



Creativity

It's what all agencies sell, and most advertisers say they want. But how do you get it, recognise it, manage it?

Roderick White reviews the evidence

CREATIVITY IS THE stock-in-trade of virtually all marketing services agencies. It's what ad agencies, in particular, pride themselves on. But it is an elusive concept, and hard to manage, while the growing research literature on the subject is quite limited in its scope (II).

For advertisers, there are two key problems: to identify an agency that offers the style and type of creativity that is right for your business; and to manage the relationship in a way that ensures that the agency delivers (7). This means aiding the process and being willing and able to recognise and support the right creative solution.

For agencies, much of the focus on creativity lies in getting the right combination of people and in establishing a process to deliver to clients the imaginative solutions they seek (8).

For both sides, a key element lies in the nature and detail of the brief, which is the subject of a separate paper in this series (14).

For both parties, creativity is a moving target: the nature of the marketplace, and the changing character of consumers, mean that 'the creative solution' is no longer (if, indeed, it ever was) just a TV campaign (4). What is needed is a creative idea - ideally a 'Big Idea' - that may have nothing to do with conventional advertising, and will usually need to be executed across a wide range of media and communication disciplines (19).

What's creative?

There is a wide measure of agreement that to be creative, an advertising idea needs: to be in some sense original and different; to be relevant and appropriate for both the brand and its target audience; and to be suitably crafted, which may or may not make it artistic in character (8, 9, 10).

Clearly, to meet this specification, it has to be based in detailed knowledge of the brand, and of the target consumer (3, 18, 20). It then has to be recognised as sufficiently creative by everyone involved in its production; and research shows that different people within agencies, and their clients, have somewhat different cri-

teria for what is creative. In particular, the creative team will probably be using rather different criteria from the account director, let alone the client marketing director (8, 10). Indeed, it has been suggested that really the only workable definition of a 'creative' ad is that it is capable of winning a creative award- and creative awards are judged by creative people, not by marketers (15). (And, contrary to widespread belief, many - though not all - award-winning creative campaigns are demonstrably effective and successful in the market.)

More specifically, research in agencies shows that the key characteristics of creative ads are seen to be simplicity/directness, freshness and originality, and wit or humour. Creative people are inclined, too, to emphasise craft values, both of technique and of production quality (8, 10).

In practical terms, the best creative ideas may emerge with the strategy, or as a response to the strategy: the strategy may have successfully re-framed a view of the market (21, 22, 23), but it may be that it is the creative idea that does this. Often, the best ideas are in fact those that enable consumers to see a whole category from a different perspective, which they then identify with the brand that led them to this. If you can do that, it's creative in anyone's terms (24).

Consumers, indeed, are not concerned with agency and advertiser criteria, but they do respond to what they see as new and interesting - just so long as it's clearly relevant to them (2, II, 20). And, especially among younger audiences, the conventional and familiar can be a very effective turn-off (I).

The creative process

Creative ad ideas come best from a process designed properly to facilitate their birth. This means that there has to be a well thought-through strategy, designed to meet specific objectives, that can be translated into a succinct, inspiring brief (13, 14). This puts an onus on the advertiser and the agency team, especially the account planner and account manager, not merely to assimilate a deep understanding of and insight into the

brand and its buyers (3) but to provide a strategic impetus that can point the creative team towards an effective solution. The brief itself is a creative artefact, and will probably benefit from having an input from the creative people.

While most ad agencies still employ the two-person 'teams' that have been standard practice since the 1960s (4), there is a growing recognition that in other industries creativity has become a team business, and there is definitely room for a variety of team activities - brainstorming exercises of one kind or another - to begin to sketch out possible ideas for further development (17). It is at this early developmental stage, too, that appropriate qualitative research among consumers can, if skilfully handled, provide valuable insights and guidance as to style, tone and the desired character of the creativework (12).

Once ideas have been generated, there then needs to be some form of screening process designed to eliminate non-starters, and this may, again, be informed by research, though it is desirable to use this not simply to get rid of the non-starters, but to point directions for improvement and development (12).

The surviving idea or ideas then need to be executed into whatever formats and media are planned for them. It is here that the craft skills and perfectionism that characterise good creative people particularly come into play.

Finally, it may be necessary to research the finished material, to ensure that it meets the company's action standards, but this part of the process has usually all too little to do with creativity as such.

Recognising creativity

Faced by a new piece of creative work, how can we evaluate it? Traditionally, the first question to be asked has always been 'Does it meet the brief?' - Is it on strategy?

In today's crowded and demanding market environment, it is suggested that this crucial question should come second, behind the even-more-critical question of whether it can achieve cut-through and involvement (I). If it is incapable of doing this, it will get nowhere, however accurately it reflects the strategy.

How do we recognise potential impact then? This is where instinct matters: does the idea literally grab you? More vitally, will it grab its defined target audience? Chances are that, if it appears capable of this, it will, in fact, be original, different, exciting, edgy and all the other adjectives with which creative directors like to pepper their presentations of new work to their clients (2,4,5).

Only then can we ask whether the idea can communicate what the brand needs, according to the defined strategy, together with the key related question of whether the idea is, or can be, strongly branded - because if it fails to identify the brand to the target audience, it is not going to do the job (1, 2).

Finally, does the idea have the substance and flexibility both to be used across media and disciplines and to be extended and developed over time (4)? There is an argument as to how far campaign consistency over time is possible or even desirable: there are good examples of very long-running campaigns, and it is certainly more economical to keep playing tunes based on a successful idea than to go out, find a new idea and start from scratch to establish it in people's minds (14,19,25).

Managing creativity

Agencies have their own problems in managing their creative people; creatives are not easy, and they are not quite like the rest of the agency (15).

For the advertiser, the problems are rather different. Clearly, it is important to ensure that the agency is fully motivated to deliver the best possible solution to your problems. There are direct and indirect ways of achieving this. The more indirect way is by being accessible; making the company's knowledge of its brand and its customers fully available and open to the agency, and encouraging the agency, especially the creatives, to become embedded in the brand experience (3,7).

The direct way is to be receptive to the agency's ideas. This doesn't mean you should be a pushover for everything they throw at you. It does mean taking trouble to understand what they present and

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Core reading

1. J Carroll: 10 principles for marketing in the age of engagement. Admap, Feb 2005.
2. A Farr and S Gardiner: Creative enough for the financial director. Admap, Mar 2001.
3. W Gordon: I'll have one small insight and two large ones, please. Admap, Dec 2002.
4. S McIlrath: A new creative manifesto. Admap, Nov 1997.

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5. P Cooper and S Patterson: The Trickster: myth and magic in great ads. Admap, April 2001.
6. W Fletcher: Cutting through the haze. Admap, April 1997.
7. R Hill and L Johnson: Understanding creative service. IJoA 23(3), 2004.
8. S Koslow et al: What is creative to whom and why? JAR 43(1), Mar 2003.
9. A White and B Smith: Assessing advertising creativity using the creative product semantic scale. JAR 41(6), Nov/Dec 2001.
10. C Young: Creative difference between copywriters and art directors. JAR May/June 2000.

Research and creativity

11. G Stone et al: Recall, liking and creativity in TV commercials. JAR, May/June 2000.
12. J Wardle: Ad development using qualitative research. Admap, Apr 2003.

Creative briefing

13. D Barker: How to write an inspiring creative brief. Admap, Jul 2001.
14. R White: Briefing creative agencies. Admap, Jun 2003.

Managing creatives and creativity

15. W Fletcher: How to manage creative people. Admap, Nov 1997.
16. R Neill: 17 ways to murder an idea. Market Leader 14, Autumn 2001.
17. P Simonet: Adman heal thyself. Admap, Jul 1998.

Case studies

18. D Chalmers: Deliciously self-centred ... a case of near-fatal Narcissism. IPA Awards, 2000.
19. G Dennis: The power of one (idea) - the Jeans for Genes campaign. AFA Awards, 1996.
20. S Gohil and T Toyota: Levi's Nippon Sodachi. IPA Awards, 2002.
21. Pine-Sol (na). CASSIES, 2002.
22. A Read and P Eveleigh: Keeping Britannia great. IPA Awards, 2002.
23. B Smart: Vodafone Michael Richard campaign. AFA Awards, 2000.
24. Target Marketing (na): Irving home furnaces. CASSIES, 2002.
25. R Ward: The incredible advertising power of Solvite. IPA Awards, 1996.

why. It also means avoiding using too many of the large number of ways in which an idea may be killed (16). And it means taking a little time to consider a view of an idea - and trying to be constructive even if you don't like it.

Does it work?

The ultimate aim of creativity is to move markets. And, if we get it right, to move them more cost-effectively because we have been more creative. Research has

shown that some ads are massively more effective than others (2, eg). The problem for all of us is that these are not necessarily the ones that we would all automatically label 'creative'. Similarly, it's clear that there is a spectrum of 'creativity', just as there is clearly a spectrum of effectiveness (15). The ideal is clearly to be able to push both in the same direction.

A final warning: originality on its own is not enough to guarantee success (2). ■