

Advertising Age's

# creativity

A monthly review of the creative process • June 1993

## THE REVOLUTION WILL BE SUBVERTISED

Director Jeffrey Plansker's unique  
selling opposition

Bogus ads:  
Award winners  
or scene stealers?

In two sections • Section I

Small shops take to the  
latest Brit invasion  
New Directors, or  
The Young and the Restless

While it's been embraced by many creative-driven American shops, there are those who insist that account planning, still a controversial British import years after its U.S. introduction, is simply research dressed in hip, new clothes—possibly the emperor's new clothes

# The British

**R**ISA MICKENBERG, A COPYWRITER AT KIRSHENBAUM & Bond who was assigned to work on the new Snapple beverages account, says she was skeptical when K&B's account planners presented the creative department with a written brief advising them on how to advertise the brand. The brief summed up the desired strategy in one line: 100 percent natural advertising. "What does that mean?" wondered Mickenberg.

In fact, that line was a distillation of extensive soul-searching interviews with consumers—the stock-in-trade of account planning—conducted by K&B planner Rosemarie Ryan. Ryan found that Snapple drinkers liked that the brand wasn't slickly advertised or packaged, viewed Snapple as a slightly naive little company, and considered the drink an undiscovered secret that they told friends about. Mickenberg did some consumer research on her own, and discovered that the planners were, indeed, onto something. "There really was this obsessive relationship between the customers and the brand," Mickenberg says; some even wrote odd, soul-baring letters to the company. Eventually that led Mickenberg and partner Amy Nicholson away from their initial take, which was based on product attributes. Instead they created the quirky, reality-based campaign that is now airing. In it, customers' letters to Snapple are read aloud by company employees, then acted upon. In one spot, a faithful Snapple fan who writes in to ask if they give factory tours is taken around the plant, even getting a glimpse of the men's room.

"I couldn't imagine us coming up with this approach without the influence of account planning," says Mickenberg. "It completely changed our thinking about the product."

Similar tales of the impact of account planning on creative work can be heard these days at creative-driven agencies around the country. A research discipline that began as a new-business tool in England and was imported to these shores a decade ago by Chiat/Day, planning—which is supposed to represent the consumer viewpoint through the entire advertising development process—is now beginning to shape the work at many of the most respected creative agencies in America, including Fallon McElligott, Wiedner & Kennedy, and Goodby, Berlin & Silverstein. Though most big agencies continue to shy away from it, planning has, in the last two years, become de-

BY WARREN BERGER



# REINVASION

rigueur at small to mid-sized shops in various regions around the country, including San Francisco (besides Goodby, Hal Riney & Partners, Mandelbaum Mooney Ashley and Goldberg Moser O'Neill all swear by it); Providence (Pagano, Schenk & Kay and Leonard Monahan Lubars & Kelly are among the latest converts); and New York (true believers include K&B, Deutsch/Dworin and Weiss Whitten Carroll Stagliano).

**W**ith agencies now rushing out to hire their own planners, the movement has begun to seem a bit faddish; as Messner Vetere Berger MacNamee Schmetterer's Ron Berger says, "Planning has become the hot new thing, like shaky cameras were a couple of years ago." Woody Kay, a partner at Pagano, Schenk & Kay, says that he believes a creative agency "almost has to have planning now just to remain competitive in new-business pitches." Indeed, planning can be particularly valuable in those pitches, partly because it helps agencies to quickly gain insights into a particular consumer market—and partly because a smaller agency can gain instant credibility at a pitch by hauling out an authoritative-sounding Brit.

But to dismiss planning as just another new-business ploy is to overlook what may be the most significant aspect of this latest British invasion—namely, its effect on the creative process at cutting-edge agencies. In some cases, planners are becoming full partners in that process, discussing research-driven ideas and strategies with creatives before, during and after the creation of work. "They work with us every step of the way," says K&B executive creative director Richard Kirshenbaum.

The question that naturally arises is whether such a partnership is necessary, or even helpful, in the creation of good work. Not everyone thinks it is. "Planning is research dressed up in hip new clothes," says Gary Goldsmith, creative director at New York's Goldsmith/Jeffrey, who had direct experience with planning during his years at Chiat/Day. Goldsmith argues that planning may threaten creativity at smaller agencies in much the same way that overemphasis on research sometimes hampers creativity at big agencies. "Whether you call it planning or research, the bottom line is it puts the emphasis on something other than the judgment of the creatives," he says. And Goldsmith believes that "if you sell planning hard to the client—as agencies are now doing—then the client is going

to expect planning to play a bigger and bigger role in the development of campaigns. So, in a way, you're creating a monster."

Tim Delaney of London's Leagas Delaney says the monster has already grown to large proportions in England, where planning has been around for 20 years. Delaney, who worked at Boase Massimi Pollitt, one of the agencies credited with the original development of account planning, says planning started out as a new-business tool, and "gradually became inextricably linked with the creative department." The result, he says, is that planners in British agencies "have the right to ferret into a creative department, and criticize and test and do all kinds of things to creative work." Meanwhile, planners in America already seem to have secured such privileges: They're not just advising the creative team on strategy, but are sometimes evaluating the work through consumer testing of ads.

Delaney believes that planners may be bringing a bit too much science to the creative process. "Planners, by nature, are engineers, not creative people," he says. "They believe that creative work is a commodity that has to pass through this sieve of objectivity and greater knowledge. And supposedly, at the end, we will have disciplined this wild animal called creativity into a finely tuned marketing tool. Of course, that's an absolute fallacy."

Delaney and Goldsmith are not the only ones to see little distinction between planning and traditional advertising research. Says one New York CD whose agency uses planners, "It's giving a special name to something that great advertising always had. It's a nomenclature issue—it hasn't added a dimension to advertising, it's simply compartmentalized it."

Still, planners and pro-planning creative directors claim there's a world of difference. Though consumer research is at the heart of all planning, planners go beyond traditional focus groups or studies, conducting one-on-one interviews with subjects, sometimes in homes or in local shops. And K&B planning chief Nigel Carr notes that planners draw out consumer feelings, attitudes and opinions, as opposed to asking formulaic yes/no questions.

But the key distinction may be the way in which that gathered information is used by planners. "Planning is proactive, whereas research is reactive," says Rob White, the recently-hired director of planning for Fallon McElligott. What's most important, he claims, is that planners usually have direct contact with creatives while researchers don't. "A research person is outside the loop of the development of advertising . . . I'm giving creatives a brief beforehand, in the hope that it will inspire ideas."

Clearly, that is precisely what happens in some instances. A brief—which can be as short as a page or two—may attempt to advise the creative team on the "tone" that an ad should use, based on the planner's reading of consumer attitudes. When Chris Wauton, director of planning at West & Co. in Tampa, researched a creative brief for Independent Life, he found that consumers were distrustful of high-flying financial investments; Wauton wrote a single sentence

in his brief suggesting that the tone of the campaign should tie in with a "tortoise and hare" theme. "That one phrase did it for us," says West creative director Doug Hardee, who wrote a spot contrasting high-living '80s junk bondsmen with down-home Independent Life agents (the spot was a Cannes finalist).

Weiss Whitten Carroll Stagliano's award-winning campaign for Bass Ale also was inspired by a planning brief. Planner Adam Stagliano's preliminary research showed that the brand had a rich history among artists, and that Bass drinkers themselves "aspire to be sophisticated, literate." The insights in that brief led the creative team to its "Deep Thinkers" campaign, in which the likes of Nietzsche and Camus ponder the meaning of life over a Bass.

**S**ignificantly, planning was equally important in helping to sell the Bass campaign to the client, and that may be the greatest appeal of planning in the eyes of CDs at creative agencies—it helps edgy ads go down more smoothly.

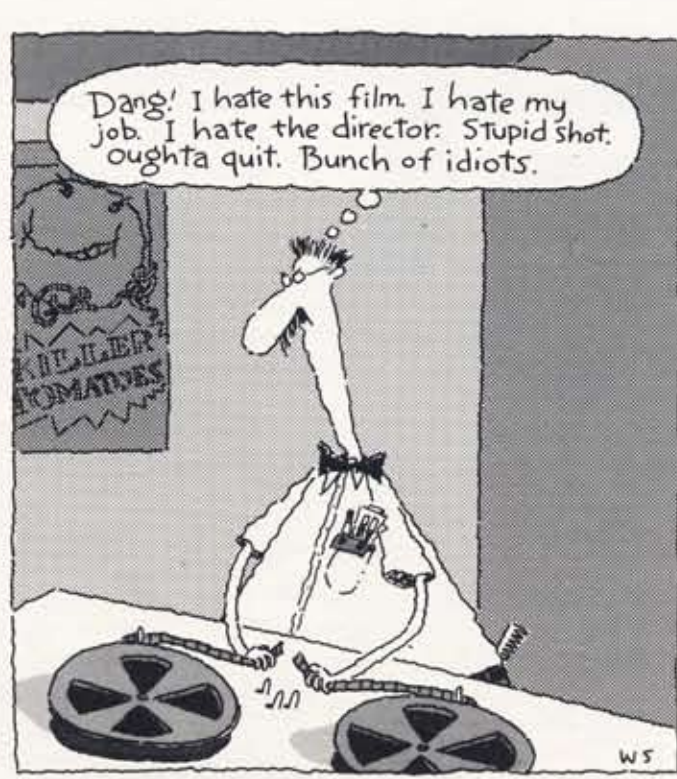
Traditional research tends to work against risky advertising, says Stagliano, but planning has the opposite effect: "It helps clients to feel comfortable with work that's on the edge, by reassuring them that the creative people really do understand the customers."

From the days when planning was first brought to the U.S. by Chiat/Day in the early 1980s, "its primary purpose was to get clients to buy work that they wouldn't buy otherwise," says Steve Hayden, president at BBDO/Los Angeles and a veteran of Chiat, who notes that planning research helped ease some of Apple's many concerns about "1984," a spot that almost didn't air.

Nigel Carr, who was a Chiat/Day planner throughout the '80s before joining K&B, says planning also helped sell the Nynex "Human Cartoons" campaign by convincing the client that the strategy of showing offbeat businesses in the ads was one that consumers would respond to. Planning also revealed that actual Yellow Pages advertisers preferred a campaign aimed at users of the book instead of buyers of the ad space inside.

But planning is hardly foolproof, as evidenced by some of Chiat/Day's infamous creative missteps. Planning advocates acknowledge that the discipline is sometimes used as a means to justify misguided campaigns to the client. "Just as planning helped sell '1984,' it also helped sell 'Lemmings,' " its widely panned sequel, notes Hayden. Indeed, he adds, planners sometimes bend their interpretations of consumer research according to what they think the agency or client wants to hear. "In the case of 'Lemmings,' I think the planners were afraid to say anything against it," he says.

CDs also point to the problem of the planner who states, with dead certainty, a view that is unfounded. "A bad planner can do a lot of damage," says Brian O'Neill of Goldberg Moser O'Neill. O'Neill says planners sometimes feel pressure "to justify their existence, in part because the job is so nebulous. That can lead them to overinterpret data. And sometimes, if they're not sure what the consumer's view is, they'll espouse their own view." ☐



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