

Conflict and Confluence in Advertising Meetings

Robert J. Morais

American manufacturers often employ specialized agencies to create and produce advertising campaigns. This paper focuses on a critical juncture in the creation of American advertising: the meeting between the manufacturer (client) and the advertising agency, where advertising ideas are presented, discussed, and selected. Although the participants enter these meetings with the common goal of reaching agreement on the ideas that will be advanced to the next step in the creative development process, the attendees have additional, sometimes conflicting, professional and personal objectives. To achieve their objectives, meeting participants must have a command of unwritten rules, understand subtle verbal and nonverbal behavior, comprehend and navigate the delicate client-agency balance of power, demonstrate the craft of negotiation, and impress their superiors. American advertising creative meetings contain the defining attitudes, behaviors, and symbols of the client-agency relationship.

Key words: advertising, marketing, meetings, work, creative

Introduction

Advertising professionals have written widely on the creative development process (e.g., Della Femina 1970; Steel 1998); scholars have considered how advertising reflects and shapes culture (cf. Henry 1963; Lasch 1979; Schudson 1984; Sherry 1987); and, over the past two decades, there has been a burgeoning interest in the value of anthropology to marketing and advertising (Louis 1985; Miller 1990; Denny 1999; Sanders 2002; Wellner 2002; Wasserman 2003; Monari 2005; Murphy 2005; Ante 2006; Inglessis 2006). Ethnographic accounts of advertising agencies are less common. Notable examinations include Malefyt and Moeran's (2003) collection of essays, Moeran's (1996) study of a Japanese advertising agency, Miller's (1997) description of an agency in Trinidad, and Mazzarella's (2003) account of the relationship between the advertising industry and consumerism in India.

This paper focuses on a critical juncture in the creation of advertising: the meeting between the manufacturer (client) and the agency where advertising ideas are presented, discussed, and selected. I shall argue that these meetings contain the defining attitudes, behaviors, and symbols of the client-agency relationship and will offer an analysis that may help advance the understanding of meetings in other cultural contexts.

Robert J. Morais is a Principal at Weinman Schnee Morais, a marketing research and consulting firm in New York, NY. The author wishes to thank Jane Morais, John Sherry, and Elizabeth Briody for their comments on a previous draft of this paper and Timothy Malefyt for directing him to pertinent literature.

Advertising in Perspective

Advertising is one component of a marketing mix that includes a wide range of programs designed to increase brand sales. Underhill (2000:32) argues that "while branding and traditional advertising build brand awareness and purchase predisposition, these factors do not always translate into sales." Yet U.S. manufacturers remain committed to advertising, spending \$130 billion on it in 2005 alone (TNS Media Intelligence 2006). Given this level of investment, and the fact that consumers tend not even to recall most advertising one day after they are exposed to it (cf. Schudson 1984:3-4; Steel 1998:xi), companies devote considerable time and money to fielding the best advertising they can develop or risk a disappointing return on their investment. For this reason, most U.S. manufacturers that spend heavily on advertising employ agencies that specialize in the creation of ads rather than generate the ads themselves.

Advertising is a highly competitive industry in the United States; agency firings and account reassignments are common. As Malefyt (2003:139, 142-143) points out, a consequence of this volatility is that "the process of ad production...is one directed...not so much at the brand, consumer or even rival agencies, but towards the client." This behavior reflects Michell and Sander's (1995) finding that advertising development processes and interpersonal relationships have more influence on agency loyalty than the perceived quality of the creative work. Other studies have examined the roles of agency personnel who create advertising (Hirschman 1989; Young 2000) and interaction across disciplines within agencies and with clients (Kover 1995; Kover and Goldberg 1995). Moeran (1996:79-87) concentrates on events surrounding a presentation in which an agency is competing to win an account (Johnson 2006). Miller's (1997:182-194)

ethnography on the development of an advertising campaign in Trinidad could apply to virtually any advertising agency in the United States. This paper focuses sharply on creative meetings and considers the contrasting objectives, strategies, and tactics of the agency and client personnel who attend these meetings.

Methodology

In 1981, I left academic anthropology and became an advertising executive. For most of my advertising career I served in account management, later moving to strategic planning and research. In mid-2006, I joined a marketing research and consulting firm. After a quarter of a century of work in the field, this is my first report, supporting Reinharz's (1988:168) contention that "there are few published accounts of (going native) since those who have gone native cease to publish." This paper is based upon participation in thousands of creative meetings between 1981 and 2006 while employed at large and mid-sized American advertising agencies and aligns closely to what Sherry (2003:xii) terms "observant participation" and to Kemper's assertion that "advertising executives are ethnographers in the strict sense of the word" (Kemper 2003:35). Formal and informal discussions with numerous account management and creative colleagues and with marketing management clients expanded my perspective and validated my analysis. The formal interviews were conducted over several months; I have had informal conversations about advertising management throughout my advertising career. Most of the meetings my advertising and client colleagues and I observed involved work for food brands, over-the-counter and prescription pharmaceuticals, personal care items, and household cleaning products manufactured by companies ranging in size from multinational corporations to venture capital funded start-ups. The product categories are a limiting factor of this research because these manufacturers are generally creatively conservative. However, these marketers represent a substantial share of the businesses that advertising agencies serve. The names of the companies, informants, and brands have been withheld to preserve confidentiality.

The Meeting Defined

The meeting as a focus of anthropological inquiry does not have a rich tradition; the most extensive attention paid to meetings by an anthropologist is Schwartzman's (1989) study on meetings in a mental health organization. Her definition of a meeting is a useful starting point. For Schwartzman (1989:7) a meeting is:

A communicative event involving three or more people who agree to assemble for a purpose ostensibly related to the functioning of an organization or group, for example, to exchange ideas or opinions, to solve a problem, to make a decision, or negotiate an agreement, to develop policy and procedures, to formalize recommendations... a meeting is characterized by talk that is episodic in nature.

Because advertising creative meetings occur in a designated place, the agency's or client's conference room, for a discrete period of time, normally 60 to 90 minutes, they can be viewed analytically as frames (Goffman 1974; Moeran 2005:43-57). Moeran's (2005:63-79) discussion of frames in a business context is useful for seeing creative meetings not only as a frame within agency life, but also as the key frame for interpreting and understanding agency/client relationships.

The Meeting Participants

In creative meetings, agency attendees include account managers and the "creatives," or executives directly responsible for creating the advertising. Larger agencies might also include account planners (Malefyt 2003). Client participants are the marketing management employees of the manufacturing company that has hired the agency.

Advertising agency account managers represent the agency to the client, communicate client needs to the agency, and help ensure that agency departments get the work done on strategy, on time, and on budget. They are relationship managers, problem solvers, and communicators. They are more similar to the client than any other agency staffer. As one client said, they "dress and speak like us; they are more like us (than creative people)." Creatives are organized into copy writer-art director teams that develop the advertising ideas. A creative director, with experience in writing or art direction, supervises creative teams. In creative meetings, the creative director is the selling partner of the account team but argues from a creative rather than a business perspective, which is the function of account managers. Creatives are conceptual, imaginative people who invent, design, and produce "the work." They differ temperamentally and stylistically from their MBA-trained clients. Client marketing managers conceive and execute the marketing plan for a brand. Their responsibilities include managing product development, quality control, product distribution to retailers, sales tracking, consumer promotions such as coupons, and developing advertising. In advertising creative meetings, clients are the gatekeepers for creative work and they must be convinced that the work merits exposure to consumers.

Advertising creative meetings involve the interaction of client and agency teams as two entities, as well as the interaction of members within teams. Hirschman (1989) speaks to both dimensions when, citing Turow (1984:21), she characterizes clients as patrons of the agency (Hirschman 1989:42-43) and then describes the roles of several participants in the creative development process. Miller, remarking on the tension between account managers and creatives in Trinidad, notes that creatives are "artists" and account managers are responsible for clients' "commercial concern" (Miller 1997:188). Even within creative teams, Young (2000) found that copy writers and art directors have different feelings about creative development. Across agency and client lines, within agencies, and, to a lesser extent, within client teams,

Table 1. Hierarchy of Agency and Client Goals

Agency	Client
Preserve the relationship	Look smart and capable
Enhance perception of the agency and one's self	Exhibit leadership and control over the meeting
Sell creative work that the agency will be proud to showcase	Manage the overall development process on a timely basis
Sell creative work in the fewest number of presentation rounds	Help develop creative work with which the entire marketing team is comfortable
Get high copy test scores	Get high copy test scores
Grow brand sales	Grow brand sales

contrasting responsibilities and attitudes have a major impact on the conduct and outcome of creative meetings.

Goals: Mutual and Otherwise

Agency and client personnel enter creative meetings to reach agreement on the work and advance the most promising creative ideas to the next step in the development process. Clients hope to manage a smooth process within specified time and production cost parameters. They also strive to showcase their professional skills to management. Clients are acutely aware that their comments during creative meetings are heard not only by the agency but also by their superiors, and clients believe that “looking smart” to both the agency and their superiors is critical. As one client said, “If you say what your boss agrees with and he says he agrees, the agency (as well as your boss) thinks you are smart.” Agency personnel share the desire to move the process forward seamlessly. They know that the better the clients appear to their own management, the more loyal these clients will be to the agency. Agency staff enter the meeting with a strong desire to sell specific creative work that makes the agency team, and specific individuals within the agency team, look insightful and inventive.

The agency also has an agency-building agenda; imaginative creative work can help win new business. Additionally, creative work is often “pushed” by individuals who want to build their personal “reel” for future jobs. Most importantly, agencies must leave the meeting having preserved, and ideally enhanced, their relationship with the client. A smooth development process, high creative test scores, and positive business results are important. Exhibiting leadership and creativity, managing the meeting, accepting the final decision with grace, attaining camaraderie, and just “getting it” (i.e., understanding client personality and culture, listening carefully to client comments, and knowing client preferences) all contribute to the larger objective of a stronger agency-client bond and retention of the account. The hierarchy of goals in creative meetings depicted in Table 1 is based on observations and discussions with agency account managers and creatives and client marketing managers.

Before the Meeting

The creative development process may be initiated because brand sales are softening, the current advertising is reaching consumer exposure “wear out,” a launch of a new product is planned, the agency has won a new account, or a client simply wants new creative work. The client or agency crafts a Creative Brief, the blueprint for creative development. Account managers work out a timetable for development, presentation, testing, and production of the creative work. They review the brief with the creative team, and, before the meeting, provide creatives with intelligence regarding the client’s intellectual and temperamental terrain.

Creatives are given two to three weeks to develop ideas. Guided by the Brief, they develop concepts that will challenge their clients’ comfort levels and ideas they are fairly sure the client will find acceptable. Conservative ideas carry special risks. As one creative director said, “I always give them something I know will sell, but I have to be careful because everything you put on the table is for sale.” Account managers, eager to please the client, request safe work and negotiate with creative directors about which work to present to a client. If a creative director insists on presenting a storyboard that the account manager believes is marginally related to the strategy, or “edgy,” the account manager asks the creative team to present an execution that is “closer in” strategically or more conservative. Often the creative team and account manager strike a deal to offer both approaches. The body of work is reviewed first by the creative director, then with the account management team, and finally with agency management. Several rounds of internal agency meetings occur before creative work is presented to the client.

For this paper, I use a meeting that will culminate in a television commercial as the case in point. There is no standard number of television storyboards that are presented in a creative meeting, but a battery of five to eight ideas is typical. Agencies group storyboards into categories based on executional styles (e.g., realistic “slice of life” situations that are problem or solution oriented, celebrity presenters, demonstrations with competitive comparisons, an image driven

idea, or a humorous situation). Sorting is also done according to variations on the strategy that emphasize particular understandings about the target consumer. For example, several advertisements for an over-the-counter wart remover might all be written to a “removes warts in one step” consumer promise while varying thematically. One underscores the time mothers save avoiding a visit to the doctor, another focuses on consumer trust of the brand, and still another connects with the embarrassment that people feel when they have warts. Sorting offers an opportunity for the agency to explain its thinking and demonstrate that no stone has been left unturned in the pursuit of creative ideas. Clients find categorization helpful for organizing and evaluating ideas.

When the work is reviewed in the agency’s offices, or even while en route to the client’s office, the agency team decides which storyboards to recommend. Many marketers field one or more rounds of advertising testing and usually only three to four storyboards will advance to testing; the remainder of the creative work presented is killed in the meeting. Some clients ask that the agency propose a single storyboard for production, which makes the agency recommendation process more difficult. During the internal agency meeting, an account manager may argue for a storyboard that compares a brand directly with a competitor because he or she believes that a senior client desires this approach. An art director-copy writer team may press for an idea that they want to produce for their own portfolios. The creative director may think his or her idea is the most persuasive or so imaginative that it will help the agency win new business. The decision regarding the agency recommendation is usually made jointly by the creative director and the most senior account manager. There will be a top choice, followed by two to three other options.

Meetings with existing clients rarely involve formal rehearsals. The sequence of the storyboard presentation is discussed before the meeting and account managers prepare their “set ups.” Senior account managers may telephone their client counterparts to sell them on the quality of the work beforehand. When clients contemplate an upcoming creative meeting, they hope, as one client said, “that the agency has found the Holy Grail, that these guys will tell you how to sell a brand in a way that you have never seen.” Agency professionals enter creative meetings with some trepidation. They understand the strategy, the consumer, and the client, but client response to creative work is unpredictable. Agency anxiety derives not only from the looming assessment of their work but also to the clients’ impending judgment of the people who created it.

The Meeting

The men and women who enter the conference room for a creative meeting exchange cordial remarks about family members or weekend activities to ease tension. Senior clients sit near the center of the table, directly across from the agency presenters, and client subordinates take seats on the same side of the table as their bosses. Agency presenters occupy the center positions, directly across from the clients. More

senior advertising agency staff often sit to the extreme right or left of center. The meeting, often referred to as a “copy meeting,” begins formally when an account manager delivers the “set up,” including the meeting objective, which is to review the advertising. The account manager then outlines the anticipated plan for the new creative work. This could include replacing weak advertising, refreshing a successful campaign, or exploring advertising that may succeed current advertising after testing among consumers. The outcome of the meeting is expressed: “When we are in agreement about the strongest approaches, we will conduct focus groups, then field quantitative testing, then place the advertising in a test market, and, if the market test is successful, we will air the new creative nationally.” After completing the meeting objectives, an account manager or account planner reads the Creative Brief. The Brief commonly includes:

- 1) the objective of the advertising;
- 2) a description of the target market segment to whom the advertising must appeal;
- 3) insights or observations about the target consumer based on research;
- 4) the positioning or basic selling proposition for the brand that sets it apart from competition;
- 5) the core promise that the advertising must make to the consumer to compel purchase;
- 6) support for the promise that provides to the consumer a reason to believe the promise made;
- 7) a statement on the tonality of the advertising; and
- 8) mandatories, or items that must be included in the advertising.

The set up for the meeting conveys that the agency understands the business context, reminds attendees of the strategic blueprint on which the creative work is based, and sets up client expectations by framing the creative work. After the set up is completed, the creative director explains how the creative team undertook the assignment and “explored a wide range of approaches.” Creative teams responsible for each idea then expose their ideas to the client. Presenters begin with an explanation of the thinking that took the team from the Creative Brief to the creative execution. For example, a commercial for a nutritional brand might be inspired by an insight that people over 50 want to stay healthy to continue to do the things they have always enjoyed. Creatives often use client buzz words. As one associate creative director said, “When you use their language...phrases like ‘good recall device’...it puts them at ease.” The art director describes each storyboard frame, then the copy writer reads the copy. Storyboards are presented one by one in this manner until all of them are exposed. As the storyboards are presented, clients jot down notes based on a mental checklist that makes evaluation of creative work more systematic. Client criteria typically include:

- 1) Their gut reaction—do they like the idea?
- 2) Is it consistent with objectives?
- 3) Is it on strategy?
- 4) Does it connect with the target consumer?

- 5) Is it clear?
- 6) Is it distinctive to the brand?
- 7) Will it cut through the clutter of other advertisements?
- 8) Is it competitive?
- 9) Does it reflect the character of the brand?
- 10) Is it extendable to a long-term campaign?
- 11) Are the claims and graphics supportable scientifically and/or legally?

After all of the creative work has been presented, the creative director or a senior account manager summarizes the ideas, groups them into categories, and discusses the storyboards the agency feels have the greatest merit. Agencies never disparage any of the work they present—"We love all of our children equally"—but most clients use the agency recommendation as guidance for their own evaluation, although some clients ignore it. In either case, an agency recommendation provides perspective on the relative strength of the ideas and gives clients time to reflect on the work they have been shown. The agency team has lived with the creative work from inception through several rounds of discussion. As one account manager said, "The agency is intimate with the work. The client is not."

After the agency recommendation has been made, clients offer their reactions to the work. Junior client personnel usually speak first followed by coworkers in ascending rank. Junior staff voice thoughts that correspond to their mental checklist. Senior clients provide more expansive remarks on the fit of the advertising with overall brand business objectives, but even company presidents might comment on a turn of phrase or a product demonstration. During this appraisal, at least one client will express appreciation for the range of thinking and the effort that the agency has expended. This statement is intended to set a positive tone for the ensuing critical comments. Agency professionals know it is mere civility. Some clients prefer to reflect on the creative work, listen to a colleague's comments, and speak only if they have something significant to add, but junior and midlevel clients feel pressure to make cogent remarks. As one client noted, "If you have nothing to contribute, you don't belong in the meeting." A client's career development goals are well served by displaying a grasp of creative concepts and an ability to identify the ideas that have the most potential to grow a brand.

When viewing an array of creative ideas, clients will rarely say, "None of this works; go back to the drawing board." Instead, they declare, "This is an interesting range of ideas," which is code for, "I don't like anything you have shown me." Even when clients reject a storyboard, they may select a phrase or graphic that they encourage the agency to include in the next round of creative development. When clients are responding unfavorably, the hearts of creatives sink, but agency professionals know they must respond to the critique. Not every client comment is addressed. Agencies pay most attention to, as one client phrased it, "the biggest paycheck." Another client said, "Pencils are raised when the senior VP talks." Comments by junior clients are heard, but acted upon only if the most senior client present concurs. When all of the clients have responded, the agency

expresses its appreciation for their remarks without appearing sycophantic, answers questions that the client has raised, and challenges criticisms tactfully. The agency recommendation is defended with a balance of conviction and conciliation; the agency must convey that it has a well-reasoned point of view while making it clear that it is receptive to the clients' viewpoint. Agencies differ in how resolute they will be in their defense of creative work. An agency that recommends storyboards A, B, and C over D, E, and F may be told by the senior client that only E is acceptable and another round of creative development is required. Some agencies acquiesce immediately or, in agency parlance, "roll over." Other agencies "push back" until they have convinced the client to accept their argument or they have exhausted all hope that the client can be dissuaded from its own position.

Experienced account managers know the difference between what clients say and what they mean. When a client asks, "Why did you choose that particular graphic?" it is code for "I dislike the graphic." The question format avoids direct conflict. The agency must decide to "fight" for the idea or explain why it chose it and offer to consider alternatives. Account managers, generally more conciliatory than creatives, feel that, as one account manager said, "Creatives would be better off listening and ferreting out the real issues," rather than leaping to the defense of their work.

Senior agency executives feel pressure to sell their work to clients. They may believe in the quality of the creative, but they also want to avoid endless rounds of redevelopment. Account managers take the lead in selling an idea; in addition to their persuasive skills and knowledge of the client's temperament and culture, their personal relationship with a client can help win the agency's case (cf. Moeran 1996: 39-68). As they listen to client comments, agency executives consider the source and formulate their response. Does this client want to look smart in front of the boss? Is that client afraid of championing an idea that is outside the threshold of corporate risk? Does he not understand the idea? Does he simply not like it? If a client states that an image campaign is too ethereal and contends that a "slice-of-life" approach would be stronger, and the account manager or creative director knows that this comment is driven by a desire to increase sales quickly with "comfortable" (low risk) creative work, the manager might say, "An image campaign is what our brand needs. If we go this way, we'll be more competitive than ever." Experienced account managers know to stop selling when clients express in tone or intensity that they are closed to further discussion. Moreover, the agency must know how to withdraw gracefully. The client must not be made to feel like a bully; if clients sense that the agency team is beaten down they may request another team within the agency or, worse, consider a new agency. As one creative director phrased it, "A good general knows when to retreat and still retain dignity. You need to be looking to the next meeting, how you will come out in a good position to do better next time." One senior account manager estimated that "You can push clients 10 to 20 percent from where they

are, but you will never move them more than 50 percent.” When agencies push too hard, frustrated clients may dismiss them because they feel the agency does not understand what they want.

After clients make critical comments, they provide direction to the agency for the next round of creative development. A client will ask that copy be clarified or a product demonstration be simplified. Clear direction is critical. When a client says “I just don’t think that tag line works,” the agency is not certain what will please the client. When a client says, “I’d like to see a tag line that expresses our brand’s superiority over the competition,” the agency can craft copy that will be more acceptable in the next round of creative work.

When all of the comments and responses have been voiced, an agency account manager summarizes the agreements reached and the actions that will be taken following the meeting (“Next Steps”) along with the timetable for accomplishing them. The happiest outcome for agency and client is to advance the process to focus group assessment or production. A requirement by the client for new creative work or substantial revisions stalls progress. When the former result is achieved, participants congratulate one another and say, “good meeting.” Meetings that close without progress are disappointing, but euphemistic phrases such as “Productive meeting” or “We’re moving ahead” help mitigate disappointment. Even a “good meeting” may not be good for everyone. Creatives might feel the most conservative work was sold or individual participants may fear they have performed poorly. A meeting succeeds on all fronts when the agency and client concur that the best work was chosen, clients feel they have been listened to, and the agency feels that it, too, has been heard. Everyone smiles and departs knowing that they did their job well. A good meeting means that the agency-client relationship has been preserved and very likely strengthened. When a meeting fails to achieve its stated objectives, agency account managers know that they must telephone their client and reassure them that the next round of work will be better.

After the Meeting

Minutes after a creative meeting adjourns and the client and agency teams separate, postmortems begin. Clients usually move on quickly to their next task, although there may be a brief conversation about their delight or disappointment in the agency’s work. The agency team engages in a more extensive assessment of the meeting, often replaying specific client comments and agency responses. Many account managers feel that an unsatisfactory creative meeting undermines their credibility with the client who may wonder if, as one account manager said, “I have communicated to the creative team what is in the client’s head.” Creatives must overcome personal demoralization when clients have requested significant changes in their work. As a creative director said, “The advertising will get worse with changes and changes and rewrites and rewrites.” One copy writer noted that sometimes

“you come back after a meeting and blow off steam. You can’t just sit down and start over again until you have done that.” After sufficient discussion, account managers review the actions required for the next step in the creative process with the agency team.

Understanding Creative Meetings: Structure, Sentiment, and Meeting Management

Despite options like on-line viewing and conference calls, face-to-face advertising creative meetings occur because they allow direct interaction that connects people emotionally as well as intellectually. For agency professionals, creative meetings are ideal venues to sell creative work and enhance client relationships, enabling agencies to better gauge reactions, negotiate with clients, and showcase themselves personally. For clients, the conference room setting is a superior opportunity for personal performance and professional camaraderie. In face-to-face creative meetings, clients can also demonstrate vividly the power and control they have over their agencies.

Status and Role

When senior agency executives select flanker positions to the far left or right of the center of the conference table they do so to stress their separateness from other agency staff and to occupy a perch from which to offer commentary during the creative meeting. Their distance from the fray carries other symbolism; it is a vantage point from which they can make the “big picture” statements that demonstrate a mastery of the full business context of the creative work. Seating is also important for agency managers to assess and respond to client reactions, which is why they place themselves within the direct sight line of senior clients.

The sequence and content of client commentary reflect the status and role of the speaker (see Schwartzman 1989:291-293 on social position and speaking sequences in meetings). The lower the status, the earlier one speaks and the more circumspect the comments. Higher-status clients offer their thoughts after lower level managers, giving them the dual advantage of having heard what their colleagues said and additional time to reflect on the creative work.

Rules of Engagement

The agency team is a kind of secret society (Goffman 1959:104) with unwritten rules of engagement in the presence of those outside the society (Meerwarth, Briody, and Devadatta 2005). Internally, as Hirschman (1989:51) observes, “conflict, mutual distrust and power struggles are inherent in the advertising process, but the agency must show a ‘united front’ to the client” (Kover and Goldberg 1995:55). One of the more egregious sins occurs when an agency representative deviates from the previously agreed upon agency position during a creative meeting. When this agreement is

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violated, the consequences can be severe. Reprimands of subordinates who diverge from the agency's recommendation are common; cautionary tales tell of employees who transgressed being fired on the return airplane flight after a client meeting. Clients are under less pressure to express a uniform point of view, but most client cultures encourage consensus, and clients know that moving creative work forward requires agreement on the direction they provide to the agency.

Reading the Room

Just before a creative meeting, a well-known advertising executive was asked by one of his agency associates what he recommended. His reply: "Read the room." His meaning: assess client reactions as ideas are presented and adjust the agency recommendation to match the ideas that the client will accept. During creative meetings, agency executives do not watch their colleagues present; they watch their clients. They scan faces for confusion, comprehension, and delight. They study eyes and body language. They pay attention to how many notes clients are taking and they watch for client reactions to specific graphics and copy. When the agency summarizes the body of work, when clients comment, when the agency responds and the client counters, agency executives read the room.

Reading the room helps the agency control creative meetings. When a client is perceived as unreceptive to an agency recommendation, an agency executive formulates a defense that shows cognizance of the client's discomfort: "The idea in this board is totally new in this category. It will startle the consumer and it will cut through the clutter of competitive advertising. This approach may make us a bit uncomfortable but it is precisely the kind of advertising the brand needs right now." If the executive senses that the favored board is being judged extremely poorly and even a strong argument will not persuade the client, the executive will cast a glance at colleagues and soften the agency recommendation: "The idea in this board is totally new in this category. It will startle the consumer and it will cut through the clutter of competitive advertising. But, because it is so cutting edge, we should test it among consumers to see if we have gone too far."

One agency creative director described how he visualizes a conference room swaying as arguments veer side to side. He prepares his arguments and chooses a position based on where the room "lands." He may agree or disagree with the prevailing client point of view, but he will choose his statements carefully to ensure that the meeting does not become contentious. The process of reading the room is like comprehending the difference between a wink and a blink (Geertz 1973:6-7). It requires contextual understanding: knowing the psychology of the participants, the strength of the creative work, the corporate cultures, and the relationships of the meeting attendees. The power and accuracy of an individual manager's intuition, of knowing by seeing and listening, is critical.

Clients may criticize creative work because they believe it is off strategy, it fails their checklist of acceptable advertising, or it is inconsistent with "what we know works." A major issue for creative personnel is how to best protect the integrity of their idea when clients feel, as an associate creative director said, that "challenging their beliefs is like challenging their religion." Kover and Goldberg (1995:56-59) describe several strategies that copy writers use to argue for their work, all of which are also applied by art directors and account managers. These tactics include: 1) selling with passion; 2) a frontal attack, which is effective when clients seek highly creative work; 3) creating work that is likely to sell, a risky proposition, as noted earlier; 4) offering the appearance of acceptance, then doing what they wish, which may be effective with small revisions but is not viable when the issue is whether an idea should even be produced; and 5) the "aleatory game," which entails hoping for the best outcome. Experienced agency account managers lower rising temperatures in creative meetings by intervening with phases such as, "That's a good thought. We'll consider that." Agency colleagues and clients depend upon account managers to control meetings; account managers know that an adroit defense of creative work and the ability to defuse difficult situations is a measure of their value.

Although clients often claim they want breakthrough advertising, most clients are nervous that "edgy" creative work will violate the character of their brand, unless the brand character is, by definition, "edgy." Moreover, many creatives feel that clients often "don't get it" when particularly inventive executions are presented, a reaction that Schudson (1984:81) terms "aesthetic insensitivity." Clients' lack of understanding of a creative idea is demonstrated by the common client practice of expressing a wish that selected copy or graphics used in one storyboard also be used in other storyboards. Similarly, when a client feels that an execution has too much humor, the client may ask the agency to "dial it back." As one creative said, "When they change the board, they pull out the one thread that holds it together." Clients' desire for a recitation of a brand's features, attributes, and benefits can snuff out a creative idea. As a creative director said, "The idea gets whittled away by the client's checklist." Clients believe that they own the creative work. When they want changes, the agency should, after discussion, agree to make them. Creatives feel that they, as the inventors of the idea, own it (Hirschman 1989; Kover and Goldberg 1995; Young 2000), which adds tension to creative meetings. As Kover (1995:604) writes, "Copy writers have a 'reputation' in the folklore of the advertising business. They are charged with defending their work and its integrity against any charge, no matter how small." Kover's explanation for this behavior is that "Copy writers do not merely present advertising, they present *themselves*." (Kover 1995:604, emphasis in original). He notes that copy writers speak about their work as if it is "a piece carved from their private being" (ibid.) and Kover

and Goldberg (1995:53) remark on the “resentment” that creatives feel when clients alter their work.

How aggressively creatives and account managers defend creative work is contingent upon agency and client cultures. Many clients see challenges to their criticisms as evidence of agency conviction, and they respond positively, as long as the defense is respectful and cordial. Seeing an agency “roll over” when a storyboard is criticized suggests that the agency has little heart for the work, and the client may wonder why the agency presented it. When the agency fights too long and hard, clients become annoyed. Clients also know when agency executives claim, “I agree with everything you have said,” they are about to disagree and prolong a discussion. In such situations, clients anticipate that after the meeting they will have a conversation with a senior account manager who will “fix it.” If the account manager cannot deliver what the client wants, then that manager risks replacement by one who will. When the choice is between fighting the good fight for the creative work and protecting the agency-client relationship, the latter is the necessary course. Agency executives understand that advertising may be at the intersection of commerce and art, but commerce is the main drag, and clients control the road.

Agreements

Agreements are the actions that will be taken to revise, test, or produce creative work after a meeting. The word agreement has an egalitarian and conciliatory connotation; it also implies that the client and agency concur on what needs to be done. However, *to agree* does not always mean to be *in agreement*. The recitation of agreements in creative meetings is, in fact, a recitation of client directives. The word agreement fuels the illusion that the client and agency are peers and it smoothes over disagreements that may have occurred during the meetings, but there is no mistake that the clients are in charge.

Impression Management and Impressing Management

Presentations by agencies in creative meetings are performances according to Goffman’s definition: “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way the other participants” (Goffman 1959:15) and are “social dramas” (Turner 1974, 1986). As a creative director said, “The spotlight is on you. You have the chance to convince someone that something you have created is worth the world seeing.” A central tenet of Goffman’s analysis, impression management, is evident throughout creative meetings. Agencies attempt to impress clients with an understanding of the client’s business, their devotion to the brand, and their passion for the creative work. An expression of passion can persuade clients that creative work is worthy of acceptance. As a creative director phrased it, “Passion can be contagious.” Meeting participants also aim to impress

management. Junior clients want to demonstrate to bosses that they are managing the creative development process effectively and, since they know their judgments are being judged, that they bring their share of insights to the meeting. When creative work is received poorly and no progress is made, a midlevel client can “die inside because it makes my life worse. The process is stalled and I’ll get slammed.” Junior agency personnel want to impress senior staff as well, and all of the agency presenters must impress their clients.

Rites of Passage

Creative meetings are a rite of passage as classically defined by Van Gennep (1960; Moeran 1996:94). Creative work is separated from its development while in storyboard form; selected ideas are transformed during the meeting by suggested revisions and then returned to the development process for consumer assessment or airing. Creative meetings are the liminal period (Van Gennep 1960: 21), “betwixt and between” (Turner 1964; Malefyt 2003:145; Sherry 2005:72-74), during which the transformation occurs. The successful transition of a storyboard from preclient exposure to initiation as a “client approved board” is hailed with as much jubilation as other rites of passage throughout the world. Meeting participants are transformed as well. It is not only the storyboard that is evaluated in creative meetings, it is also the people who created or contributed to the work. Extending the argument from Geertz (1973) that cocks symbolize men and Kover (1995) that storyboards represent copy writers, all of the agency and client personnel who display their imagination, intellect, experience, and professionalism in a creative meeting are as exposed and judged as the advertising ideas. In this sense, approval or disapproval of a body of work and the achievement of goals in creative meetings is not just business. It is personal.

Conclusion

Creative meetings are, as Schwartzman notes of all meetings, “sense makers” that help participants “define, represent, and also reproduce social entities and relationships” (Schwartzman 1989:39) and they function as “social and cultural validators” that enhance a sense of community and identity within an organization (Schwartzman 1989:41). Moeran observed this phenomenon in a Japanese advertising agency when he noted that meetings are “frames in which participants made sense of their organization and their actions taken therein” (Moeran 2005:14). Sense-making modes in creative meetings include the comprehension of verbal codes that mollify tense situations, the reading of verbal and nonverbal behavior, the understanding of the subtle machinations surrounding the client-agency balance of power, and the craft of negotiation. Miller (1990), writing about an agency in Trinidad, agrees with Moeran, writing about an agency in Japan, that presentations “define and maintain the advertising community as a whole” (Moeran 1993:88). Schwartzman

contends that meetings are organization life “writ small” (Schwartzman 1989:39). Similarly, creative meetings contain the essence of client-agency relationships: conflicting objectives, displays of status, opportunities to show supreme insight, to control without appearing controlling, to demonstrate passion without being combative, to persuade without browbeating, and to accept without embracing. Agencies work hard to preserve creative integrity, but preservation of the client-agency relationship is paramount, for without the relationship, there is no creative presentation.

Despite the conflicts in creative meetings, the confluence of professional and personal objectives makes these meetings a powerful mechanism of action in the advertising industry. They function because they provide a venue for commercial ideas to be challenged and often made stronger, and for participants to achieve goals that secure their positions and advance their careers. In creative development, the agency’s desire for art shaped by the demands of commerce meets the clients’ need for commerce clothed in seductive art. During creative meetings, the often dazzling fusion of business goals and creativity, and of divergent organizational, attitudinal, and temperamental styles, converge. Some advertising agency executives say, “It’s all about the work.” Others view their business cynically, as the management of client-agency relationships. Both are correct. The work of the agency is the creative product and the creative meeting itself.

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