

FORUM – a miscellany of your news and reviews. This issue, Katarina Skoberne and William Eccleshare debate the influence of OpenAd.net, ‘the world’s largest creative department’, Tim Coulton invites us to a digestion workshop, Lindsay Bruce outlines research on key account management and we include John Webster’s final speech

Online creativity: a threat to agencies?

KATARINA SKOBERNE AND WILLIAM ECCLESHARE DEBATE THE PROS AND CONS

‘When people hear about OpenAd.net, they invariably describe it as a ‘virtual advertising agency.’ But this is a lazy definition. Yes, we sell creative work to clients and even refer to ourselves as the ‘world’s largest creative department’. But we do not offer planning, account directors or traffic departments. We are an ideas company, pure and simple.

On paper, that should make us less threatening to the traditional advertising agency. But if anything, it makes us more so.

If we tried to sell ourselves as just another one-stop-shop, we would fall on our feet. As it is, we invite clients and agencies alike to think outside of the creative box by adding a very 21st-century creative resource to their armoury. Unfortunately, agencies only see the threat, not the benefits, and would prefer it if their clients did not use us at all.

The unspoken panic is that OpenAd.net destroys their USP and possibly destabilises

their already fragile business model. As one well-known advertising professional used to joke, clients buy into full service agencies because they are the only places capable of harnessing wayward creative talent. OpenAd.net proves that is no longer true – but if agencies acknowledge that, they lose their mystique.

Yet creatives love us. Over 5000 in 102 countries have already signed up to submit work and that figure rises every day. They just do what they do best: come up with ideas that make or break a business.

OpenAd.net gives clients a surprising degree of freedom, too. There are no rows over agency contracts, no arguments over paying for pitches or paying £1 for the intellectual property rights to work shown at the pitch stage, as the IPA’s 2005 annual report highlighted. Nor will a client find his small-spending brand overlooked by a large network obsessed with global businesses, or his tactical brief given to the work-experience team.

All transactions are equal, transparent and up-front. Companies can take out membership for as little as US\$3000, which entitles them to view our virtual galleries stocked with original advertising ideas, or hold online pitches.

Prices are set by the creatives and if clients want to buy something, they can license an idea for 12 months or in perpetuity. Our website may channel creativity, but is also a well thought out legal framework, enabling sales to be made in a copyright-policed environment. Our job stops at the point of making the ad – although we can offer some informal advice.

Ironically, OpenAd.net could be good for agencies too. After all, how many new business directors find themselves without a decent idea to show a potential client on the eve of a pitch? Even the best departments can’t crack every brief. But agencies fail to see OpenAd.net as a modern creative resource. Instead they



Katarina Skoberne:
‘Traditional agencies can’t beat the competition.’

would prefer we went away.

But just as high street retailers once hoped eBay and Amazon would never catch on, so agencies need to accept that e-commerce is coming to the business-to-business sector. Burying their heads in the sand won’t work. Traditional agencies can’t beat the competition, but the smarter ones will use it. For those who cling to tradition, the future looks bleak. ☹

Katarina Skoberne is co-founder of OpenAd.net.



William Eccleshare:
‘There is still no substitute for the very special mix of talents that the best agencies provide.’

‘We’re talking chalk and cheese, apples and pears, here. There’s no doubt that the net offers significant opportunities to develop advertising content in a fast, efficient and low-cost fashion. This is not new, and there is a spectrum of sites available which offer everything from instant, off-the-peg local advertising to the more flexible services of OpenAd. They are, no question, a real alternative to some of the more basic creative content that some advertising agencies have historically pro-

vided at excessive cost and often with little enthusiasm.

But that is not what the best of the bricks and mortar agencies are doing, or have ever done. Great agencies – big or small – have always known that the quality of their work depends not just on the brilliance of their creative teams, but on a coherent, connected and consistent account team who work together to really understand a brand long before pen is put to paper.

Insight may have become a much abused word in recent

years, but it remains the case that an agency’s ability to really understand consumer motivation in relation to category and brand is an essential prerequisite to producing compelling commercial content in any medium. Without that, generating great creative work is a frighteningly hit and miss enterprise.

For example, the consumer insight that revealed how people use their mobile telephones, how frustrated they were by opaque billing, and how confused they were by the tech-

nology, led a client and agency team to the creation of a multi-million brand called Orange. The observational research that enabled AMV/BBDO in London to see how customers were 'sleep-shopping' during their supermarket visits produced the recent 'Try something new today' campaign that has helped Sainsbury's much-publicised recent recovery. It seems unlikely that an online ad shop could have done that.

Equally important is the way

in which the best agencies understand the economics of their clients' business and work tirelessly to ensure that their work is seamlessly attuned to financial imperatives. Stephen King's recent death has reminded us of how he led the creation of the Mr. Kipling brand, not on some creative whim, but as a result of a deep understanding of Rank Hovis McDougall's production and distribution capabilities. More recently, it was the close collaboration between agency and client that

has led to the evolution of the Dove brand from a niche soap to a major player in toiletries that has transformed Unilever's position in the high-margin sector.

Agencies have always evolved as new platforms for brand expression have emerged. That evolution is taking place at a more rapid rate today than ever before. We are embracing new technology for production more quickly than at any time in our history, and most of the big networks are offering serv-

ices similar to OpenAd for dealer support programmes or local retailers where there are specific client needs that can be appropriately met in this way. But for long-term brand building, which inextricably links real consumer understanding, business success and creative magic, there is still no substitute for the very special mix of talents that the best agencies provide.' ♡

William Eccleshare is Chairman and CEO of DDBO Europe.

Having difficulty absorbing research findings? Try a digestion workshop

FROM TIM COULTON

Much has been written by clients in the last year or so about the limited use of research. As someone who has managed research on both the client and agency side, I believe that much of this view can be attributed to one thing – insufficient effort by both the research company and its client to convert the 'findings' (what's happening out there) into 'insights' (the nuggets of 'real truth' that are genuinely useful to the client in future decision-making).

Research agencies spend a lot of time producing research results, but often fail to convey them effectively. In turn, clients often underestimate the importance of reviewing the findings in depth and developing an action plan

based on the results. Rather, they allocate a limited amount of time to the results presentation before filing the research report on a shelf.

However, this situation is changing. In the past, research agencies produced thick reports that made clients' eyes glaze over. Today, many offer to present the findings, though in my experience clients still find this frustrating as they often have to view as many as 120 slides in one sitting, with no time to reflect upon the content.

As a result of this, clients have become more discerning. They want the opportunity to be able to really understand the results, digest and use them sooner, and interpret their implications and plan

some early response while the findings are still warm.

One effective means of doing this is through 'Digestion Workshops'. During these workshops, the research findings are blended with other information and distilled through the existing experience of the management. This provides indicators as to those areas of direction or strategy that need retuning or revising.

The research agency starts by presenting only the key results. Any other relevant information is then given by way of discussion stimulus (for example by technical or creative staff) before the participants give a 'first impressions' reaction. Ideally, the first day's session closes at this point, as it is highly beneficial to let this first pass at the findings cook in the participants' heads overnight.

The following day's session is devoted to a deeper exploration of all the results and, perhaps even more importantly, their implications, before the workshop closes with an action plan session. This is important as it means the client can leave not feeling

'overawed' by the findings, but with some concrete next steps in their pocket.

Workshops like these can also benefit the research agency, as it allows them to stay involved as an 'expert witness' and provide more of an advisory role by helping the client use the findings. With time this can lead to a much deeper relationship between client and agency.

They also permit other stakeholders, such as an advertising agency or new product development staff, to be involved as appropriate, and to contribute directly in discussions and internalise fresh insights for use in their own work.

One reason often given for not having these workshops is insufficient time. However, if they are included in the original project brief and incorporated into the client's overall strategic review cycle, it can make the difference between research being regarded as a 'nice to have' or an integral necessity. ♡

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Digestion workshops: the solution to heavy research presentations.