

an agency group perspective

## breaking down the barriers between media and creative

**Mandy Pooler**



In a world where connections are everything, the advertising industry spent the 1990s putting physical and behavioural walls between its own workforces. Now it must re-think traditional structures if it is to fully exploit the new media landscape.

Years ago, Rowan Atkinson and Mel Smith did a sketch.

Rowan: "What's the secret of great..."

Mel: "Timing."

Rowan: "... comedy?"

I promise you it was very funny at the time and, of course, proved the point. Timing is the secret of great comedy and, I think, it's also the secret of great advertising. But in a 300 + channel world it's easy to get your media timing wrong. And in the kinetic world of the 21st century consumer, it's easy to miss the creative zeitgeist of the moment.

Much highly respected work has been published in the last few years on the disproportionate benefit of getting your timing right - from John Philip Jones's academic treatises on recency in media planning to the Henley Centre's studies on consumer response to customer relationship marketing. To summarise the upshot of much of this research: a message received about a product or service when I want it is great, however at any other time those companies can seem little better than stalkers.

We all recognised the truth of Andrew Cracknell's timely warning<sup>1</sup> that much of our output was becoming little better than pollution because it didn't pay sufficient respect to a 21st century consumer who is now in command of his own media environment. As Andrew said: "Is treating the

proliferation of media opportunities as simply an increase in the number of ways in which you can stick your foot in people's doors particularly clever? And then ramming your message in their faces, regardless of context – is that entertaining?"

In light of Andrew's comments that he may sound like the turkey who voted for Christmas, it will be fascinating to see the outcome of UKTV's bold decision to restrict advertising minutage on its channels (see Chapter 9). Here's hoping that Dick Emery and Andrew Cracknell's intuition and experience prove a valuable point - that in advertising less can be more – before it's too late. Because too much advertising doesn't wait to be invited in. And too much advertising has its timing all wrong.

### **21st century timing**

Having warned against excess it must be a source of enormous frustration to media owners that just when their inventory is broadening and deepening (from programme making to event creation, custom publishing and websites, from blipverts to infomercials and interactivity) they find themselves too often confronting a decision-making void. The streets of London that lie between the doors of creative and media companies must be littered with great ideas looking for an advocate, and great media salesmen

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looking for a buyer with brains and bravado. If Madison and Vine are to meet and merge, we must put primacy on integration and imagination.

### **an industry out of step**

The great irony of the communications business is that just when our world went broadband, we went analogue. It's easy to see why the arguments for splitting up and out all the skills that used to reside in a full service agency succeeded at the time. "The future is all about specialism" was the thrust of the new media independents' mantra – and, certainly, they were right to push the crucial importance of a skilled workforce dedicated to navigating a complex new

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world of intersecting superhighways.

Where we all – and I include clients in this – got it wrong, however, was in missing the killer application of ‘content’ as it’s now commonly called. In other words, we forgot that it’s not just when you drop in on the consumer, it’s what you have to say and how you say it that makes the difference between a warm welcome or a cold shoulder. In a world where connections are everything, we spent the 1990s putting physical and behavioural walls between our own workforces.



There is, of course, little point in raking over the past. It’s easy to apportion blame after the event. And to point out that a lot of people made a lot of money out of the split between media and creative agencies, and a lot of clients saved a lot of money by unravelling the old commission systems to play media and creative agencies off against each other for packets of money based on inputs rather than outcomes, such as great ideas, return on investment,

sales success. So let’s forget all that. What matters today is where we are now and where we have the possibility to be.

Consider the status quo. Is there hard evidence that our existing agency structures and work practices are holding us back from professional and personal success? I think there is. A lot of evidence is, inevitably, anecdotal but there are some hard facts that must be acknowledged.

**funding the future:  
what do clients want and who will provide it?**

In its 2002 survey *Media Neutral Planning: Myth or Reality*, Willott Kingston Smith make a convincing argument that the ‘integrated communications’ – or ‘media neutral’ services – that clients insist is their primary requirement will only come about if financial structures allow it to. Which presents an immediate problem. In Willott Kingston Smith’s view, any well run

marketing services company should be able to make a 15% to 20% margin. Yet consider its survey and two things become apparent. First that creative agency margins plummeted in the 1990s as media company margins rose in almost equal proportion. In other words, when the media department left for the independent promised land it left a large proportion of their overhead behind.

Second, as figure 1 shows, companies with media buying at their heart now make the highest margins: only design specialists coming close (source: Willott Kingston Smith).

So, logic suggests, media agencies are the ones with cash to invest in a creative

### Operating profit margins by sector

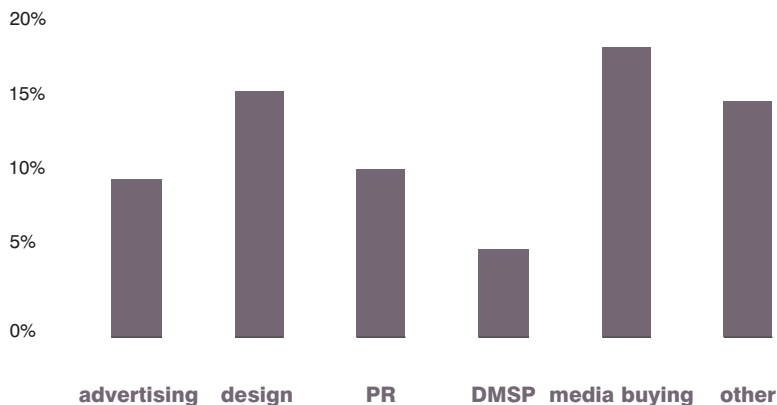


figure 1.

source: Willott Kingston Smith, 2002

product. But will the media agencies break 'out of the box' in time to save the day? I'm with my old friend Jonathan Durden on this one. In his own words "Media companies should invest more in creative talent in its broadest sense ... we should also aggressively heal the rift with advertising agencies, as we no longer have anything to prove ...".<sup>2</sup>

Hear, hear, I say. And interestingly, Jonathan gives another reason why we should get on and do this as soon as possible. Because every media owner worth its salt now has cross-media sales and in-house creative services.

#### Project Jericho: just in time?

Project Jericho was an initiative launched by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising in 2002 to bring creative and media people closer together. It never set out to deconstruct and reconstruct our industry – that's the job of the individual managements of those companies

which make up our highly competitive and over-supplied business. And from an early stage we agreed some important principles.

First up was the shared belief that the best return on time invested would come from concentrating our efforts on the next generation of executives: those who had never worked in 'full service' agencies so had the big advantage of carrying no baggage. As a consequence, training and education would be our priority with human introduction and interaction – the social

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cement essential for new working patterns – a happy by-product.

We also agreed that while actively seeking to encourage participation specifically from creatives and media specialists, Jericho should be inclusive – in other words, open to all disciplines. Media owner participation in the initiative was vital. We canvassed the views of media owners at the outset and found a shared frustration at the way current structures mitigate against great ideas and even smooth working practices. It was shocking how many media owners reported time-wasting at a very basic level, such as trying to reconcile bookings for 40-second commercials with 30-second copy, or press copy arrival times with booked insertion dates.

Finally, the Jericho initiative was also founded on the belief that everyone in our industry needs to be educated in wider skill sets – including an understanding of the financial implications of our working practices. This point was strongly argued by McCann's executive creative director Robert Campbell, who is also chairman of the IPA's Creative Forum. Over-cosseting over the years, he believes, has contributed to a generation of creative people too willing to stay in a 30-second box oblivious to the fact that their financial oxygen is running out.

### **mixed success**

So is Project Jericho working? Well, so far 450 people have attended relevant IPA training courses and 150 people have already attended two Creative Media Showcase evenings. Anecdotally, these were well-received. But, there is much, much more to be done. One happy by-product is the initiative's knock-on effect –

trade press coverage raising the issue; M&M Europe's conference in October; Yahoo! deciding to stage its own London and New York events; and, of course, the support of companies like **ids** in publishing this.

Whether the metaphorical - or even real - walls between creative and media come down, however, remains to be seen. I, for one, hope that by the time the next generation takes command they simply won't exist. ■

***Mandy Pooler is Chief Executive of The Channel, WPP's media and communications knowledge practice.***

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Cracknell's Campaign Essay published in Campaign, March 15, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Durden's Campaign essay published October 18, 2002.

