

# Admap classic: the anatomy of account planning

In this article, first published in 1989, the late **Stephen King** gave an authoritative view of how planning developed, and where it might go in future. It remains highly relevant

**T**RACKING ACCOUNT PLANNING is rather like counting a mixed batch of tropical fish. You think you see patterns, but they've all changed by the time you've finished counting.

There's little doubt about its growth. Today most top UK agencies have planning departments and most of the recent new UK agency wave have them built into the letterheading (at least one of Beagle, Bangle, D'Annunzio, Twigg & Privet will be a planner).

Yet the current approach of agencies varies between the integral and the non-existent. It's impossible to imagine Boase Massimi Pollitt without account planners. At the same time it has recently been announced, in suitably crude language and to no one's surprise, that there's no room for account planning at McCanns.

I don't think one should just throw up one's hands at this diversity. It seems to me that the future of account planning, and maybe indeed of advertising agencies themselves, depends on our teasing out correctly the historical strands - three in particular.

## How account planning started

The first strand is how it all started. Advertising has always been planned and campaigns have always been post-rationalised. People like James Webb Young, Claude Hopkins, Rosser Reeves, David Ogilvy and Bill Bernbach were superb planners. What is relatively new is the existence in an agency of a separate department whose prime responsibility is planning advertising strategy and evaluating campaigns against it. Such departments are older than we sometimes think. To quote from a 1938 JWT London brochure: 'Bright ideas must survive sharpshooters in the marketing department and snipers on the Plan Board, before they stand a chance of being seen by the client.' Despite the rather negative role of sharpshooting, it seems there was a department that aimed to apply marketing thinking to advertising ideas. (This was not a research department. BMRB had been set up as a separate research company five years before.)

When I joined JWT's marketing department in 1957, there were about 25 people in it. What we did for our clients included analysing marketing data and published statistics, writing marketing plans, recommending research, and planning new product/brand development. Our marketing plans were a bit naive - strong on the broad view, but a touch vague on logistics and usually in the dark about profits, but somebody had to write them. Not surprisingly, they went into most detail on advertising strategy and expenditure. They were the basis for the agency's creative work.

Then clients started to build up proper marketing departments, which wrote their own plans. We tried to influence the strategic part of these plans by getting in first with our own recommendations (with some relief abandoning any pretence of knowing much about distribution, journey cycles and case rates). Increasingly we concentrated directly on our own expertise, the advertising strategy. We also set up four small specialist groups - advertising research and media research units in 1964, new product development and operations research units in 1965.

In a sense therefore, when JWT disbanded the marketing department and set up its account planning department on 1 November 1968, it was more a reorganisation and renaming than a radical change. Perhaps the biggest change came from recognising that many senior media planners were analysing exactly the same data in exactly the same way as people in the marketing department, as a basis for making the main inter-media recommendations.

The first written proposals for the new department came on 8 April, the final blueprint in August. It was all worked out in a series of meetings and away-days. At one of these, we finally settled the name: we'd tried target planner (too narrow and obscure), campaign planner (too competitive with what creative people did) and brand planner (too restricted in people's minds to packaged groceries). Tony Stead suggested account planner and it stuck.

Meanwhile a very similar development was happening at what turned into



BMP. There was one important difference: the basis there was research, rather than marketing. By 1964 at Pritchard Wood there was a media research unit, a marketing research unit (mainly doing desk research), a qualitative research unit and a research department (mainly commissioning quantitative research) - some 25 people, but too fragmented to have a powerful voice in the agency. When Stanley Pollitt took over research and media, he made the crucial change of putting 'a trained researcher alongside the account man on every account'. He quickly found that many trained researchers were more concerned with technique than with the green-fingered interpretation and use of research, and so moved on to finding

and developing specialist advertising planners, with Peter Jones the first.

When BMP was formed in June 1968, account planning was built in from the start, and Stanley Pollitt became the first head of it in an agency (though the name was later borrowed from JWT). The basis was the Cadbury Schweppes account group, whose members carried on their existing working practices.

While the start of it at BMP was thus equally gradualist, there were some differences from JWT's approach. The ratio of planners to account managers was higher - it has varied from one-to-one to one-to-two, whereas JWT has always had about one-to-four. Partly because of this, and partly maybe because of their origins in research, BMP's planners have been far more directly involved in qualitative research. As David Cowan put it in 1981: 'A central part of the planner's job is to conduct the qualitative pre-testing research.' JWT's view was always that the gains this brought in involvement and direct contact with consumers would be offset by the loss in objectivity, so it was better to use specialist researchers.

Whatever the differences between the pioneer agencies, the similarities were much greater.

Both recognised that the key innovation was the development of professional planning skills and of their integration into the process of producing advertising. It was a fundamental change in the internal balance of power. As I wrote in 1969:

'What we have set up is a system whereby a project group of three skills (account management, creative and account planning) is the norm for the planning of advertising campaigns.' Or as BMP put it in its offer document of 1983: 'The main new element introduced into its structure by BMP was called the account planner. The planner brings not simply research, but also the use of data, into every stage of advertising development as a third partner for the account handler and creative team.'

The rush by other agencies to follow was muted. For several years nothing seemed to happen. By 1979 only six other agencies in the top 20 had planning

departments, and maybe a dozen smaller agencies. After 1979, spurred on by the formation of new agencies and of the Account Planning Group, it all accelerated rapidly.

The speed of recent growth has had one unfortunate result. Many managements have copied the most overt element of BMP's planning, without fully understanding the depth of skill and breadth of interest involved, the very high ratio of planners to account managers and the great commitment to training. All they have seen, in fact, is planners running group discussions. As a result a large number of qualitative researchers have found themselves, after four years or so slogging away at group discussions, translated overnight into instant agency planning directors. It was so much easier to find them than people with a thorough grounding in all aspects of brand-building.

I believe in fact that the most fundamental scale on which to judge planners is one that runs from Grand Strategists to Ad Tweakers. And nowadays there are rather too many agencies whose planners' skills and experience are much too near the ad-tweaking end of the scale.

### **Views on 'how advertising works'**

A second strand that affects differences in planning is that of the personalities of the agencies themselves. This issue was richly and convincingly discussed by Charles Channon.

His key thesis was that differences in agencies and their output 'in the end reflect different ways of thinking about how ads work and consequently different approaches to planning ads which do so'. He picked out 'argument' as the essence of Masius' thinking, 'imagery' for JWT, 'rhetoric' for BMP, 'aesthetic' for CDP.

It's certainly true that the development of planning and of ideas about how advertising works have supported each other. For JWT 1964 was a critical year. Its new advertising research unit, faced by off-the-peg quantitative ad-testing methods imported from the US, had got stuck. We felt that the only sensible approach was to

measure whether ads achieved their specific objectives, but creative strategy was being set as a 'consumer proposition'. What on earth was meant by 'achieving a consumer proposition'?

This led eventually to a new approach to planning advertising, called the T-Plan. It was based not on what ought to go into the advertising, but on what ought to be the consumer's responses to the brand as a result. Other ideas about how advertising works - like reinforcement rather than conversion, brand personality, the direct/indirect scale of responses and the consumer's buying system - have all moulded the way in which planning developed at JWT.

One valuable addition to planners' views on how advertising works was described most clearly by Rod Meadows in his July 1983 *Admap* article *They consume advertising too*. He argued that people actively consume advertising in its own right; they're experts in what it's trying to do; they judge brands as much on

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**Stephen King** was one of the founders of account planning, and the intellectual powerhouse of JWT London for many years.

the quality of their advertising as its content. These 'advertising-literate' people expect advertising to be original enough to get their attention, in a form that stimulates them, entertains them and recognises their interest. Such views among planners have done much to support the distinctive form of UK advertising.

### **The agency environment**

The third formative strand has been external changes. Almost all business has become more competitive and has had to respond more rapidly to events. For instance, the pressures on packaged goods marketers from retailers and the 'crisis of branding' in the mid-70s led to a noticeable shortening of vision; it's hard to devote attention to strategic planning if Sainsbury's is threatening to delist you tomorrow.

The agency world has changed, too. Agencies used to be professional partnerships, often dozily managed. Quite suddenly, led by Saatchi & Saatchi, they became businesses in their own right, often facing the financial pressures put on a public company. The trade tabloids started getting stories and comments from financial analysts, rather than people with a direct understanding of the business. Some managers of agencies become affected by some traditional 'City values' (such as short-termism, greed, self-absorption and hysteria). They stopped worrying about clients and layouts, and started worrying about convertible deleveraging ratios and fully diluted negative net worth.

There are other ways in which agencies may have been becoming more inward-looking. The recognition of consumers' advertising literacy has been wholly good for UK advertising, with its stress on the need for original ideas and vivid expressions of them. But it's not too difficult to slide from that to believing that the creative people in an agency and the creative work are the only elements that matter; that creative people alone are fit to judge the merit of campaigns; that the account manager's job is simply to sell the resulting great work to the unsophisticated

client. While the extremes of such views are rare, there have been subtle changes in the balance of power and influence within some agencies; and in the way the trade press has presented them.

Any trends towards short-termism and self-absorption are bound, I think, to diminish the role of account planners. Their skills lie in the outside world and the longer term, trying to match clients' abilities and brand personalities with consumers' aspirations. On the whole, the agency environment has tended over time to push planners towards the ad-tweaking end of the scale.

### **So where will it all go next, then?**

It seems to me that the future of planning will continue to depend on the same three strands and in particular on the role advertising agencies play in future.

Marketing companies today are changing their viewpoints. They recognise that rapid response in the marketplace must be matched with clear strategic vision. The need for well-planned brand-building is pressing.

At the same time, they see changes in ways of communicating with their more diverse audiences. They're increasingly experimenting with non-advertising methods. Some are uneasily aware that these different methods are managed by different people in the organisation, to different principles; they may well be presenting conflicting impressions of the company and its brands. It all needs to be pulled together.

I think an increasing number of them would like outside help in tackling these problems, and some have already demonstrated that they're prepared to pay respectable sums for it. The job seems ideally suited to the strategic end of the best planning skills. The question is whether these clients will want such help from an advertising agency.

If agencies move further towards an inward-looking obsession with profits or creative awards and a narrow-minded view of advertising as a competitor to other communication media, I'm not sure that they will. The work will go, as it is

starting to, to a variety of specialists, management and marketing consultants, PR advisers, corporate identity designers, and so on.

However, agencies have a few powerful advantages. Most outside observers believe that the quality of planning and brand-building skills and people is higher in agencies than elsewhere. They have made more progress on how communications work (though on a rather narrow front). They have pioneered the use of valuable technical tools, such as market modelling. They have the immense advantage of continuous relationships with clients. If the will is there, it could be done.

What agencies, and the planners in them, would have to do is, above all, demonstrate that they have the breadth of vision and objectivity to do the job; apply 'how marketing communications work' thinking and R&D to a wider area; probably bring in outside talent, from marketing companies or other fields of communication; make more efforts to 'go to the top' in client contact (the one great advantage of the various specialists); and make sure that they get paid handsomely. I hope this can happen - I wouldn't like to think of the best strategic planners leaving for other sorts of company or of agency planners shifting wholly to ad-tweaking.

I trust too that *Admap* will continue to plot how this goes in the future as it has for the last 25 years. Its contribution has been enormous; most new ideas about advertising and how it works have emerged and been argued on its pages. It uniquely bridges the gap between 'D'Annunzio set to quit in Twigg, Privet image turmoil' and 'Conjoint analysis of extrinsic benefit appeals: a magnitude estimation approach'. Planners have been constantly stimulated, infuriated and enlightened by *Admap*.

*A book of Stephen King's writings - A Master Class in Brand Planning - has recently been published by Wiley.*

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