

PLANNING AT 40: SOLVING THE WRONG PROBLEMS

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In *How to Become an Advertising Man*, published in 1963 when it was still okay to use a phrase like “Advertising Man,” James Webb Young wrote: “Finding the best opportunity in the market for the particular advertiser and shaping his advertising to exploit that opportunity is one of the greatest contributions the Advertising Man can make to his client. And the chances of making that contribution... will depend upon his penetration into the real facts and nuances of that advertiser’s situation.”

When planning was born just a few years later, it was in many ways the physical manifestation of this idea. Advertising represented an opportunity; it was a means to an end, the end being, as Stephen King put it, “a certain state of mind in the potential buyer.” The planner used research to identify what that state of mind could or should be, and what means might be used to achieve it. First and foremost, it was about setting the right objectives.

The new discipline existed on that ever-volatile border between logic and creativity. At the fledgling Boase Massimi Pollitt, Stanley Pollitt described the planner’s role as “ensuring that all the data relevant to key advertising decisions should be properly analyzed,

complemented with new research and brought to bear on judgements of the creative strategy and how the campaign should be appraised.”

Setting the right objectives and doing the right thing. But this couldn't happen in isolation. The principles that guided planning were *shared agency principles*. JWT and BMP didn't just talk about effectiveness; it was a guiding force that affected decisions in every department, at every stage of strategic and creative development.

For that reason I think it's important to be clear that we're here today to celebrate forty years of *planning*, not forty years of *planners*. The distinction is significant, because where planning has made the greatest contribution to clients' business, it is not just because planners have been doing a brilliant job. (Although it has usually required them to do so.) The truth is, planners can't be useful unless they have the support of others outside the planning department: of open-minded, ambitious (and often patient) clients; of upright, honourable agency managers; and, perhaps most important, of talented, confident creative directors.

Stephen King and Stanley Pollitt were brilliant leaders of the planning discipline, but I have often wondered how they would have fared, and how the discipline itself might have fared, without creative directors like Jeremy Bullmore and the late John Webster. You've already heard from Jeremy who, despite having a meeting room named after him at JWT, is apparently still very much alive. I'm very sorry that John couldn't be here tonight; like all great creatives he was never

easy to work with, but that was because he cared so much about getting the work right. He challenged planners as much as anyone I ever worked with to help him do that. He hated mediocrity and sloppy thinking as much as he loved great ideas; he never stopped asking questions, and it took a lot for him to be satisfied with the answers. But as great a writer and artist as he was, he never forgot that this was, first and foremost, a business.

In last week's *Campaign*, Dave Trott related a story about John from his days as a young writer at BMP. John said to him, "The difference between you and me is that you're a gifted amateur and I'm a professional." Dave asked him what he meant. John replied, "At the end of the day, you'll come out of your office with something brilliant or nothing. I'll come out of my office with something brilliant, or something usable."

I want to show three commercials – good old-fashioned TV adverts – that show John, and an agency that believed fervently in doing the right thing – at their very best.

SHOW CADBURY'S SMASH, GUARDIAN, SONY

When I was briefed on tonight's presentation, I was told, "Look forward, not back." On the basis of what I've said and shown so far, you may be forgiven for thinking that my presentation is somewhat ironically off-brief.

Well, so far I've talked about the analytical foundations of planning; the desire to set the right objectives for clients; the need for planning champions who reside not just in planning departments but also outside – on the client side, in agency management and creative departments; and about planning at its very heart being about doing the right thing.

I've done this because as planning continues to spread globally – something that Guy will talk more about later – I fear that much has been lost in translation. And in the current business environment, I also fear that planners and their agencies are too often being asked to provide the right solutions to the wrong problems.

In the 1980s, America discovered account planning. To be precise, Jay Chiat discovered account planning, which he once famously described as “the best new business tool ever invented.” I'm sure it was, when people like Jane Newman, MT Rainey, and Rob White – all very fine planners – were standing up in his new business meetings, and Chiat/Day was the only agency that had it. But the true test of planning isn't in new business; it is on existing business that the promise of planning is really tested. Are the right strategic decisions being made? Are the right creative decisions being made? And if so, the bottom line, are the client's objectives being met?

Unfortunately, money talks – especially in the United States – and the new business success of Chiat/Day, and later that of agencies like Goodby, Silverstein and Fallon McElligott, was the catalyst for

countless other US agencies to adopt the planning discipline. However, in agencies that didn't have creative directors like Chiat's Lee Clow, or Goodby's Jeff Goodby and Rich Silverstein, or Fallon's Pat Burnham or Bill Westbrook, it didn't make much difference. Planning can do many things, but in the absence of talented creative people it will never make the work better.

"Make the work better." In this phrase lies a second problem.

A few years ago, one of my friends in the United States was hired as planning director of an agency whose founder, the first name on the door and executive creative director, had never attempted to hide his loathing of account planning. I was curious about how this might affect my friend's day-to-day operation as a planner, and asked him, "What do you actually do at the agency?"

He replied, "It's my job to look cool, be smart, and hang out with the creative department." And he was only half-joking.

I have been alarmed to see the spread of a planning culture, which is defined by "cool, interesting, and insightful," and championed enthusiastically by some of today's bloggers – present company excepted, Mr. Grant – who seem to regard discipline, research and hard work as terribly twentieth century. Good insights don't often come out of thin air. It might appear that they do, because the critical words are often uttered almost randomly. But that's what happens when a great deal of information is consumed, and handed over to

the subconscious to turn over and over in the mind. Insight is all about connections, but without the initial information, such connections will be hard to find.

As Malcolm White so rightly said in his introduction to a section in *A Masterclass in Brand Planning*, “Planning is not about creativity; it’s about grounded creativity,” and at the risk of sounding like a grumpy old man, I lament the lack of grounding in so much of the creativity, and so much of the planning, that I see today.

For agencies to even be in a position to identify and exploit opportunities for clients, to set the right objectives, planning has to go back to its future. We have to remember that our greatest successes were built on a foundation of fact. We also have to remember that they emerged out of the natural tension that exists between creative and planning departments who are challenging each other to do their best work. Cosy, “hanging out with the creative department” relationships may seem very nice, but in my experience they rarely result in great work.

At the same time as planning has moved away from its roots, so too the client world has changed, and with it expectations of marketing in general, and agencies in particular. There was a time when the word, “procurement,” suggested illicit, exciting night-time activities. Now procurement is a daytime word, an every damn day word, and it’s no fun at all. Where the Holy Grail for marketing communications was once effectiveness, or doing the right thing, the quest is now more

often for efficiency, which is about doing things the right way. And on its own that's not enough.

An *Advertising Age* survey of American CMOs in January of this year revealed that the top two issues on their minds were tenure, and ROI. The average tenure of an American CMO is now less than two years, which is almost as bad as being the manager of Newcastle United. The figures are not much more encouraging in the UK, so the main objective for many CMOs is, not surprisingly, not getting fired or at least delaying the inevitable. And this means focusing on shorter-term objectives. Doing the right thing is no longer as important as doing something, to be seen to be making a difference.

Also in January this year, *AdWeek* magazine published another CMO survey in the US, in which the majority said that in the coming year they planned to plough more resources into things like email programs, CRM, marketing performance measuring dashboards, and search engine marketing. My hunch is that many of those expressing this aim may not even know what they are investing in. But they do so, comfortable in the knowledge that it's measurable.

It reminds me of a television interview I saw a few years ago with a senior police officer, who defended the reduction in numbers of officers on Britain's streets, on the basis that when there were more officers on the street there had been fewer arrests. Statistically, he said, it was clear that since officers had been taken away from the

traditional beat, there had been more arrests. He regarded this as a good thing.

Indeed, what he was talking about may well have represented success against a government directive to increase the number of arrests. But does it represent increased effectiveness in policing? One could argue that when there were more officers on the street they acted as a deterrent to crime, therefore fewer arrests were necessary. But it's harder to measure crimes that might have happened but didn't. So which is the better objective for society? More arrests? Or less crime? The higher, more important objective was being sacrificed in the name of accountability, and I fear that many clients in this audience today, and by association their agencies, are under similar pressure.

In 1989, at an event held to mark the 21st birthday of Planning, Paul Feldwick spoke about the anger that lay behind the discipline's creation and early development: anger at outdated and still unproven models of how advertising worked; anger at spurious research methodologies that acted as a barrier to creativity rather than an aid.

Well, looking forward to the next ten years and beyond, I'd like to see some more of that anger, more of that energy, and have planning once again challenge a rather disappointing marketing status quo. I ask this of all of you, as planners, creative people, agency managers and clients, because if planning is to continue helping to identify and

exploit opportunities as James Webb Young once described, it needs your support.

As Stephen King and Stanley Pollitt stood up to stupid, unhelpful research, so too we should stand up to the current obsession with the short term. Where are the marketing equivalents of Sir Alex Ferguson and Arsene Wenger? (I should add that I'm not fond of either, but I applaud their employers for sticking with them.) Both clients and agencies, like Sir Alex and Mr. Wenger, have to be given the time to build for tomorrow, even if it means not winning today.

We should be angered by the accountability mindset that means we're making more and more decisions based on what can be measured, rather than what's really important. How many companies today are setting "Big, Hairy Audacious Goals?" Certainly not enough, and we are also culpable in their failure to do this. We need to inject more ambition into our objectives.

This same accountability mindset, for spurious reasons of control and objectivity, also means that agencies are no longer partners to their clients in the way that we were when I was a young planner. As a planner at BMP I was as much a part of my client's marketing department as I was a part of the agency. (Indeed I even spent a few months as a brand manager at Courage when someone was out on sick leave, because I knew the brand as well as he did.) It upsets me that many clients no longer want that kind of relationship, and it upsets me that agencies have allowed it to happen.

As planners we should be angry at the erosion of our departments, but more so at the erosion of rigour as the discipline has evolved. Planning conferences have always revealed the tendency of planners towards intellectual and philosophical debate - “How many planners will fit on the head of a pin,” and “can Paul Feldwick pass through the eye of a needle,” but in the past that used to happen just once a year. Now so many of them are blogging they can do it every day - Planning Unedited – and it’s affecting the delicate relationship between opinion and fact in their everyday work. Much modern planning lacks the penetration and precision that Stephen King and Stanley Pollitt championed, and maybe just being angry isn’t enough. If planners really think it’s their job to be cool, talk smart and hang out with the creative department then we should fire them. If they’re not good with numbers or qualitative research, we should fire them. And while we’re at it we should fire the planning directors for not training them in the first place.

For me, the role for planning in the next forty years is to help clients once more to set the right objectives. The right objectives for brands and for business, not just for communications. In order to move forward, we need to look back, to principles and practices that have served us well in the past and can serve us well again. The fundamentals of planning, as I discovered in countless hours spent wading through Nielsen reports, may sometimes not be very interesting. But we ignore them at our peril.