



Bringing account planning to direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical advertising

By Robert Morais

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When direct-to-consumer prescription drug advertising (DTC) first appeared in the 1980s, the advertisements were created by agencies that focused on professional health care practitioners. In those pioneering DTC days, pharmaceutical clients would typically ask their current professional (practitioner-focused) agency to create an advertisement that would encourage patients to initiate a conversation with their physicians about an ailment and/or a branded medication. The marketer's assumption was that their professional agency understood

the ailment and the medication, knew FDA regulations, and could simply transpose the practitioner-selling proposition for the consumer target. The advertising that resulted looked strange and sounded awkward. It was often marked by uninspiring visuals, lackluster headlines, and body copy that only the copywriter's mother could love — but probably couldn't understand!

A brief history of DTC assignments

During the early 1990s DTC media spending skyrocketed. Consumer-focused advertising agencies, especially those with health care subsidiaries or over-the-counter brand advertising experience, saw the DTC gravy train and wanted to jump on. DTC assignments began to shift from professional agencies, or be initially awarded to consumer shops. Ten

years ago, the list of DTC advertising assignments was dominated by venerable professional agencies. Today, consumer agencies such as Deutsch, Leo Burnett, Grey Advertising, Young & Rubicam, and Lowe Lintas handle many DTC brands. To be sure, a few agencies such as Commonhealth's Quantum Group, the Merkley Newman Hartley Healthworks Division, and our firm have made a strong case for the integration that marks the best jointly-developed practitioner and DTC communications programs. However, these exceptions do not forgive the staggering lost DTC revenue opportunities to professional agencies.

The shift of DTC from professional to consumer advertising agency stewardship can be understood from several perspectives. The consumer agencies convinced DTC advertisers

that the expertise needed to create brand-building DTC ads was not the medical knowledge held by professional agencies but rather the deep understanding of consumer behavior that is the province of consumer agencies. The pitch also stressed the unparalleled branding skills of consumer agencies. Professional agencies responded by learning, applying, and selling the branding concept. They hired staff with consumer advertising backgrounds to mitigate the consumer agency contention that their personnel were better equipped to connect with and motivate the consumer target. Still, DTC assignments flowed to consumer agencies.

What the professional agencies did not do was gain research-based consumer understanding for DTC campaigns. This inaction may be the major reason why so much DTC has fallen into the hands of consumer advertising agencies. Consumer agencies do not only sell themselves on the basis of their consumer understanding, they have specialized departments that focus sharply on consumer behavior and attitudes. These departments, known collectively as account planning, boast a skill set that is virtually unknown in professional agencies. In an informal survey of several managers at professional shops and among executive recruiters specializing in professional agencies, I found few individuals who even knew how to define account planning! Yet an advertising agency icon no less than Jay Chiat once referred to account planning as "the best new business tool ever invented."

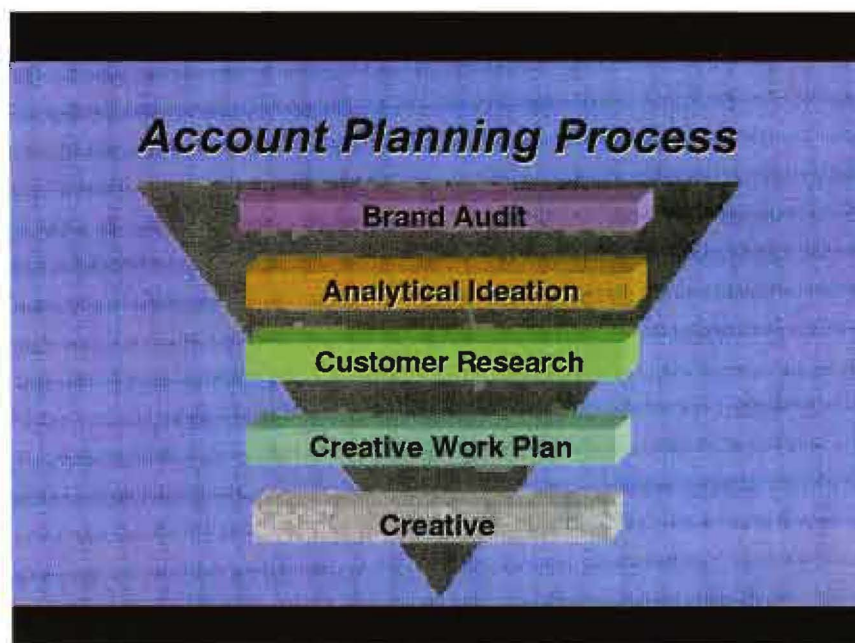
Account planning

Account planning, conceived in England during the late 1960s, arrived in the United States in the early 1980s, initially at agencies such as Chiat Day and J. Walter Thompson. Account planning is part consumer research, part strategic planning, and part account management with a good measure of creativity. Some people (planners among them) contend that

account planning makes advertising more relevant, more credible, and more distinctive. Many argue that the job of the planner is to represent and interpret consumer wants and needs throughout the creative development process. Planners develop a more profound understanding of brand equities and target customers than anyone on the agency and marketing team. They conduct firsthand research ranging from focus groups to in-home observations to psychologically-oriented projective tests. They lead ideation sessions. They write creative briefs. Planners work close-

ment; it incorporates all of the learning and insights generated thus far. "Creative Development" gives life to the analytical work upon which it is based. An evaluative phase of strategies and creative work is often built into the account planning process at critical junctures.

Because all agencies differ and each planner brings a personal expertise to an assignment, the planning process is varied in content and scope. Whatever the model, with the right analysis and insights, planners unlock potential in brands that might never be tapped without their guid-



ly with creative teams to tell the story of why a consumer should choose one brand over competition.

The accompanying chart illustrates one model for the account planning process. In this model, planning begins with an analysis of the marketplace, the competition, a brand's strengths and weaknesses, pertinent demographics, psychographics and cultural trends. "Analytical Ideation" refers to a method that borrows from linguistics, psychology, anthropology, traditional ideation, and classic marketing to provide a springboard for new strategies and research questions. Customer research may include qualitative and/or quantitative inquiries. The "Creative Work Plan" is the blueprint for creative develop-

ance. It is often argued that account planning, part of many disciplines and a discipline of its own, simply makes advertising better.

Account planning and professional advertising agencies

Account planning, either as an operating philosophy or as a free-standing department, is common to virtually every major consumer advertising agency. Given its strengths, it is surprising that professional agencies have not adopted it. Yet there may be a simple explanation for why planning is not generally found in professional agency suites. Professional ad agencies often hire account managers with experience in pharmaceutical sales, a reasonable

decision given the target of most of their communications efforts. These managers often believe that their firsthand experience as sales representatives provides them with a thorough understanding of their professional target. After watching a focus group or two, they feel they have all the information they need to guide creative work. Whether or not this assumption is valid, there is no question that this approach is less effective when defining creative direction for campaigns targeting patients/consumers. Such targets lead complex lives. They have heartfelt attitudes about their illness, or wellness, in the case of vanity drugs such as Propecia for baldness. They have unique relationships with their health care providers. This is where account planners, who specialize in accessing consumer thoughts and emotions, bring critical value.

For account planning to work, it must be championed by top agency management and embraced by account managers and creative personnel. Cooperation and mutual respect between agency research managers and account planners is essential. Account planners must become leaders of the strategic planning process and partners in the creative development process. They must also take a leading role in new business because planners help mine insights that can win a pitch. At the same time, account planners should not be viewed as the saviors of an agency's poor creative or disappointing new business performance. Unreasonable expectations of account planners will bring frustration and make it difficult for planners to do what they do best.

Adoption of account planning by professional agencies will provide them a new tool to compete with consumer shops for DTC. Moreover, the application of account planning to practitioner-focused communications will add enormous value. By linking their inherent knowledge of professional behavior and medical science with a more rigorous process for

obtaining customer insights, professional agencies will gain an edge in their quest for new practitioner as well as DTC assignments. **16**

Resources

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