often even they confuse means with ends. Tim will have more to say, and perhaps with more colour on this subject later.

Assuming there have been no more difficulties experienced, on its completion and only then is creative work discussed by the account and creative groups in forum.

No one would dispute that good creative work should be relevant and well targeted. It is in the area of distinctivity and innovation that the majority of problems between planners and creative people have conventionally arisen. We believe in exposing all of our work to the relevant consumers prior to its eventual production.

We try to avoid the term "pre-testing" with all of its pejorative connotations for creative people, and at a different level for clients.

There are no magical techniques or methods, but for obvious reasons our approach to creative assessment is almost exclusively qualitative. Only in rare instances where we had an extremely specific awareness of communication objective would quantitative techniques be considered, and only then in parallel with qualitative methods.

The days of long lasting product differences and hence a brand advantage appear to be over in the majority of consumer markets. Increasing emphasis is placed upon the advertising not merely to differentiate the brands, but in many markets to act as the brand discriminant itself.

We see an increasing emphasis being placed upon the relationship between consumer and the advertising itself, both in its form and content.

As much, but by no means all, advertising is designed primarily to reinforce existing behaviour rather than convert or change behaviour or beliefs this acceptance or rejection of a brand's advertising values has focussed attention on existing users and their relationship with the brand in question.

Furthermore, we would contend, that acceptance and appreciation of advertising values can also influence only the attitudes of non-users, but also their behaviour.

All of this places a not inconsiderable responsibility upon the shoulders of the planner. His task at this stage is not one of measuring current response, making due allowance for the inadequacies of all stimuli material be they narrative tapes, animatics or whatever, but to assess how and the extent to which responses will develop in the future.

Again we offer no magical solutions, but by ensuring that our planners understand and identify with the agency's overall creative objectives we can build upon their obvious technical skills, and hopefully eliminate the common divide between "us" and "them".

So although we can't describe how to ride a bicycle, we can show you some pictures of people doing so.