

John Grant – Planning’s Mid-life Crisis?

“Life Begins at 40”

...unfortunately so do haemorrhoids, reading glasses, and (according to Carl Jung) a nagging sense you may have found yourself ‘half way up the wrong ladder’.

“Planning begins at 40”

What if planning has reached a midlife crisis moment?

There are some worrying signs. Planning sometimes looks like your mate that turned 40, got divorced and now goes clubbing. Planners in skinny jeans, using words like ‘cool’, ‘web 2.0’, ‘flash mob’, ‘twitter’ and ‘blog’. This is viewed by planning traditionalists as a sure sign of declining standards. Older planners - ie ones my age - worry that the discipline and rigour has gone; that's it's all creative intuition and fad.

I don't share that view: There have always been sloppy planners as well as good ones. But I don't think these new interests are faddish. Brand models are heavily dependent on media. More dependent than we sometimes admit. Most of the modern ideas about brands (like the idea of brand image or personality) emerged at the same time as commercial TV. We wouldn't have the idea of a (unique selling) proposition unless we had started with press and its headlines. New media, new models.

'Getting new media' is part - but only part - of figuring out how it all works. Most of my work as a strategist has been based on or at least supported by large amounts of laborious research, sifting, questioning, evidence and analysis. Creative planning is great for thinking up options, but shouldn't be used in my view to leap to conclusions.

Having been kicked out of an interview in MT Rainey's office once as 'one of those planners who thinks he's a creative' I thought I ought to set the record straight (albeit 15 years too late for that job)! Don't judge the new generation of planners by their haircuts or hobbies, judge them by their IPA effectiveness papers.

Anyway back at the theme. Is planning having a midlife crisis?

Once upon a time when I was a trainee, it was common to say here at JWT (or BMP, I forget which) that products had lifecycles, but brands didn't. A well managed brand could go on and on. Nowadays, in an era of cultural as well as material obsolescence I am not so sure. Seth Godin an American marketing author with slightly less hair than even John Steel or I, wrote on his blog early this year that 'brand lifecycles' follow 5 stages:

1. Who is Brad Pitt? [insert your brand/name here]
2. Get me Brad Pitt!

3. Get me someone like Brad Pitt, but cheaper!
4. Get me a newer version of Brad Pitt!
5. Who is Brad Pitt?

According to planners I speak to, planning in many places by now is hovering around “3. Brad Pitt, but cheaper”. This is exemplified by the trend to fast strategy, ie less planners per agency and less time per account. We also do see some ‘4. Newer versions of Brad Pitt’ in planning – for instance the trends bog turned brand consultancy is one.

What reaching midlife really means, as Seth’s model vividly illustrates, is that you have passed the point when you are making your mark. Jung described this as like the sun reaching the high point in the sky. Of course this task may still lie ahead in India and other places where planning is newer. But even here most of the groundwork has been done.

The less good news is that you can’t stay at this peak forever. Life is change. History is change. The glory days of TV advertising may be past. Digital is 13 years old now too. The Western economies (currently so fragile and being bought up on the cheap by investors from Qatar and Hong Kong) look culturally exhausted. The energy and world changing spirit increasingly comes from the younger countries that are just establishing themselves on the world stage: India, China, Brazil... Planning as we knew it is probably going to decline. And even if it may blossom in new markets and new forms, even if it grows in numbers of practitioners it will never be 'new' again, will never again be in the exciting 'discovery' phase.

Faced with the reality that things are changing, will fade in excitement, and over the long term you face a decline (nothing lasts forever), according to Eric Ericsson (the great psychologist of the lifestages and author of the term ‘identity crisis’) you have 2 choices:

1. go on as you are. Ericsson called this Stagnation. Every year you tell the same old stories. Fight the same old battles which you already won. And you shrink a bit every year. Because you are shrinking from the knowledge of your decline.

2. start believing in something bigger than yourself. Ericsson called this Generativity. You have established yourself, made your name. Now it’s time to find a mission in life. Something to leave behind to future generations.

Ericsson believed that in mid life Generativity was the only way to keep on developing in psychological terms. He saw stagnation as the result of freezing in the headlights of your unconscious fears of mortality. Only by finding something bigger than you which could endure, could you go on growing. Through a process Jung called individuation.

That may sound a long way from the business world. But “Built to Last” (the business book by Collins and Porras) came to a similar conclusion. Long-lasting successful companies tend to have a much bigger vision than just making money from what they produce. I’ve had the privilege over the last 14

years of working with one such company – IKEA – whose mission is nothing less than this: ‘to improve the everyday life of the majority of people’.

What might Generativity or ‘finding a higher cause’ - something worth doing for future generations - mean for planning?

Well as some of you know, my personal answer has been about sustainability. I see this as the key thing which our generation has to get right, and fast. I see a huge role for our skills, in creating behaviour change, helping the companies that lead sustainability be successful, getting the marketing of green right (which often means it becomes seen not as green, but as normal).

Sustainability is an opportunity. it's also a threat. Junk mail may get banned - the Scottish Parliament already looked into this. 19 billion items a year, made out of tree, with poor recyclability, and many don't even get opened. Clients will hold media plans accountable for their carbon footprints. Car ads will carry eco health warnings. There are renewed attacks on consumerism from environmentalists and NGOs. And they hold advertising as the culprit. Because it's the visible tip of the iceberg perhaps. Whether you want to ignore this issue or not, you are going to need to start to find some answers.

I hope sustainability will be on your agenda going forward. It certainly seems to be on many clients' agendas (not to mention Martin Sorrell's given his recent much quoted 'super-consumption' comments). But making it THE cause is my midlife answer. Planning will have to find it's own answer. Even if it's the same one.

The other big themes that came out on my blog when we chatted about all this were globalisation, and the digital age. I've met people from Goldman Sachs and Google who certainly seem to have found their life's work in those fields. And maybe there are other issues closer to home you will want to tackle (like saving the ad agency and industry?)

The point about midlife is I don't really think it matters what you believe in. Only that you believe in something. Something bigger than getting the job done.

Planning doesn't begin at 40. There's no point pretending it's young again. But it could well be ready for a good midlife crisis. A crisis of purpose and finding a bigger cause.

That's about all I have time for. Thank you for listening, to the organisers for inviting me, and to everyone here (including some of my own former mentors) who helped planning become what it is today; a place where some of the most interesting, valuable and original thinking anywhere in business takes place. Long may that continue.