

THE  
CRICHTON  
SYMPOSIUM  
IN HONOR OF JOHN H. CRICHTON

“ISSUES IN COMMUNICATIONS”

“VALIDATION OF CREATIVE STRATEGY”

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ADVERTISING AGENCIES

TUESDAY, MARCH 16, 1982

THE PIERRE HOTEL

FIFTH AVENUE AT 61st STREET, NEW YORK

# "VALIDATION OF CREATIVE STRATEGY"

"The objective is the hill. The strategy defines the objective and tells you how you can go up the hill." Not my words. But those of an agency president, one of several with whom a colleague and I spoke. In a dozen differing ways we asked the question: "How do you know when your strategy is right?" We spoke with many others as well. Senior creative and account service management, not just from Bates; we even ventured to the East Side. And we spoke to senior management at various clients as well. We had stimulating interviews.

I'll tell you what we heard from many people, from talking to them for many hours. The results were amazing--everyone we spoke with enjoyed the opportunity to crystalize his or her own views. We heard a little consensus here and there, and these discussions resulted in this morning's talk. Being good researchers, we still believe that no answer is right or wrong, and we'll protect our sources' anonymity.

The subject of when a creative strategy is right is of critical importance. In 1979, Ad Age surveyed fifty of the largest advertisers in the country and interviewed their agencies as well. Advertisers were asked, among other things to rate the importance of a number of agency services. "Creative Strategy" was rated "absolutely necessary" by 81% of the advertisers, "very important" by 17%. No surprises. That's one key function of a full service agency.

However, what I found intriguing was that 63% of the agencies surveyed believed that their clients were "extremely satisfied" with agency performance in the area of creative strategy. Yet, in fact, only 31% of the clients were "extremely satisfied" with their agencies' creative strategies. I don't need a quadrant or need-gap analysis of these data to realize that the 4A's could not have chosen a more relevant topic for today's symposium.

What the Ad Age survey didn't tell us, and why I'm speaking on this topic today, is exactly where a creative strategy fits in a marketing plan, what it is perceived to be, and how or why one feels it's working. That's why we conducted our interviews.

First of all, where do creative strategies fit in overall marketing plans? Creative strategies are developed to direct salient information and ideas about a product or service, from concept form to finished advertising form.

Not everyone we spoke to was in agreement about the elements that contribute to the development of a creative strategy. While the agency account and client brand groups wanted to see cohesive analyses, the creative teams found much of the research and marketing analysis that goes into strategic development to be useless, even misleading at times. The creatives wanted to see the pieces of information, not compiled, but separate, so that they could allow the creative process to evolve.

However, everyone, at some point, compared creative strategies, implicitly or explicitly, to military strategies. They did so because, in a greater marketing plan, the creative strategy is seen as one step on the way to taking the hill. It's where there should be a lot of preparation before one wages war, and it should be helpful and focussed.

There's the military--or marketing strategist--point of view, nicely articulated 2100 years ago by Publilius Syrus: "War should be long in preparing in order that you may conquer more quickly." An Australian agency executive echoed this viewpoint: "The more you focus upon the real issue of the marketplace, focus your brain on solving that issue, the better will be the creative product. Discipline shouldn't inhibit creativity, it should enhance it. The strategy should ultimately focus on one issue, the issue that is the fulcrum of the marketplace." A concurring point of view from an advertiser: "The big challenge always is to ensure that if you are going to stick your neck on the line, that you do indeed find the proper benefit. Because if you don't define creative strategy very precisely, very specifically, what you end up with is a strategy with more than one benefit. By definition, then, you are not going to do a very good job."

Shakespeare lets Julius Caesar express a contrary point-of-view: "Cry 'Havoc!' and let slip the dogs of war." I've heard it time and again...strategy inhibits creativity...the time spent writing about copy could be better spent writing the copy itself. Unquestionably great advertising has emerged in the absence of clearly cut strategies. And we've all seen instances in which problems were over-defined. A creative director: "For a recent exploratory, we not only had the structure defined, the solution defined, we even had suggested examples of the creative...before the people started working.

But structure, strategy, direction--whatever--of its nature does in no way inhibit creativity. Shakespeare wrote 152 sonnets, each with the same rhyme scheme, each with the same number of syllables, with a resulting range of emotion and ideas far more moving and enduring than our countless thirty-second slices of life.

Early on in the development of an advertising strategy, one should first examine how best to position a product or service--to find the unique niche that can be most beneficial to both advertiser and consumer. A concept, or core idea, is a building block in the development of an advertising strategy that can be studied to find where best to position a product or service.

We've now reached what seems to be the first step of the validation of creative strategy: reassuring ourselves of the validity of the concept itself. The probability of creating effective advertising without first validating the concept to position a product or

service in the current market situation is nil. Some strategies do evolve from many ideas that fall into place, others are clearly articulated early on and become refined through concept validation. History and the marketplace have effectively rejected Hermann Goering's strategic approach: "Shoot first and inquire afterwards, and if you make mistakes, I will protect you." If you, as an agency, do that, any client should fire you!

What exactly is a creative strategy? It's "The Creative Road Map" that is composed of elements to assist a positioned product or service to arrive at its destination--finished advertising.

What are the elements of a valid strategy? Depending on to whom you listen, there are four, or three, or five. I liked best one client's single sentence definition: "A creative strategy is the determination of the benefit that you want to communicate to consumers to motivate them to buy your product." All the pieces are there: 1) the objectives of the advertising--or--what is the advertising trying to accomplish, 2) the target audience--or to whom am I speaking, 3) the benefit or selling platform--or--what shall I say, 4) the reason why--or--why should one believe me. These are the key elements, paraphrased with four "p"s: the problem, the prospect, the promise, and the premise.

In writing advertising with impact, no one seems to include tone or manner nowadays because they're considered as being executional, rather than strategic, limitations. Here's a telling comment: "I think tone and manner always end up being useless adjectives, written to seem precise, but that certainly are not. Words like modern or announcement, introductory or personal, entertaining or serious are of no use in constructively defining the product. Primarily they're in there because someone wants to pretend that he's done more work than simply writing the two most important things: to whom do you want to talk, and what do you want to say?" I like this direct approach.

How do you know when you have the four p's right? That's when your strategy is valid. There is no one test, no one technique, no one magic number. But, there are three steps. They involve looking backward, looking inward, and looking outward. Specifically, these steps are looking backward at what you did to arrive at an existing strategy, looking inward at the creative process of what the agency did or can do to best crystalize a strategy, and looking outward at the information available about the salient current and potential marketing environment in which advertising based on a creative strategy exists.

First, looking backward. On what basis and with what support, do each of the four strategic elements stand? Now, one should ask oneself if the initial research, judgment, marketing savvy and creative process are complete. Is the strategic thrust of the advertising properly directed?

The first of the four "p"s is the problem. Is it one which copy itself can directly address? I heard everyone tell us that countless strategies were invalidated, rejected because of declining sales or share and, in some cases, maybe correctly so. But, think about this: "declining sales" is not a valid statement of a problem for a creative strategy. Declining sales must be addressed in the context of an overall marketing plan. The problem could be related to a shift in the market due to a lessening consumer demand, or to competitive activity. Unless client and agency alike are convinced that the problem is directly related to inappropriate or misdirected advertising, then, in those cases alone can an advertising strategy be pronounced invalid.

Looking backward at the problem, or the objectives of the advertising, involves examining the development of the marketing strategic direction, with the creative advertising strategy as a part of that overall mix.

The second of the four "p's": The prospect. The salesman's adage: "Know your prospect." As advertisers and marketers, a major concern always is knowing the target, in terms of their demographics and attitudes. Countless lifestyle and psychographic presentations have begun with the assumption "The better you know to whom you're speaking, the better you can communicate."

But when we asked our experts which element of a strategy was the most expendable, it was the definition and description of the prospect. Please understand. They didn't believe it to be unimportant, merely least important. One creative director put it this way: "I could probably do without target audience because I could write a commercial so close to the product and its benefits that I don't have to know whether the person using it is 18-25. I could write a story on [a brand], and it really wouldn't matter. I mean I could get away with it without knowing who the target is."

Perhaps this is not true in every category. Sometimes the target is critical. In the rental car business the majority of volume comes from 7/10ths of 1% of the population. Understanding in depth and reaching these very few highly mobile, upscale individuals is absolutely essential to the crafting of effective copy.

However, the reality is that the usage base in some product categories is so broadly diverse that definitions are impractical. Look at tissue paper--is the exact target critical here? No! Nor may it be with other broad-user based low-involvement categories. And it is especially in these categories that the message is critical. Because the prospect portion of the strategy cannot be validated apart from promise. What are we saying, to whom?

My third "p": The promise. Without any doubt, the most important ingredient in advertising. It's our implicit contract with the consumer: When you buy this brand, you get this benefit. Done

well, our market economy works, our clients are happy and we prosper. Violated, we deserve whatever criticism is laid upon us. Call it a U.S.P. or whatever you will, advertising cannot succeed without it. An agency account group head: "You have to know that you're saying something relevant. In the end, let's assume that everybody does his homework, and not just us but our competitors, too. So the real thing that will distinguish one brand's strategy from another may not be the definition of the audience, but the definition of the message." From a creative director: "What element could I not do without? The selling proposition!" An account man: "A creative strategy must ultimately lead to a single-minded product benefit." We can look backward at whatever data we have in hand, and ask: Is this promise meaningful to the prospect? And if we don't know with certainty, we must call "time out," and do whatever is necessary to find out.

Lastly, a premise, a reason why, support. As one advertiser put it: "People simply need to know that there is a reason why. That simply gives the consumers a reason to believe your benefit. It's nice to claim something, and it is even better if you can prove it in some sort of tangible way." I think this goes beyond permission to believe to include permission to purchase and consume.

Reason why is especially important when the promise is an emotional or psychological one. It can provide the rationale our prospect wants and needs. Only then does the message have meaning.

George C. Marshall put it well: "You can have all the material in the world, but without morale it is largely ineffective." How to validate the premise? Operationally there are many ways, but the most simple way is to ask the question: "Is the prospect more likely to believe my promise after I've told him why?" If the answer is "yes," the premise is a strong one.

So, many elements of a sound strategy can be validated by looking backwards at research and marketing experience. However, judgment and gut feel also play an important part in looking backwards. No set of numbers can always provide the answer. Numbers should not be used in place of common sense. As Reva Korda put it several years ago: "I honestly do begin to detect a slight stirring of new respect for judgment in the conference rooms I hang out in. There is beginning to be a return to the idea that human beings--customers--are often emotional and unexpected, and that no one set of numbers can predict their responses as well as a good advertising woman or even a man."

The second step is to look inward at the creative process. There are two key questions. How best can a creative strategy be executed? What gives a good creative leader confidence in the strategy provided? That's partly a function of who's responsible for writing that strategy.

To answer these questions, most of the people we spoke to felt that creative strategies are best executed when a team approach is utilized. The team approach allows for strategies to evolve in brainstorming sessions, and for the creative team to have all the information they need to develop special advertising. The more involved all the players are, the better the opportunity to create impactful advertising.

Our sources felt the initial efforts should involve creative, account management and research contributions. An account person said: "When I write strategies, I write a draft of what I want. And I very much insist on sitting down with the creative director and discussing the interpretational strategies. Together, we will brief the other creatives so we believe in what we are trying to achieve."

Another said: "The creative person should be involved in understanding all of the research that went into developing the strategy." And finally: "Yes, but inundate the creative people with information, but unstructured information that they can combine in unusual ways."

So, whoever puts the creative strategy on paper "should be the best informed guy in his agency relative to the issues that impact the business. Not only everything we've talked about; but all the advertising within the last ten years in this area." And that's a function of the team effort.

Then the almost-magic. The cold facts, the statistics, the selling platform become warm, then hot, as they are transformed from marketing language to arresting, attention getting, involving people language. Evidence again of validity. It comes in the form of good test scores, enthusiastic consumers, a gut feel that you've got something great.

For if the cold strategy cannot be transformed into warm copy, one should not only look to the creative process, but should clearly question the creative strategy itself. But creative judgment itself is key to validating a strategy. One writer put it: "They're all just pieces of paper. But some threaten me; others I can't wait to work on." How can a strategy threaten? If it looks like it's going to be a straight-jacket in terms of creativity. A good strategy is like a set of wings.

Realize, however, and this is key, that the formulation of the creative strategy is not the time to begin the creative process, it is a continuous agency-wide activity within the creative process.

The third step, and final one, of validation is an outward look. At results. Not surprisingly, that's how most everyone talks about validating a strategy. "We had a strong strategy, something seemed to work and drove sales up for six or seven months. Then, when sales went soft, people figured the strategy wasn't as strong as we thought." "When sales keep going up." "When my share is up."

"When it stopped going down." "The right strategy, when the competition starts copying my approach." "Gut feel." "When we're being outspent, but are holding our own." "It's right when competition begins to get defensive in its advertising." "When my client is happy." "When you as a consumer driving to the supermarket for the purpose of buying canned peas, know that one brand, in a field of five, all of which are of the same size and price, is the one that makes the most sense to purchase. That's when you know your strategy is right."

And once that strategy is validated, what do you do? Listen to Ulysses S. Grant: "The art of war is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike him as hard as you can and as often as you can, and keep moving on." To other hills.