

*This download
comes to you from*

www.commissionedwriting.com



The IdeaMines Website



The Anatomy of Account Planning

Stephen King
WPP Group

Tracking account planning is rather like counting a mixed batch of tropical fish. You think you see patterns, but they've all changed by the time you've finished counting.

There's little enough doubt about its growth. today most of the top UK agencies have planning departments and most of the recent new UK agency Weves have them built into the letter heading (at least one of Beagle, Bargle, D'Annunzio, Twigg and Privet will be a planner).

Yet the current approach of agencies varies between the integral and the non-existent. It's impossible to imagine Boase Massimi Pollitt without account planners. At the same time, it's been recently announced, in suitably crude language and to no-one's great surprise, that there's no room at all for account planning a McCann's.

I don't think one should just throw up the hands at all this diversity. It seems to me that the future of account planning and maybe indeed of advertising agencies themselves, depends on our teasing out correctly the historical strands – three in particular.

HOW ACCOUNT PLANNING STARTED

The first strand is how it all started. Advertising has always been planned and campaigns have always been post-rationalized. People like James Webb Young, Claude Hopkins, Rosser Reeves, David Ogilvy and Bill Bernbach were all superb planners. What is relatively new is the existence in an agency of a *separate department* whose prime responsibility is planning advertising strategy and evaluating campaigns against it. Such departments are older than we sometimes think. To quote from a 1938 JWT London brochure: *'Bright ideas must survive sharpshooters in the marketing department and snipers on the Plan Board, before they stand a chance of being seen by the client.'* Despite the rather negative role of sharpshooting, it seems there was a department which aimed to apply marketing thinking to advertising ideas. (This was not a research department. BMRB had been set up as a separate research company five years before).

When I joined JWT's marketing department in 1957, there were about 25 people in it allocated to accounts – as described in some detail by John Treasure (1). What we did for each of our clients included analyzing marketing data and published statistics, writing marketing plans, recommending more research, and planning new product/brand development. Our marketing plans were a bit naive – strong on the broad view, but a touch vague on logistics and usually in the dark about profits; but somebody had to write them. Not surprisingly, they went into most detail on advertising strategy and expenditure. They were of course the basis for the agency's creative work.

Then clients gradually started to build up proper marketing departments, who wrote their own plans. We tried to influence the strategic part of these plans by getting in first with our own blue book recommendations (with some relief abandoning pretence of knowing much about distribution, journey cycles and case rates). Increasingly we concentrated more directly on our own expertise, the advertising strategy. We also set up four very small specialist groups – an advertising research unit and a media research unit in 1964, a new product development unit and an operations research unit in 1965.

In a sense therefore, when JWT disbanded the marketing department and set up its account planning department on November 1 1968, it was more a reorganization and renaming than a radical change. Perhaps the biggest change came from recognizing that many of the senior media planners were analyzing exactly the same data in exactly the same way as the people in the marketing department, as a basis for making the main inter-media recommendations.(2,3)

The first written proposals to the management for the new department came on April 8, the final blueprint on August 23. It was all worked out in a series of meetings and away-days of the new group heads. At one of these (on July 15) we finally settled the name: we'd tried target planner (too narrow and obscure), campaign planner (too competitive with what creative people did) and brand planner (too much restricted in people's minds to packaged groceries). Tony Stead suggested account planner and it stuck.

Meanwhile a very similar gradualist development was happening at what turned into BMP> There was one important difference: the basis there was research rather than marketing. By 1964 at Pritchard Wood there was a media research unit, a marketing research unit (mainly doing desk research), a qualitative research unit and a research department (mainly commissioning quantitative research). Some 25 people in all, but not allocated to accounts, and too fragmented to have a very powerful voice in the agency. When Stanley Pollitt took over the research and media function, he made the crucial change of putting, *a trained researcher alongside the account man on every account.*' He quickly found that a great many trained researchers were more concerned with technique than with the green-fingered interpretation and use of research; and so moved on to finding and developing specialist advertising planners, with Peter Jones as the first.

When BMP was formed in June 1968 account planning was built in from the start, and Stanley Pollitt became the first head of it in an agency (though the name was

in fact later borrowed from JWT). The basis was the Cadbury Schweppes account group, whose members carried on their existing working practices.

While the start of it all at BMP was thus equally gradualist, there were some differences from JWT's approach. The ratio of planners to account managers was much higher – it has varied from one-to-one to one-to-two, whereas JWT has always had about one-to-four. Partly because of this and partly maybe because of their origins in research, BMP's planners have been far more *directly* involved in qualitative research. As David Cowan put it in 1981: '*A central part of the planner's job is to conduct the qualitative pre-testing research.*' JWT's view was always that the gains this brought in involvement and direct contact with consumers would be more than offset by the loss in objectivity and that it was better to use specialist qualitative researchers.

Whatever the differences between the two pioneer agencies, the similarities were very much greater. Both recognised that the key innovation was the development of professional planning skills and of their integration into the process of producing advertising. It was a fundamental change in the internal balance of power and influence. As I wrote in 1969: '*What we have set up is a system whereby a project group of three skills (account management, creative and account planning) is the norm for the planning of advertising campaigns.*' (3) Or as BMP put it in their offer document of 1983: '*The main new element introduced into its structure by BMP was called the account planner. The planner brings not simply research, but also the use of data, into every stage of advertising development as a third partner for the account handler and creative team.*'

The rush by other agencies to follow this lead was muted. For several years nothing at all seemed to happen. By 1979 only six other agencies in the top 20 had planning departments (CDP, DDB, Dorlands, DPBS, FCB and OBM) and maybe a dozen of the smaller agencies. After 1979, maybe spurred on by the formation of new agencies and of the Account Planning Group, it all accelerated rapidly.

The speed of recent growth has had one unfortunate result, in my view. Many managements have copied the most overt element of BMP's account planning without fully understanding the depth of skill and breadth of interest involved, the very high ratio of planners to account managers and the great commitment to training. All they have seen, in fact, is account planners running group discussions. As a result, a large number of qualitative researchers have found themselves, after four years or so of slogging away at group discussions, translated overnight into instant agency Account Planning Directors. It was so much easier to find them than people with a thorough grounding in all aspects of brand-building.

I believe in fact, that the most fundamental scale on which to judge account planners is one that runs from **Grand Strategists** to **Advert Tweakers**. And that nowadays there are rather too many agencies whose planners' skills and experience are much too near the advert-tweaking end of the scale.

VIEWS ON 'HOW ADVERTISING WORKS'

A second strand that affects differences in account planning is that of the brand personalities of the agencies themselves. This issue was richly and convincingly discussed by Charles Channon in 'Agency thinking and agencies as brands.' (4)

His key thesis was that differences in agencies and their output, *in the end reflect different ways of thinking about how ads work and consequently different approaches to planning ads which do so.* He picked out 'argument' as the essence of Masuis' thinking, 'imagery' for JWT, 'rhetoric' for BMP, 'aesthetic' for CDP.

It's certainly true that the development of account planning and of ideas about how advertising works have supported each other. For **JWT1964 was a critical year.**

Its new advertising research unit, faced by off-the-peg quantitative ad-testing methods imported from the US had got stuck.

We felt that the only sensible approach was to measure whether ads achieved their specific objectives, but creative strategy was being set as a 'consumer proposition.' What on earth could be meant by 'achieving a consumer proposition?'

This puzzle led eventually to a new approach to planning advertising, called the T-Plan. It was based not on what ought to go *into* the advertising, but on what ought to be the consumer's *responses* to the brand as a result. Other ideas about how advertising works – like reinforcement rather than conversion (5), brand personality, the direct/indirect scale of responses and the consumer's buying system – have all moulded the precise way in which account planning has developed at JWT.

One valuable addition to account planners' views on how advertising works was described most clearly by Rod Meadows in 'They consume advertising too.' (7) He argued that people actively consume advertising in its own right: they're experts in what it's trying to do; they judge brands as much on the quality of its advertising as its content. These 'advertising literate' people expect advertising to be original enough to get their attention, in a form that stimulates them, entertains them and recognizes their interest. Such views among planners have done much to support the distinctive form of UK advertising.

THE AGENCY ENVIRONMENT

The third formative strand has been that of external changes. Almost all business has become more competitive over the 25 years and has had to respond more rapidly to events. **For instance, the pressures on package goods marketers from**

retailers and the 'crisis branding' in the mid-70s led to a noticeable shortening of vision; it's hard to devote a lot of attention to strategic planning if Sainsburys is threatening to delist you tomorrow.

The agency world has changed a lot too. Agencies used to be professional partnerships, often somewhat dozily managed. Quite suddenly, led by Saatchi and Saatchi, they become businesses in their own right, often facing all the financial pressures put on a public company. The trade tabloids started getting their stories and comments from financial analysis, rather than from the people with a direct understanding of the business. Some managers of agencies inevitably become a little affected by some of the traditional 'City values' (such as short-termism, greed, self-absorption and hysteria). They stopped worrying about the clients and the layouts and started worrying about convertible deleveraging ratios and fully diluted negative net worth.

There are other ways in which agencies may have been becoming more inward-looking. The recognition of consumers' advertising literacy has been wholly good for UK advertising, with its stress on the need for original ideas and vivid expressions of them. But it's not too difficult to slide from that to believing that the creative people in an agency and the creative work are the *only* elements that matter; that creative people alone are fit to judge the merit of campaigns; that the account manager's job is simply to sell the resulting great work to the unsophisticated client. While the extremes of such views are not doubt rare, I think there have been subtle changes in the balance of power and influence within some agencies, and certainly in the way that the trade press has presented them.

Any trends toward short-termism and self-absorption are bound, I think, somewhat to diminish the role of account planners. Their skills lie in the outside world and the longer term, trying to match clients' abilities and brand personalities with consumers' aspirations. On the whole, the agency environment has tended over time to push planners towards the advert-tweaking end of the scale.

SO WHERE WILL IT ALL GO NEXT, THEN?

It seems to me that the future of account planning will continue to depend on the same three strands and in particular on the role that advertising agencies decide to play in future.

Marketing companies today are increasingly changing their viewpoints. They recognize that rapid response in the marketplace needs to be matched with a clear strategic vision. The need for well-planned brand-building is very pressing.

At the same time, they see changes in ways of communicating with their more diverse audiences. They're increasingly experimenting with non-advertising methods. Some are uneasily aware that these different methods are being managed by different principles; they may well be presenting conflicting impressions of the company and its brands. It all needs to be pulled together.

I think that an increasing number of them would like some outside help in tackling these problems, and some have already demonstrated that they're prepared to pay respectable sums for it. The job seems ideally suited to the strategic end of the best account planning skills. The question is whether these clients will want to get such help from an advertising agency.

If agencies move further towards an inward-looking obsession with their profits or their creative awards and a narrow-minded view of advertising as a *competitor* to other communication media, I'm not sure that they will. The work will go, as it is already starting to go, to a wide variety of specialists, management and marketing consultants, public relations advisors, corporate identity designers, and so on.

However, advertising agencies do have a few powerful advantages in this area. Most outside observers believe that the quality of account planning and brand-building skills and people is higher in agencies than elsewhere. They have made more progress on how communications work (though on a rather narrow front). They have pioneered the use of some valuable technical tools, such as market modelling. They have the immense advantage of continuous relationships with clients. If the will is there, it could be done.

What agencies, and the account planners in them would have to do is, above all, *demonstrate* that they have the breadth of vision and objectivity to do the job; apply 'how marketing communications work' thinking and R & D to a much wider area; probably bring in more outside talent, from marketing companies or other fields of communication; make more efforts to 'go to the top' in client contact (the one great advantage of the various specialists); and make sure that they get paid handsomely for the work. I very much hope that this can happen – I wouldn't like to think of the best strategic planners leaving for the other sorts of company or of agency planners shifting wholly to advert-tweaking.

I trust too that ADMAP will continue to plot how all this goes in the future as it has for the last 15 years. Its contribution has been enormous; most of the new ideas about advertising and how it works have emerged and been argued on its pages. It uniquely bridges the gap between '*D'Annunzio set to quit in Twigg, Privet image turmoil*' and '*Conjoint analysis of extrinsic benefit appeals: a magnitude estimation approach*.'

Account planners have been constantly stimulated, infuriated and enlightened by ADMAP. They know that its particular flavour has been largely the work of two people. I know that the innate modesty of the publisher and consultant editor will not allow them to be named, but from all account planners I'd just like to say thank you.

REFERENCES

1. Treasure, J.: The origins of account planning, Admap March 1985
2. Jones, R.: Are media departments out of date? Admap September 1968
3. King, S.: Inter-media decisions, Admap October 1969
4. Channon, C.: Agency thinking and agencies as brands, Admap March 1981
5. King, S.: Can research evaluate the creative content of advertising? Admap June 1967
6. King, S.: Practical progress from a theory of advertisements, Admap October 1975
7. Meadows, R.: They consume advertising too, Admap July/August 1983

