

AS VIAGRA IS TO SEX.

Will Strategic Planning Bring Agencies Back into Marketing?



They go by many names and dwell in many castles. Strategic planner, brand planner, campaign planner. They are to agency new business as Viagra is to sex, although exactly what they do is not as certain.

I've been told that these people are the consumer's representative, the brand's champion and the communication plan's architect. That they are the drivers of integrated marketing.

That they have the skills to develop the brand campaign to the point where subject-matter experts, like writers, art directors and media planners and buyers, can take-over and connect the dots.

In this best interpretation, the strategic planner is the agency's attempt to develop a multi-skilled consumer and brand-marketing champion.

A less charitable view sees it as the failure of client brand management, which has encouraged agencies to grab at recovering the marketing influence they once had and sorely miss.

The now familiar term "creative agency" tells part of the sad story. Ten short years ago it was a compliment, not a category. There were full service agencies, creative boutiques and media services. But the same pres-

sures of competitive necessity that led full-service agencies to downgrade research also caused them to spin-off free-standing media groups capable of serving in-house and outside clients.

Detaching creative from the life-support of media and research was a desperate move. It lowered costs and broadened revenues, as planned, but it also created the media AOR, which lowered the price-of-entry into the agency business, allowing smaller creative shops to compete for large accounts, a trend richly illustrated by Arnold, Goodby, Riney, Messner, Deutch and others.

Can the creative agency reinvent itself as "full-service?"

Will strategic planning return the creative agency to the center of brand marketing? I think it unlikely, unless the creative agency reinvents itself as the full-service agency, but I doubt that Djin goes back in the bottle. Focus groups are not the stuff of strategic planning.

If any group has a shot at delivering strategic planning, it is the media agency, because its people are used to dealing with most of the volume of information that needs to be integrated to make robust strategic recommendations.

But media has a full plate. It's just coming to terms with TV optimization (switching a client out of daytime into cable is not strategic planning), and it faces the rock-climbing discipline of media-mix.

I don't think media agencies can deliver strategic planning today, simply because the strategic planners aren't there. Those people need to know a

lot more than they're likely to. The difficulty in developing competence is the demanding combination of broad scope and niggling complexity.

Unless the planner has a good grasp of how markets, consumers and media work -- and real-time intelligence on new media and market-prices -- direction is being set by an gifted amateur. These are often mutant media planners who have learned how to dance.

Isn't strategic planning A group assignment?

Perhaps it's unrealistic to expect one person can do it all. Isn't strategic planning a group assignment? Isn't it a structural and management issue, rather than a question of training? The company that can offer the research resources, interpreted by specialists who talk with each other, will set the standard. I think some media agencies understand this.

Part of the planning challenge lies in the kind of information we have to work with, as much as who gets to interpret it. As communication opportunities increase, piecing information together from many media-centric sources (NTI, MRI, Radar, NetRatings), becomes more difficult. When media mix is the sport, the analysis anchor needs to be the consumer, not the individual media.

Strategic planning starts with the consumer.

Strategic planning needs research that starts with the consumer. In the 1970's US agencies toyed with integrated marketing before the beast was named. They constructed a media fancy called "A day in the Life of Joe Consumer," which sketched-out the advertising opportunities presented by routine consumer behavior.

These were superficial essays created for new business, and they seldom looked past traditional, commissionable media. But the core idea is sound. Gale Metzger's Statistical Research, Inc. has just completed a rigorous "Day in the Life of Study" which shows the value of this approach for strategic planning.

The full service agency was the home of strategic planning. It is close to extinction. In its place there is the "nearly full service agency," itching to do the job. Dave Verklin suggests that the new media agency, morphed into message manager, will supply everything but creative - and have a big say in that too.

Sounds like strategic planning.

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