

From troubled waters to a 'total planning' future

To steer a course through all the disruption and change, planning needs to get back to the centre of the client discussions with a holistic business, category and brand understanding and vision. To achieve this, planning has to stop thinking and operating in silos and adopt a 'total planning' approach, which will help secure the future of agencies and add greater value to the client

By Alan Martin

There is a sea of seismic change developing in the relationships between clients and the traditional communication agencies and, as a consequence, agency planning is finding itself in troubled waters. However, with adroit leadership, account planning has the potential to help steer a good course for all through these storms, but without it, equally runs the risk of being caught up rudderless in the currents.

So what is happening to make such a statement? Fundamentally, we are in a broadly low-growth environment and the pressure for brand owners to deliver the next quarter is relentless. While this in itself is not new, the advances of technology and digitisation have added a new element to this mix, bringing with it new possibilities. The consequence is that everything is up for questioning, including the role of agencies, their costs, and an assessment of their added value. Zero budgeting is back in vogue and client management now feel they need to make changes before they themselves become the change.

Efficiency is key and that means a drive on cost and speed. Procter & Gamble is defining a new agency model to focus agency resources on the creative department while its team takes on a more direct consumer contact role. This includes a deeper focus on data and analytics which, in turn, will bring into sharp focus who is best placed to do the planning.

Numerous clients are now developing

and managing digital content and assessing it themselves, something that in the past would have been handled by agencies. Where once there would have been one key advertising planner on the brand due to the critical nature of TV and one media planner, today there are multiple planners across multiple agencies reflecting the greater fragmentation of the media. The result is a diffused total brand picture for the agencies seeking to serve its clients.

All these changes, and more, move the communication and insight planner further away from the client's key strategic brand discussions and, at that point, the value of planners and who pays becomes an issue.

Media planners are also under great pressure. Technological advances such as programmatic are eating into activities that they would have undertaken in the past. Major media owners like Google and Facebook are going direct to clients and cutting out the agencies, with the result that the planners are left partially blind to the total picture.

Now some of you may read the above and say that is not my client or agency situation, and of course that can currently be very true, as we are all individuals in different situations with different perspectives valuing things in different ways. Undoubtedly, there are many highly talented planners who are totally relevant and worth every penny or cent, but there are also macro changes going on beyond them, and with that, significant consequences and impact. So planning, whether it realises it or not, is in troubled waters right now and

there is a critical need for it to define its own destiny that will best serve the clients' brands before it gets one by default.

So how might planning steer a course through this change that is good for all? Fundamentally, planning needs to get back to the centre of the client discussions with a holistic business, category and brand understanding and vision.

To achieve this, planning has to stop thinking and operating in the silos within which it has found itself. It is too inefficient for the insight planner to do their work, for the communication planner to interpret this and add their thinking, to then pass it on to media planners to do their work and the retail planners to do the same. It is too slow, too fragmented, too disjointed and can too often miss the bigger picture and opportunities.

Planning is at its best when it distils the ever-increasing sources of data across all the disciplines down to a few golden nuggets of insight that provide the springboard for growth. In today's world, it must also move with far greater speed and agility.

It is fact-based data that can be the unifier across all planning capabilities to create one sharp inspirational picture and direction. With so many questionable and confusing metrics surrounding digital data, there is an even greater need to find the truth in data, and planners as a total team will need to play a critical role to achieve this.

What will be needed going forward is 'total planning', a truly holistic approach. Total planning will bring together all aspects

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of planning – from insight through to final delivery, via one team. This, though, is much easier said than done in practice. Individual roles and responsibilities of all participating parties have to be explicitly clear with minimum overlap to minimise competitive friction and, importantly, genuinely bought into by all. There needs to be a true multidiscipline planning team of equals. But who should bring this all together in an optimal way? Well, there are probably three key candidates.

The first could be the clients themselves. As brand owners, an argument could be made that they could do this as they have access to all the brand data they buy and could staff up and bring in various skillsets. However, many would see the potential risks of losing the broader picture of the consumer that agencies can naturally provide from working across numerous businesses and the synergies that provides. There are also operational practicalities around workload peaks and troughs of certain skillsets that agencies can spread over multiple clients. The interface with agencies' creatives will need to be considered carefully, so they need a safe environment to challenge the planning outputs.

To offset some of these issues, though, the clients could decide to manage a combination of agencies with a very hands-on approach, and from this provide the single planning picture themselves. It's a valid route but also not without significant challenges. Many marketing clients will have numerous other demands on their time, including everyday operations, forecasting, new product development, pricing, quality audits, countless internal meetings for organisational alignment etc. An internal client planning function could offset this, but care would be needed to avoid that function itself becoming a silo.

While this client-led approach will bring authority regarding leadership of the multi-agencies team, the high management time should not be underestimated, nor should the challenges of creating one true effective team derived from multiple agencies with differing cultures and norms. Friction is likely to be high, particularly in areas of overlap between specialists, and passive politics can easily abound.

Perhaps more important, though, is the amount of client 'brain time' that will inevitably focus on process and multi-agency management, rather than critical 'thinking' contribution. This can be partially offset



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by employing a marketing agency in a lead role, but this will be doomed due to the competitive nature of agencies unless the client gives them overt authority that is genuinely accepted by other participating agencies. There would also need to be a guarantee of the quality of people and participation from all team agency partners. It will be quite a mind shift for the agencies, and the management challenges should not be underestimated for the client.

The second candidate to develop this 'total planning' approach could be the major business consulting firms. Typically, they work closely with the client C-suite and therefore

have a good understanding of the bigger picture with an overview regarding the client and industry, all of which is needed for a good planning approach. Business consultancy firms, at their core, are excellent at distilling vast amounts of information quickly and efficiently to derive a clear vision and associated plans for the future – all good skills for planning.

However, they currently do not have the total true multidiscipline planning capabilities globally, but this situation could change quite quickly. Accenture and Deloitte have both been highly active in expanding their marketing services capabilities with substantial investments. With the current dynamics of

the marketing services industry, it is highly probable that they are assessing further acquisitions to fit their strategy. While on the one hand, if they decide to go down this road it will take time to integrate these acquisitions, the advantage is that an offer can be designed for purpose.

The final obvious candidate is the major network agencies who could certainly take this role and, to some extent, they already try. To really succeed, though, they will need to take a fresh approach, and if they do, they may well generate considerable success for all parties.

Too often the traditional advertising agencies, due to their size and long-term client relationships, take the lead with other agencies and planners sometimes invited into discussions and programmes. This reflects the planning days of yesteryear rather than the truly holistic approach needed today.

A more neutral, probably central network planning leader or conductor of the team is required, someone who has the breadth of marketing knowledge, who can work effectively in a planning multidiscipline multi-agency team, and also with the senior client contacts. But for this approach to work, two key changes will be required: the first is structure and the second is culture.

First, let's consider structure. Agencies within networks, typically, are quite autonomous and have their own P&Ls and organisational structures. While there are many advantages to this model, it can be restrictive or complex for multi-agency initiatives. One way around this is for planners to be seconded on a time paid basis from the various agencies needed to cover the required disciplines from insight to delivery under the leadership of the central planner. As there are overlaps in the planning disciplines, there would need to be clearly defined team members' roles and responsibilities to aid team cohesion.

Flexibility in structure would need to be built in to meet the various needs and culture of the client rather than a lofty 'this is how we do it' approach. Potentially, there may also need to be the inclusion of a non-network agency desired by the client.

The team would need to create its own united culture, and its team members a true sense of identity. Egos will need to be left outside the door and focus will need to be on the bigger picture. Team members' rewards

and recognitions would all need to change so that the agencies and their people are truly motivated to fully participate, and to ensure the right level of people come to the party.

Under a seconded approach, this is not without its challenges, as team members would have two homes with two reporting lines, namely their 'home' agency and the total planning team, but it is not impossible with the right mindset and leadership.

Critically, the client has a major role in this model as well, to define what they expect with regard to delivery and behaviours, and how they will manage to reward the agency accordingly. They will also need to invest in this approach.

Potentially, a further bold step to this approach could be to create a separate total planning division within the network agency, with the team members working on multiple clients delivering total planning solutions. For this to work, the outcomes of the teams' work would need to be embraced and used directly by the creative, media buyers, and retail consultancies for it to be effective. Importantly, this also means ensuring that the work is not passed on to remaining planning personnel within the respective agencies, as there would be a high risk of reinvention or misinterpretation. This would frustrate clients, create brand message fragmentation and waste time and money.

Whichever route is taken to deliver total planning, there are a number of key enablers common to all for it to succeed. First, the data has to be available. This seems an obvious statement to make but with an increasingly direct relationship between suppliers, and clients protecting their data sources, this is continually a challenge. Clients as the purchasers, have a key role to play here to facilitate the necessary sharing of data.

Second, greater care will be needed on the treatment of the data in respecting privacy rights as outlined by GDPR and other guidelines and laws defined in various geographies.

Third, given the ever-increasing amount of data available, and the contradictions within it, there will be a need for better technical systems to handle the data in a coherent way that frees planners' time to think, be curious, ask the right questions, and to develop stories rather than poring over countless reports.

Artificial intelligence could be a critical game-changer to go across systems to find

patterns in data, and to do it quickly. It will, however, only currently show what is today; it will require planners to dig deeper into the important 'why' behind the data, and then to apply imagination and lateral thinking to provide magical inspiration and to define what could be in the future. Time will tell how much further AI will be able to go.

A suite of technologically advanced tools could also be developed to more accurately assess return on investment in supporting clients' budgetary decisions by utilising the broad data sets. It could also, potentially, be used for advanced scenario planning. The development of AI and complementary tools could be a key differentiator for any total planning team organisation and provide it with a winning edge.

Finally, total planning will need an aligned client and agency vision, with both investing time and money.

It is interesting to see the recent announcement by O2 to create its planning hub of media, PR, advertising and CRM planners from multiple agencies, all to be in one location for three days a week. They are clearly on this journey seeking to remove the silos and to gain synergy from the capabilities to create one clear brand planning programme.

So, in summary, there is a sea of change happening which is impacting planning. The Darwinian laws will no doubt apply. Those that adapt to this inevitable change and set sail will thrive. Those that are too slow to adapt for fear of disrupting their income model, or for other reasons, and think they are in a safe harbour will probably face a bleak future and, in today's environment, the time horizon and tipping points may be nearer than many think.

For those willing to go on a new journey of discovery with a new total planning approach, the potential prize will be considerable. Total planning will be able to add far greater value to the client, which will ensure it has a rightful place at the centre of the client's strategy. This will need a cultural mindset shift, in all probability a structural shift, and it will require flexibility to adapt rapidly along the way in what is now a highly dynamic marketplace. For those up for the challenge under total planning, it will be an invigorating and highly rewarding experience.

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