

I was lucky enough to chair the judging of the APG Creative Strategy Awards last month. It was great to see all the fantastic Planning from around the world and see how our discipline is changing in these fast-moving times. The results will have to wait until the awards ceremony tonight (but you can follow them on Twitter @APGjudges). In the meantime I wrote this article which appears in Campaign today. If you haven't been able to grab a copy, see below for the article. If you were wondering, the Planning Brand guidelines (picture above) were created by our very own Graham Wood.

The development of a brand called 'Planning'

These APG Creative Planning Awards were never going to be business as usual. With the industry in the teeth of a recession it was with a little trepidation that the APG launched its 2009 awards back in February. Was there any great Planning being done as clients battened down the marketing hatches? Would agencies be entering awards this year, especially for something as unsexy as Planning? If Cannes was looking unlikely for some agencies, then the APG Awards could become the Carling Cup of awards.

Ripple-dissolve to June and there were 153 papers entered; a record in the awards' 9th year. Clearly agencies were seeing the showcase of their strategic ability as a priority in times of economic difficulty. And quite right too. Difficult times always call for more imaginative thinking. One Planner travelled 10,000 miles on his own money to present his case to the judges. Two other Planners live video-blogged the writing of their paper (www.twoplannersinaroom.com).

The marketing of the awards this year also reflected renewed enthusiasm: the @APGJudges Twitter feed; betting available – though now closed – on the winner of the Grand Prix (www.mcbookie.co.uk); and the earliest ever release of the shortlisted papers on CampaignLive.

The judging process was an intense, stimulating and rewarding two days and we all feel rather bullish about the state of Planning as represented this year. The results will have to wait until tonight. In the meantime here are some observations on what was a thrilling and humbling set of entries.

The changing brand of Planning

The main thing that struck the judges this year was the sheer diversity of Planning roles that were on show. Planning has always been a broad church but never before has such variety been so evident. The last awards in 2007 contained relatively little in the way of digital, media, and global thinking, and yet these were common themes across many entries in 2009.

We should never take it for granted that Planning will be as relevant to the new challenges as it has been to the old. However, the awards demonstrate just how well Planning is adapting to times of great media, technological and commercial change. Rather than being tentative or concerned, there is a strong sense of confidence from the Planners about all the new opportunities. Stephen King said that 'in the end the only constant thing may be the need for change'. Were he on the jury I sense he would have been heartened by what he heard.

Let's begin by taking a look at some of the ways that Planning is embracing its changing future. And before we all get too excited, let's go on to examine how we should look to define, protect and champion our brand – Planning – in these new times ahead.

The new colours and shapes of the Planning brand

Content Planning

A number of entries this year showed Planning involved in both the strategic rationale for, and stewardship of, content creation. In preparation for the introduction of competition, Eurostar needed to strengthen itself as a brand (as opposed to simply being the cross-channel train service). Mother's Planning saw that Eurostar needed communications with depth, richness and legacy, and that this called for content creation, rather than a traditional campaign. They developed a model for different types of branded content and sought emotional placement of the brand in a film; the output being the award-winning Somers Town.

The chewing gum brand Air Action Vigorsol faced the challenge of the fragmentation of the Italian TV market. In this impulse-driven category awareness is key to driving sales, but awareness was getting harder to build and maintain as share of voice was falling. Planning's answer was to move from interruption to entertainment. You can read more about their solution – Cippi the farting chipmunk – in their paper!

Channel Planning

This is by no means a new subject. But the onward march of channel growth, coupled with the feeling that media snobbery has left Planning, opened the way for yet more creative and fresh approaches to channel thinking. M&C Saatchi were briefed by Kent County Council to discourage 'unhealthy' teenage behaviours in the County, and increase uptake of support services that the Council provided. The Planners found that conversations with friends are often the catalysts for seeking help. Planning therefore set about designing a medium to fuel such conversations. In this audience's 2.0 world it might have been easy to set this online, but Planning identified that the face-to-face aspect as crucial. They called it House, and set it in the unused High Street locations thrown up by the recession.

In order to achieve sales targets for the international Xbox Halo 3 launch, McCann Erickson's Planning needed to attract a mainstream audience beyond the game's loyal followers. To do this they had to compete in the broader entertainment category and made the strategic leap from selling the game to selling its hero, Master Chief, and in the real world honouring his future heroics, now, as if they were in the past. Got it? Along with traditional activity, this led to the creation of a Victorian-style diorama to commemorate his battles, as well as ambient murals, plaques and statues to embed him as a true real-world hero.

Cultural Planning

As global brands increasingly become the norm, the power of Cultural Planning to adapt global strategies and make them culturally relevant will grow in importance. JWT Mumbai's work for

Forevermark Diamonds saw Planning confronted with the task of increasing diamond sales by localising a strategy about associating diamonds with love. This required getting under the skin of the Indian norms around marriage, and Planning uncovered a deeply ingrained ideal of the self-sacrificing, dutiful bride, symbolised by gold adornment. In this context, selling a different type of ring was not enough: they had to sell a different type of bride. Planning redefined its task as delivering the new ideal of a 'diamond bride.' Crucially, they created designer wedding dresses for the diamond bride, to encourage the ideal to penetrate culture.

In BBH's work for Johnnie Walker in China, Planning built collectivism into the idea of 'Keep Walking' to make it chime with Chinese values around drinking, masculinity and social life. It led to a China-specific commercial that introduced 'Keep Walking' as a toast between friends.

Behavioural Planning

Behavioural Planning seeks to change behaviour through communications, without necessarily having to go through the steps of changing attitudes first. We saw this in 2007's Grand Prix-winning work for Sainsbury's, and it's an approach being championed by IPA Chairman Rory Sutherland in his talk of behavioural economics. In BBH's Axe Japan work, Planning's role was to increase spraying frequency among an audience that saw Axe as an occasional fragrance rather than an everyday deodorant. The brand had to become part of their users' morning routines. Planning's insight was that most of the audience use their mobile phones as their alarm clock, with near 100% penetration of mobile phones for this group. The solution was the 'Axe Wake-Up Service', complete with scantily clad Axe Angels reminding users to spray.

McCann Erikson's campaign for the charity Skcin sought to change the behaviour of those most at risk of skin cancer. Planning found that those at highest risk, the 'tanorexics', are as much in danger from the sunbeds they use to keep their year-round tan as from the sun itself. What's more, these avid sunbed users are susceptible to being wowed by new tanning technologies. They interrupted this group's behaviour on their journey to brown – and in the process damaged – skin by marketing the hoax 'ComputerTan' to affect change at the point of behaviour.

Real-time Planning

Planning has shown its ability to be fleet of foot in developing strategies in reaction to real-time changes. Nokia's multi-market Supernova campaign by Wieden+Kennedy developed work around the idea that if you found someone else's phone you would be tempted to look through it. This led to a campaign playing out over three months, telling the story of three key characters lives' through online access to their mobile phones. Each morning the Planners had to evolve the Planning as a result of the data from thousands of interactions with the characters the previous day.

Saatchi & Saatchi's Planning for the Sony Net-Share Cam launch in Australia used an influential video blogger to showcase the product. Planning then monitored and managed the response to the product and videos as they played out in real time.

Micro Planning

Micro Planning is about making sense of extraordinary amounts of detail. One prime example is Tribal DDB's work in developing the new Volkswagen website. Armed with a conceptual model of how Planning wanted users to experience the site, Planning went into intense detail to understand which part of the car buying process should be delivered through which element of the site, by which message, and to which audience. At its most granular this meant that Planning curated a 'wall of briefs' – literally a wall of whiteboard with around 200 squares representing each element of the website, together with interrelations and dependencies.

Creation Planning

We have seen this year an abundance of examples of Planners actually making things. These are not simply creative briefing materials, but at their best are tools to engage the agency and client in the subject more powerfully than words ever could. The Campaign Palace kept a diary of a week on the road with the RSPCA inspector Slade; Mother's Planning created a mood film for Stella Artois 4% to fuel inspiration around a new setting for the brand; there's Tribal DDB's intricate wall of briefs; and McCann Erikson developed a stimulus booklet delivered in an ammunition-style metal box. This creativity also extended to Planners at AMV creating a mind map of the thought processes of their respondents in Economist groups and Saatchi & Saatchi building a visualisation of the emotional journey around the shoot and upload process of the Sony Net-Share Cam and its competitors.

The future of our brand

Once again the APG Awards provide a window into the changing brand Planning, but what of the future? I think there are four key points to note.

First, it is important for Planning not to lose its ability to be a big picture discipline. There is no doubt that the remarkable expansion of Planning into the new areas outlined above is of great credit to the Planning brand and its ability to turn strategic skills to emerging areas. And perhaps for a period of time it will be the 'new stuff' that rightfully attracts the lion's share of Planning's attention. The danger is that Planning becomes obsessed with the fringes and loses sight of the whole.

Planning clearly has the power to create some interesting new bits for brands, but it must also seek to create the brand itself. A brand is a coherent entity, not a lot of bits. Planning must continue to see itself as a whole too, and maximise the overlaps between its skills rather than see them in isolation. (None of us are helped here by the creative award industry that awards one-off executions over campaigns.)

Secondly, Planning is clearly becoming too broad a job for one person to hope to learn in sufficient detail. Traditionally, Planners have been generalists. They gradually learned about research, creative briefs and effectiveness until they could be called 'fully-rounded'. As these awards have shown, the number of different roles that a Planner must now play is too much for one person, especially given the level of detail and specialism that exists in each role.

If Planning was about being a one-man show with a supporting actor or two, now it is a West End production with a significant cast and crew. Younger planners will need to learn specialisms. More experienced Planners will have to know at least a little bit about everything, as well as a lot about something. Plus they will have to know how to coordinate all those specialists.

Thirdly, UK Planning must look to learn and embrace the development of the discipline around the world. Whilst London might consider itself the home of Planning, it is most certainly not the best at Planning. The Planners from India and Australia who presented to the judges were a very smart, confident and persuasive bunch. And these people represent a burgeoning wealth of Planning talent across the globe. And as global brands will dominate the commercial agenda for the coming decade, fluency with Planning around the world is going to be terribly important.

My final point would be for Planners to know that it is right that they champion the value of Planning itself. We are all involved in building a brand called 'Planning' – one that we ask Clients to pay for. We are not leaving this behind as we learn new skills. Rather we are strengthening our brand as a whole and increasing the value that we can add to Clients. It is therefore incumbent upon Planners to show that Planning matters. Our value and status depends upon it.

May I take this opportunity to thank the shortlisting judges, led by BBH's Rachel Hatton, for the unenviable task of having to sift the very best from the best. Equally, may I also offer my appreciation to the final judges who were a very dedicated, forensic and jolly bunch.

I do hope everyone enjoys the awards dinner and feels as positive as I do about the future for Planning.