

# Researchers and creatives: a meeting of minds?

Yes, you really can have a successful research meeting with the ad team. **Charles Young**, Ameritest, explains how to go about it

*When I heard the learn'd astronomer,  
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in  
columns before me,  
When I was shown the charts and diagrams,  
to add, divide, and measure them,  
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he  
lectured with much applause in the lecture-  
room,  
How soon unaccountable I became tired and  
sick,  
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by  
myself,  
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time  
to time,  
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.*  
Walt Whitman (1855-1968) (1)

**W**ALT KNEW WHAT it was like to be a creative, even if he never sat in a conference room listening to research. But not being a businessman, he might not have understood that creating stars out of ordinary products and services requires the marketing manager to find ways to get the poet and the scientist to communicate effectively with each other.

This has never been more important than now, when senior management demands 'figures, ranged in columns' proving the return on investment before the budget is approved.

Many researchers have been working hard on the messy problem of how to improve advertising measurement, particularly in the emotionally-charged arena of pre-testing or copy testing. Knowing in advance you have a piece of creative work that will return a multiple of the ad spend to the bottom line is much more useful than learning after the fact from tracking studies that, unfortunately, last year's advertising did not work.

## No single formula

Researchers have tried different measures for predicting ad performance: recall, persuasion, attention-getting power, likeability, communication and so on. All have been found to be somewhat valid and therefore important, but none has been found to be perfect. One conclusion many researchers have reached is what

creatives have been saying all along – different ads work in different ways and there is no one, simple formula for creating effective advertising.

Without debating the pros and cons of different measures, one overlooked implication of this is that for research to contribute to developing effective ads, creatives must communicate to researchers how their advertising is supposed to work. Only then can appropriate research methods be deployed, and appropriate interpretations of the data given, to understand whether your advertising works as intended. Researchers and creatives must collaborate.

So, what are the barriers to successful collaboration?: in a word, emotions.

Let us look at the emotions likely to accompany various findings on ads you research. In general, if you test enough ads, the scores generated, regardless of the system used, will follow a normal curve (Figure 1). Ads in the top 30% will be above average, a cause for celebration.

Ads in the bottom 30% will be below

average, a cause for disappointment. But generally, if the research is clear-cut, most professionals accept the verdict of the audience and move on to another idea. Emotionally, this is a zone of acceptance and resignation.

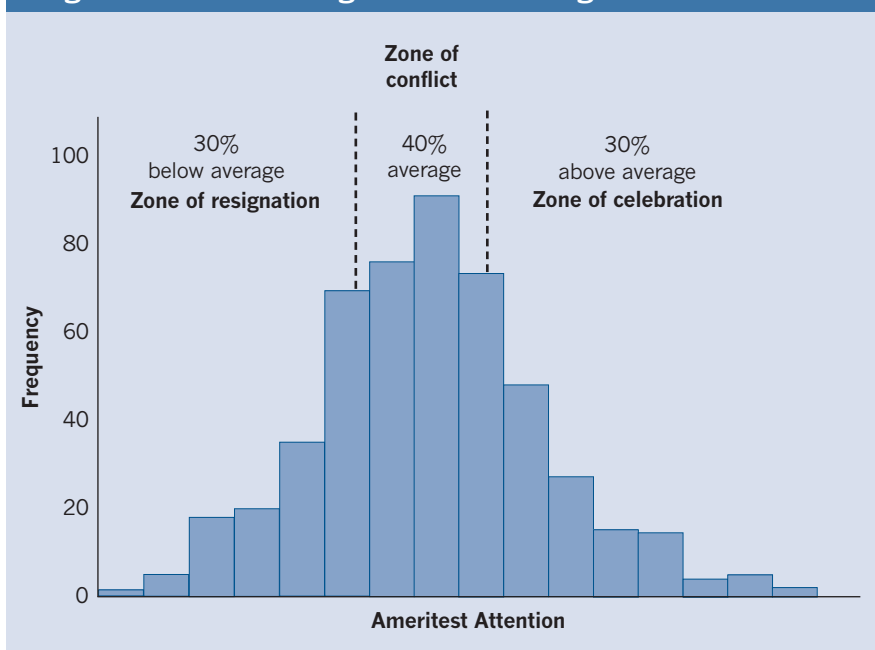
The difficulty arises in the middle, where an ad is only average statistically. No one wants to be considered average, with the unspoken connotation of mediocre. No ad manager wants to spend millions of dollars behind an average ad. At best, average ads should cancel out competitive advertising, but cannot be expected to grow the business substantially. No end-of-year bonus there.

## Ambivalence

Yet, the research is not saying that the ad is good or bad – research reports are cautiously ambivalent. Perhaps it is only telling you that the work is not quite done, that the execution needs more polishing to release its full potential. In this limbo, there is room for interpretation and for advocates of the ad to spin the

FIGURE 1

Range of emotions during research meeting with ad team





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data – or question the research. But, given the pressures of the marketing calendar, there is a need for the team to understand what to do next.

Emotionally, when research reports average scores for an ad, you enter the zone of conflict. Unfortunately, by the laws of statistics, you find yourself here about 40% of the time.

How you deal with the emotional dynamics of this determines whether you have a successful research meeting with the ad team. No matter how technically excellent the research was, the ad research project is not finished until you have had such a successful meeting: it is only when research is understood that it can make a useful contribution to creative development.

One common mistake in managing emotions in the meeting is to pretend they do not exist. A research meeting is not a court of law where the ad is on trial and the judge admonishes the jury to set aside their emotions and look reasonably at the facts. The dichotomy between reason and emotion is a false one. Indeed, reason and emotion work together in creating effective advertising. Therefore, the separation of these faculties is equally wrong when researching to evaluate ad effectiveness.

Great work comes from people who are passionate about their ideas – so how can we expect team members to be dispassionate about research findings on their work? In our experience, one of the most reliable indicators that the team is learning from the research is visible conflict of ideas – as long as it is productive and not taken personally.

Another barrier to successful meetings is the lecture-room format of most research presentations. Whitman warned of the likely response from creatives to that. A sure sign of impending failure is when the researcher assumes the role of professor and the team obligingly asks questions about the methodology, taking attention off the true, often uncomfortable, subject of the

meeting, the performance of the advertising.

### **Give and take**

A sign of impending success is when everyone is fully engaged in a lively give and take of ideas as they struggle to understand the significance of the audience response to the ad. Everyone should participate in the discussion with the goal of understanding and insight, not winning points or attempting to make one's own point of view prevail.

This kind of group interaction is what Peter Senge describes in his book *The Fifth Discipline* (2), when he talks about dialogue being at the heart of group learning: 'The purpose of dialogue is to go beyond any one individual's understanding. In dialogue, a group explores complex issues from many points of view... individuals gain insights that simply could not be achieved individually.'

Senge borrowed this from British physicist David Bohm, who wrote an insightful little book called *On Dialogue* (3). According to Bohm, dialogue is concerned with: '... a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which may emerge some new understanding. It's something new, which may not have been in the starting point at all. It's something creative.'

Dialogue should focus on meaning, not analysis. In dialogue, people come from different backgrounds and experiences, with different opinions, assumptions and mental models. Collectively, they can explore the complex issues of advertising from many points of view.

Indeed, many points of view are represented in the typical ad research meeting. To understand the emotional dynamics, it is useful to review the different positions that might be present (Figure 2).

From the client side, three principal players, in addition to assistants and observers: the senior marketing person,

for example the marketing director, who owns the brand and controls the advertising budget; the person charged with day-to-day management of the brand and responsible for the development of advertising strategy, the brand or advertising manager; and the primary client researcher – these days, the consumer insights manager. This person, who is the research supplier's client, is responsible for the research contribution to creative development and therefore owns the meeting.

From the agency, there might be four types: the creative director, the principal architect of the brand's advertising over time, who occupies the position of the advertising expert; the creatives, who came up with the concepts being tested; the account manager, responsible for managing business relationships with the client and interfacing with the creatives; and, finally, the account planner, whose job is to build bridges between consumer desires and creative inspiration, which here means acting as translator between the science of research and the art of advertising.

Finally, the research supplier presents the findings and facilitates discussion. This role can be assumed by the client researcher.

An emotional sensitivity to different viewpoints is critical to successful dialogue. This is not the same as deference to hierarchy. As Bohm says: 'Hierarchy is antithetical to dialogue, and it is difficult to escape hierarchy in organisations.' If the senior person is used to having her views prevail because of her position, successful dialogue will not occur. If junior people are used to withholding their views because of insecurity, dialogue will fail. For successful dialogue, all players must participate fully – which does not mean that all must agree.

### **Differing roles**

What are the roles the different players can be expected to perform? Not long ago we conducted a couple of group discus-

sions among client and agency personnel on how to have a successful research meeting. A summary of their suggestions is shown in **Figure 2**.

The marketing director is the decision-maker: her primary job is to actively listen rather than talk. If she makes her views known too early, she will create a situation of follow the leader, which is counterproductive to dialogue. That said, she has a role at the start, to validate the advertising objectives. Since her business goals are at stake, she should also challenge the group for excellence. Finally, at the end of the meeting she should sum up. This is important, so the group under-

stands what findings she has internalised that will affect her decision-making. She should set next steps so the actions to be taken are clear to everyone and the group can move forward.

The brand /advertising manager should set up the meeting by reprising the brand strategy and the objectives the creative work is designed to achieve. As the advertising buyer, the brand manager should be disciplined in examining the research to be sure that the advertising has met those objectives. But as buyer-critic, it should be clear that all comments reflect a critique of the work, with an eye to identifying opportunities for improve-

ment, not criticisms of the people doing the work. A key role of the brand /ad manager is motivational, to be a cheerleader to get the best possible work from the team.

The consumer insights manager validates the methodology and makes sure the meeting is spent discussing what is important – the advertising – not wasted on confusing discussion of methodology. Her job is to help clarify research findings to illuminate their meaning to the other team members. If there is a problem with the performance of the ad, her job is not to tell the creatives how to solve the problem but to define the problem as precisely as possible so the creatives can focus on finding appropriate solutions.

The creative director is the primary source of advertising expertise and should provide relevant mental models and examples for framing discussion of creative issues. This means providing a big-picture view of how a particular execution fits the client's brand objectives. The creative director should set a positive tone by signaling an interest in consumer response to the advertising, actively taking the lead in discussing the findings.

The creatives are the most emotionally vulnerable and uncomfortable, for it is their work that is being publicly critiqued. Simply being there to listen and learn signals their willingness to stand behind their work and their genuine interest in their client's success. Painful as it is, whenever a gap opens between creative intent and the audience response to the execution, this represents an opportunity for a new insight about the consumer to whom they are trying to sell. As seekers of missed opportunities, creatives should actively participate in discussion and not sit quietly by. Far the best research meetings are those where the creatives do much of the talking.

The account manager is the strategic partner of the brand manager and co-creator of the strategy. As organising hub of the agency resources, his or her job is to keep the discourse grounded in the practicalities of keeping the process on timetable and within budget. But emotionally, his/her job is to provide moral support to the vulnerable creative spirit, to encourage risk-taking and the inevitable missteps implicit in creating outstanding work. In research meetings, she will frequently come across as the defender of the work, championing ideas to provide the emotional momentum necessary to get an idea through to completion.

**FIGURE 2**

## Key players and their roles in research meeting with ad team



The account planner's role is to bridge science and art by helping to interpret and translate the research findings in ways the creatives find helpful. Since creative inspiration is frequently intuitive or inner-directed, the planner provides a counter-point by bringing an outer-directed focus on the consumer, much like research, but with a conceptual, rather than technical, orientation.

Because ad development is inherently collaborative, these roles all overlap. But it is important for understanding the group's emotional dynamics to understand the differences in viewpoints of the various stakeholders.

### Conditions for dialogue

According to Bohm, three conditions are necessary for discourse:

1. All participants must suspend their ongoing assumptions and preconceptions;
2. All participants must regard one another as colleagues;
3. There must be a facilitator who holds the context.

The absence of these undermines the success of the meeting. If participants take a defensive stance, arguing from fixed preconceptions even in the face of research findings, their minds are closed to learning and the meeting will not accomplish anything useful. True learning occurs when you confront the gap between assumptions or expectations and reality. According to an old business adage, it is not what you do not know that leads to failure, it is what you think you know, but is not true.

The second point is a matter of trust. If one party does not trust the others to interpret data correctly or draw right conclusions, this leads to attempts to control or spin the findings. This represents a fundamental lack of respect for your colleagues that will undermine the ability of the team to learn. Respect for differences in viewpoint and trust in everyone's good intentions are fundamental to creative collaboration. Bohm points out the importance of this: '... people in any group will bring to it their assumptions, and as the group continues meeting those assumptions will come up. Then what is called for is to suspend those assumptions, so that you neither carry them out nor suppress them. You don't believe them, nor do you disbelieve them; you don't judge them as good or bad. Normally when you are angry you start to react outwardly and you may just say

'In a successful meeting, your ad team has received a communication back from their target audience and the gap, if it exists, between creative intent and audience response has been explored fully'

something nasty. Now suppose I try to suspend that reaction. Not only will I now not insult that person outwardly, but I will suspend the insult I make inside of me. Even if I don't insult somebody outwardly, I am insulting him inside. So I will suspend that, too.'

Third, it is important to have a facilitator, to empower members of the group to express their views freely and to keep discussion focused on how the advertising is working. The skills needed to generate discourse in a meeting are no different from those of a focus group moderator. Admittedly, it is rare to find business meetings run as well as focus groups.

It is difficult for the client researcher to act as moderator because of her need to be perceived as a member of the team – someone ego-invested in the success of the advertising. A mistake client researchers sometimes make is to present themselves as objective and therefore indifferent to whether research findings are positive or negative. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is a great difference between objectivity and willingness to suspend assumptions. Client researchers care as much as any member of the team about developing winning advertising, and this must be communicated to the others members for them to be accepted as a valued counsellor. For that reason, client researchers often allow the supplier to act as facilitator, particularly when the results are controversial.

The facilitator's role is like that of a skilled focus group moderator, though s/he may also have to answer technical questions about methodology. In general, the facilitator must control or focus the discussion. In particular, s/he should elevate

issues above methodology and keep focused on the advertising. S/he should generate dialogue and build collaboration by actively listening, being sensitive to emotional dynamics, and by helping to synthesize different threads of thought in order to build consensus. The facilitator must resist the temptation to take the stage and focus the spotlight on him/herself as expert.

### Conclusions

To sum up, what are the sources of failure in a research meeting with the ad team? Here are the main ones:

- ▶ Lack of agreement on objectives
- ▶ Data is confusing/contradictory
- ▶ Research findings are seen as black box without face validity
- ▶ Discussion is focused on methodology rather than the advertising
- ▶ Emotional dissonance; creatives feeling attacked, creatives feeling they are being told what to do or not knowing what to do as a next step
- ▶ Researcher comes across as a know-it-all or too academic
- ▶ Researcher tries to play creative director
- ▶ The researcher lectures the team, rather than generating discussion.

And how do you know if you have had a successful meeting? If the members of the team report the following:

- ▶ Everyone talked, particularly creatives
- ▶ All points of view were heard
- ▶ Focus is on learning, not report card results
- ▶ Positive emotions were created
- ▶ Clear understanding of how the ad worked
- ▶ Clear understanding of opportunities for improvement
- ▶ Clear understanding of next steps.

In short, in a successful meeting, your ad team has received a communication back from their target audience and the gap, if it exists, between creative intent and audience response has been explored fully. In that case, the zone of conflict has become the zone of opportunity. ■

1. *W Whitman: Leaves of Grass. San Francisco, Chandler Publishing Company, 1968.*
2. *P Senge: The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization. New York, Doubleday, 1990.*
3. *D Bohm, David. On Dialogue. London/New York, Routledge, 2004.*

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