A brief history of account planning

1940s - 1950s
Marketers hire a “copy contact” - an art director, writer, strategist and media guy all in one.

1960s
Bill Bernbach innovates with specialization, creating teams consisting of art directors and copywriters, with the account manager doing the strategy work. The research discipline also develops.

1970s
Jay Chiat “discovers” account planning as a vehicle for consumer insights in the ad process. In 1982, he hired Jane Newman, an account planner who trained with Stanley Polit, to bring the discipline to Chiat/Day.

1990s
Account planner Jon Steel helps come up with the “Got Milk?” campaign with Goodby, Silverstein & Partners based on the insight of a now called depression strategy. At a time when marketers bought into the concept of the importance of brand planners and were looking at new-business gods, especially during the dot-com boom.

2003
Jeff Goodby makes “Death of Account Planning” keynote at the American Association of Advertising Agencies’ account-planning conference.

TODAY
Account planners are no longer the only planners anymore. They are competing for the attention of decision-makers with content specialists, tech planners, media planners and trans-media planners, as well as new agency specialists such as event-marketing planners.

Notable account planners

STANLEY POLLIT
c-o-founder of BMP and Stephen King of JWT, London separately invented two forms of account planning in London in the late 1960s, convincing agencies that creative development would be enhanced by research.

JANE NEWMAN
brought account planning to Chiat/Day and the U.S. “she made us realize a planner’s job is to make the ideas happen,” said Suzanne Powers, executive director of strategy, TBWA/Chiat/Day.

ADAN MORGAN
a former Chiat/Day executive, institutionalized the thinking around how smaller, challenger brands can use communications to eat the larger marketing fish. His current company is BsB/Msh.

Jon Steel
who worked for Goodby, Silverstein & Partners, is known as the godfather of planning in the U.S., in part because his writings are still used as guides today.

UP AND COMERS
Some up and comers include Colin Drummond, Chris Porter and Boagity, Leslie Stone, Wenden & Kennedy, New York; Gabrielle Grant at Venables, Bell & Partners, San Francisco; and Linn Reznik at Venables, Bell & Partners, New York.

The seven deadly sins of marketing

1. Living by the old assumptions, especially focusing on specific brand definitions instead of letting consumers define brands on their own.
2. Caring about the wrong objectives—particularly focusing on keeping a brand consistent and not on brand energy, which thrives on constant innovation.
3. Focusing on linearity and order instead of randomness and complexity, the consumer’s addictive dopamine.
4. Thinking brand communication is what matters, when it’s the company’s actions and cultural/social point of view that counts. Good examples: Dove and AIDS.
5. Spending time modeling brands instead of building brands organically.
6. Thinking big things matter and forgetting small things can trigger big impact.
7. Operating by a “learn then do” process instead of “try, learn, then try again.”

Account planners at a crossroads

Former agency rock stars scramble to keep up with fast-changing media

By ALICE Z. UNEED
adweek.com

Is the poor account planner?
Not long ago, planners were the undisputed rock stars of the agency business. But they’ve now more mortals in “the middle of the maelstrom of everything going on—what communication, what media, how to compete and how to become versed in multimedia,” said Edward Cotton, director-strategy, for Influx Insights, a unit of Butler, Shine, Stern & Partners, Sausalito, Calif. Not to mention that they are increasingly finding themselves on teams with other disciplines of, yes, planners, media planners, content planners, trans-media planners, channel planners, directors of user experience. “How do you [prepare a brief if there’s 10 on a team}?” Mr. Cotton asked.

It’s an evolution that is sure to be discussed at the American Association of Advertising Agencies’ Account Planning Conference in San Diego next week. Whereas the discipline was once rooted in the staid British tradition of representing the consumer in the advertising-creation process by pushing marketers and agency teams to produce the best TV spot, today’s planning ideas need to stand up to all forms of advertising and every way consumers spend their time. “A big challenge is being up to date with what’s going on,” Mr. Cotton said. “Six months ago, it’s MySpace. Now it’s Facebook.” James Fox, chief strategic officer, Taxi, argues that those changing media models have rendered planning more valuable to both marketers and agencies. “It’s on the planners’ shoulders to facilitate all of that,” he said. Planners find the insight that is key regardless of whether it plays out on YouTube or the boob tube. For example, a product like Axe deodorant is 1% perfume and the rest compressed air, but planners unearth the emotional need—the insecurity of young men—and promise them seduction.

Of course, selling marketers on intangibles at a time when they are pitching pennies and demanding measurable results isn’t always easy for planners, especially when their emotional propositions are executed in a nontraditional manner. “Planners have to find new metrics to evaluate and measure things that are in some ways unmeasurable,” Mr. Fox said.

The first planners had “giant personalities and could go head-to-head with the creative people,” Mr. Cotton said. Goodby, Silverstein & Partners’ famed account planner Jon Steel had “an approaching-zeitgeist moment” with Jeff Goodby, Mr. Cotton said, in creating what’s become the “Got Milk?” campaign with Goodby, Silverstein & Partners. At a time when marketers bought into the concept of the importance of brand planners and were looking at new-business gods, especially during the dot-com boom.

Since then, account planners have slipped a few rungs down from decision makers. Suzanne Powers, executive strategy director, TBWA/Chiat/Day. sits among the agency’s top decision-makers in her New York office but recalls a moment of planning clarity while working on the Pedigree account with Worldwide Chairman Lee Clow a couple of years ago. Ms. Powers said she walked into the meeting thinking she had cracked the marketing puzzle until he spoke. “You sound like our client,” Mr. Clow chided. “Speak to me as humans speak.” That’s becoming even more difficult in an era where, Ms. Powers said, even the term “consumer” is mis-leading. “To me, you have to earn the right to have a conversation with somebody,” she said. “You can’t assume they’re already consuming.”

No longer can planners just be good at strategy, said John Thorp, director-brand strategy and associate partner at Goodby Silverstein. “It’s a cross-silo activity. They have to be good at a lot of things that run across advertising. Ambidexterity is required across the house.”

In a way, the new realities also have put planners in a predicament much akin to those of a marketer trying to sell a product. Planners need to “produce their offerings—should you produce a mini-documentary or go with a PowerPoint presentation?” Mr. Cotton said. All this has created a humbling attitude on the part of planners. “It’s my way or the highway” isn’t as prevalent anymore, he said.

The changes may be enough to bring more planners to a psychiatrist’s couch, of sorts, as some describe the upcoming account-planning conference: “Thinking big things matter and forgetting small things can trigger big impact.”

Operating by a “learn then do” process instead of “try, learn, then try again.”

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