

MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS AND ADVERTISING PROS: IT'S TIME TO BRIDGE THE GAP

By Allan Steinmetz, CEO | Inward Strategic Consulting

Advertising and public relations professionals spent years leading up to the millennium and 2000 complaining that their input was not valued at the boardroom level. Now that marketing and communications have assumed a strategic position in the minds of corporate leaders, PR and advertising practitioners have had to deal with an unexpected complication – management consultants invading their turf.

Advertising executives and management consultants have not meshed smoothly. Advertising executives are jealous of the recent foray by management consulting firms into their domain, and consulting firms really don't respect what advertising agencies do for their clients in the area of strategy development. In addition, management consulting firms also are expanding their competencies so they can take business away from communications companies – even if they don't have the expertise and capabilities to do the work.

In an attempt to capture more of the available fees on a given project, ad agencies/pr firms and management consultants are attempting – halfheartedly – to become more like the other. A number of agencies are hiring strategy consultants as stringers, while many management consultants take to brainstorming slogans or taglines on a whiteboards. Young & Rubicam bought Capital Consulting a few years ago,, and last year, Edelman Worldwide and Ketchum started change management communications practices. On the other side of the gap, PricewaterhouseCoopers and Towers Perrin have established full service marketing communications practices that are growing fast.



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I've been in both worlds, working for McCann-Erickson and Young & Rubicam on the agency side and for Andersen Consulting (now Accenture) and Arthur D. Little and at my own firm on the consulting side. I see cooperation between the two disciplines as essential to meeting clients' needs, while attempts by each to offer services of the other could be disastrous for the client.

There were numerous times while I was on the agency side, when the client would engage Booz Allen or McKinsey to evaluate the marketing planning process or review the agency's branding strategy as part of an on-going corporate business process evaluation or audit. The ad folks felt threatened by people who they regarded as auditors and number crunchers. They made comments like "What do they know about advertising or the consumer?" or "When was the last time they recognized a good ad from bad one?"

Consultants came back with process and structure, market intelligence, sales channel integration strategies and more – elements that would require the advertising pros to change their methods and operations. The agency executives would ask, "What does all that have to do with creative advertising and a strong message?"

The agencies relied on creativity and consumer insights, intuition that was validated by research and qualitative in-depth interviews and focus groups. A fresh idea ruled! We had brand/product groups, planning departments, media planning and segmentation models, too. Who says we didn't have a science? Who did the consultants think they were to challenge our ways.

It wasn't until I became "one of them," a management consultant, that it started to sink in that there are better ways to create compelling and stronger marketing ideas – ideas that are embraced faster

and attain sustainability within the organization. I had to change my perspective totally. There is value in a methodical process that was repeatable, trainable and coachable. In addition, there is a requirement to get organizational support and buy-in to get an initiative adopted culturally and enterprise-wide.

This is where the breakdown exists between ad agencies and management consulting firms. Each believes they can do the other's task, but they can't. Both parties have yet to learn to work together, forcing clients to become mediators and arbiters – and that causes confusion, mistakes and poorly executed plans that lack buy-in.

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While advertising pros and consultants each have strengths and weaknesses, they have failed the lesson of doing what they know best and have created confusion of their roles and clouded their judgment as to what they are able to do well and do poorly. What matters most is when the stakes are high and the outcome critical, clients can't risk making a mistake. They need the right solution managed by the best provider. Unfortunately, the ad agency or management consulting firm doesn't view it this way. Both claim to be experts in everything.

Traditional Agencies

Ad agencies' greatest strength, along with their expertise in attention-grabbing productions in a variety of traditional media, is creativity. They focus on the sell, not on building consensus before launching a campaign. And when creativity is the product, the focus won't be on methodology and repeatable results.

That strong salesmanship becomes a weakness when not aligned with corporate goals. Clients often succumb to high-pressure creative people and their supposed experience and strong recommendations.

We often hear clients say, “We hired them for the creativity and expertise, so we really shouldn’t second-guess them. They’re the experts.” Consequently, campaigns get approved only to find the rainmakers/sales force reacting incredulously.

A high-profile campaign for Nissan a few years back is a well-remembered example of this phenomenon. The campaign involved toy cars and toy people interacting in humorous situations to a rock and roll score. The ads won numerous awards – and didn’t sell any cars. Nissan’s dealers felt betrayed and management had to start over.

IBM provides a counter-example. When IBM’s managers changed communications strategy to focus on infrastructure support rather than ebusiness, they had to fight their own agency to get that reflected in their advertising. In the Wall Street Journal IBM’s director of advertising, Ms. McGuire, said, “That the creative people at the agency initially thought that advertising ‘infrastructure’ would be boring.” Ogilvy & Mather’s creative director Chris Wall was quoted in the article as saying, “The word is a bit clinical.” The IBM managers were firm in their knowledge of the marketplace and of the sales force feedback. The result was a successful, talked-about campaign that served both firms extremely well.

Traditional Management Consultants

In contrast, management/strategy consultants sell disciplined, methodical and measurable processes, connecting proposals to their business impact. They idealize the “best practice,” or repeatable methods of achieving desired results. That can also lead to inflexibility, as well as an inability to spot developing trends and respond to them.

However, they are typically neither

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creative, nor execution-oriented in terms of their skill sets. They may try to hang onto all aspects of execution even when they shouldn’t, out of their sense of process or their stake in a successful outcome. Some believe that because they have in-house marketing departments, proposal centers and graphic designers on staff that they can come up with catchy slogans and layouts for brochures and even ads. But they are not necessarily good at thinking through how employees’ behavior

should be changed at the individual or team level. Nor typically are consultants skilled at communicating at the level of values, benefits and attributes, to answer the question, “What does this mean to me?”

Avoid the Gap

Clients should incorporate the positive aspects of management consulting and change management, and the very latest in external marketing to come up with a codified approach to educating, motivating, inspiring and enrolling staff. The process moves from measuring the change-readiness of the organization at the outset, to conducting employee surveys about the core business and the corporate objectives well along in the process.

Having the ad agency and the management consulting firm perform activities that they do best saves time and money. Clients should end up hiring both types of firms. Clients shouldn’t try to mediate between the two, one interaction at a time. Instead, create a comprehensive, integrated marketing/communications process, and fit the hired guns in where needed. The client must act like a conductor managing a large orchestra with different instruments and musical movements and timing. All too often clients delegate the entire marketing process to the agency or consultants and that is a mistake too. The client must take an active role, set strategic

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direction, integration and facilitate internal acceptance and implementation.

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This will require the disciplines of both advertising and consulting to work together. Advertising experts will gain better understanding of how the strategic goals of the company plan into individual campaigns, while consultants may be able to incorporate advertising disciplines into change management initiatives. It means more work for both sides (which is usually how both sides like it).

The Process To Bridge The Gap

The desired result is a comprehensive process driven by consultants and creative communications professionals working in tandem. Working together, to meet the external communications needs of the company and simultaneously fuels the fire of employees to quickly convert them to be supportive of the brand and to understand what the company stands for. The process needs to:

- *educate the staff about how the business works*
- *enfold their suggestions and input into the plan*
- *spell out the detailed implications for individual workers' and teams' daily activities*
- *inspire the staff to care about a new vision.*

Over the course of this effort, companies must use impactful and creative marketing practices to unfurl the banner of a message that unites and motivates the workforce. Internal communications should be as powerfully exciting, experiential and relevant to each audience as external advertising and public relations, and should creatively personify the company brand.

The program needs to be detailed, measurable, and repeatable. This will be a challenge for today's corporate leaders, who might like to keep strategy and communication separate, or make one subordinate to the other to make it easier to manage in the short term.

As a result, some of this push must come from the outside. Advertising leaders must ask about strategic positioning, internal employee alignment, sales force acceptance and buy-in and not just sell creative. Management consultants must acknowledge the value of communications and build collaborative models into their processes and recognize that creativity is a skill and adds value to the desired strategic outcome.

If we all work together, we can use partnerships across these disciplines to improve the efficacy of our programs and our value to our clients.

Allan Steinmetz is Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Inward Strategic Consulting, Inc., a management consulting firm that specializes in providing clients with a unique and highly integrated approach to strategy development, change management, change management communications, marketing/branding strategy and internal communications with offices in Boston, Chicago, San Francisco and Toronto. Formerly, he was the Worldwide Director of Marketing and Communications at Arthur D. Little in Boston, and served as Worldwide Director of Marketing at Andersen Consulting at their Chicago headquarters, and before that was a Senior Vice President with Young & Rubicam. He can be reached at asteinmetz@inwardconsulting.com.



www.InwardConsulting.com

T: 617.558.9770 | F: 617.964.9355

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