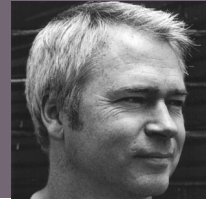


a creative perspective

adland vs change

Robert Saville



Change is happening all around us and the new environment that is emerging simply doesn't fit the old agency model. Those with a modern structure and forward-looking focus will, undoubtedly, stand to gain the most

Fragmentation is having a profound effect on us all. Not so long ago, agencies had little more to worry about than what to put into the next big budget film. Numbers were what counted most and peaktime ITV was king. But that was before media fragmentation.

Today, ITV's dominance is in decline and quality has overtaken quantity in importance. Consumers are now fragmented and this means brands must build a new kind of relationship with them – a relationship that's deeper, more engaging, and more relevant to their daily lives. This, in turn, demands a different approach to communications from brand owners and their agencies. No longer can anyone afford to sit back and rely on the old broadcast, numbers-driven model. Now it's all about big ideas able to flex their power in lots of different ways.

an outdated economic model

Despite this, many agencies have been slow to modify their behaviour accordingly. They have been held back by complacency and an outdated economic model reliant on big, money-earning accounts – such as car, airline or big beer brands – which involve a couple of TV ads a year and a bit of press work turning in margins of anything up to 30%. It takes far more blood, sweat and tears to create big ideas able to work across many different communications platforms in sufficient volume and variety to truly take the best advantage of the different context in

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which consumers now consume commercial messages. Most agencies would still rather make big bucks on just one or two big budget TV executions than pursue a different model of communicating with consumers.

But agencies are not alone. Whilst it's true that many have been slow to respond, so too have a number of media owners – and that includes some multichannel owners, too – who stand guilty of not pushing advertising convention or established thinking far enough. Progress has been further restricted by the way in which most media is still bought and sold.

multichannel TV: a 'powerful opportunity'

Yet multichannel TV provides brands with a powerful opportunity to get closer to consumers in the right place, at the right time and to interact with those consumers when they are in the right frame of mind. Which, of course, is just what the new,

fragmented, 21st century marketplace now demands. And because of its lower cost, multichannel also provides opportunities to experiment and innovate – such as through advertiser funded content, or long-form films.

All of which is great news for us at Mother. We don't – and never have – believed that banging people over the head repeatedly to get high awareness scores works. We've always been more interested in deepening

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the conversation our clients' brands have with their consumers through multiple executions and engaging campaigns using diverse media. We've never understood the argument that seeing an ad 10 or 11 times on ITV or Channel 4 is somehow worth more than the opportunity to see a range of executions many more times on multichannel TV.

a creative communications approach

When we set up Mother seven years ago we were keen from day one not to be seen as ‘an advertising agency’ but as a ‘creative communications agency’. This may sound pretentious to some, but this was – and still is – absolutely right, in my view. If you acknowledge from a creative viewpoint that everything is fragmenting you must set out to create huge creative ideas able to span all different communications channels – from T-shirts to viral advertising, direct marketing to sponsorship, press and TV – and embrace each as equally important. And you do this by directly addressing both the strategic and creative people within your agency.

Yet the ‘Terrestrial TV Rules’ status quo continues to be endorsed and promoted by the industry. Awards schemes are still largely obsessed with big TV films and rarely recognise integrated campaigns or initiatives. When we got a gold at D&AD for our work for Britart (involving commercial messages appearing on ‘street furniture’ ranging from benches to drain covers), many in the industry responded that it should be withdrawn as this campaign was neither ‘proper advertising’ or using ‘proper media’. Yet we had created a creative idea that not only screwed the

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conventional advertising model but which was perfectly in tune with an increasingly fragmented marketplace. And we did it by employing creative people who understand strategy and strategic people who understand execution.

change demands different attitudes and working practices

Everyone in advertising lives or dies by their ability to communicate with the consumer and keep pace with the way their lives are changing. Agencies must re-educate themselves if they are to meet this challenge. Multiskilling is a particular challenge – especially for larger, more traditional agencies with established structures and client relationships, but change they must. For it is younger agencies – such as ourselves and others, like Clemmow Hornby Inge – who are now showing that multiskilling and flexibility really count.

The real irony, of course, is that advertising agencies appear to be growing more conservative than their clients. Take Unilever, which has been working to radically change its structure and is now attempting to create space within the business for greater risk. I can’t think of any agency in the current climate willing to be as brave.

The death of industry standard communications structures has now been so widely predicted that many agencies now seem to think it just won’t happen. It’s like those who invested in digital at the time of the dotcom explosion; many were secretly relieved when the dotcom bubble burst because it meant that, thankfully, nothing really had to change. I truly believe many agencies would be delighted if Sky



modern structure, forward-looking focus

suddenly plunged from the sky and all cable throughout the UK was dug up by gophers. If this led to the return of ITV's dominance then all would be just fine.

But such blinkered thinking ignores the fact that change is happening all around us – across multichannel; magazines; radio; outdoor; digital media and direct marketing. And the new environment that is emerging simply doesn't fit the old agency model. It's still too early to predict just who will win the day, but those with a modern structure and forward-looking approach will, undoubtedly, benefit most.

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a 'creeping revolution'

And yet this has been a creeping revolution. In many respects, change has been quite slow. And, as a result, it has been easy for many agencies – and clients – to dismiss. Which is why if we propose creating a soap opera for a brand starring a character we could turn into a personality as popular as Morecambe & Wise not amongst the mass market but amongst a smaller audience who really counts ... the suggestion would be greeted not with interest but a puzzled frown.

Of course it's hard to change if people have a lot invested in the traditional agency structure. And it is a fact that those who tend to run agencies are the agency's relationship managers. So it's not in their interest to change because the importance of their role is likely to be reduced. At Mother we believe a good relationship with our clients is the product of managing and addressing the client's business and solving their problems on a daily basis.

This is not just the function of senior management but everyone within the agency. So we don't have account handlers to manage our client relationships, rather everybody who works on the business has an active client relationship. Every member of the team that works on the business has a shared responsibility for understanding a client's business and working to develop solutions to clients' problems.

redefining 'advertising'

As for the nature of the advertising we produce, that too must be honed by lessons learned from understanding this new, fragmented environment. More impactful and relevant to advertising than many suspect is the whole area of programme sponsorship and programme adverts – especially on multichannel TV. This content is created for a specific environment to accommodate the relationship an audience has with a particular programme to deepen that relationship. It represents a good example of how advertising could start to use multichannel TV to have a different type of conversation with consumers.

Multichannel TV presents significant potential to create pieces of content that cross the line between conventional advertising and editorial. It's always been the case that while dozens of people are involved in the production of a single 40-second ad for ITV just one account man, a creative in a tatty T-shirt and a junior producer knock out radio ads on a daily basis. Radio's second class price tag allowed this. Just how much experimentation this resulted in is questionable. But in the multichannel arena real potential for experimentation is

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there, as is a great opportunity to create deeper relationships between consumers and brands.

Consider some clients' recent culling of the brands in their portfolio. Under a different model of communications it might not have to assess the future existence or otherwise of a particular brand against how many millions of pounds it has to invest in marketing that brand. Surely it won't be long before lower cost communications opportunities allowing greater experimentation and more flexible thinking will be able to sustain smaller and medium-sized brands, perhaps turning them into the mega-brands of the future.

the future: 'fragmented advertising' specialists?

Agencies have to be able to provide the sort of alternative solutions brand owners are now starting to demand. And if they don't? Well, who's to say we won't see the emergence of a new breed of 'fragmented advertising' communications specialists? We already have regional agency specialists, after all, so why not a new generation skilled in adapting brand ideas across a broad range of diverse contexts? True, everyone's talking about integration nowadays. But for all the talk, our attempts

at segmentation are still incredibly blunt.

For the time being, though, I don't believe we have yet seen a really great case study that, on its own merit, both demonstrates the true potential of multichannel TV and sparks industry imaginations to the extent that, finally, even the most traditional agencies acknowledge they must change. However, boundaries will be pushed back further. Multichannel owners are growing increasingly flexible and inventive in their approach to their medium. Meanwhile multichannel viewers used to active viewing and being in control increasingly expect it.

So for me, the key question has to be: How much bigger and more important will all this have to get before the advertising industry takes it seriously?

When Sky penetration was just 20% the tide was lapping at the end of the street, but it was still raining. And now what have we got? Just two TV mega-brands: the BBC and Sky. The pressure is truly on commercial terrestrial TV. And the door is opening for progressive and radical-thinking multichannel networks hungry to capitalise on this. Agencies would do well to learn from the likes of UKTV and how it is trying to solve problems very similar to their own: namely, how to attract and retain audiences and deepen their relationship with them in an increasingly fragmented marketplace. If we don't solve this dilemma together we will all lose out. ■

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