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Creative Women in Advertising Agencies: Why So Few “Babes in Boyland”?

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Abstract:

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to explore reasons why there are so few women in creative departments of advertising agencies and to discuss what impact that might have on the work environment of those creative departments and advertising messages they create.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Provides a review of published research and plus opinions of professionals who cover the advertising industry or work in agency creative departments. Personal observations from the authors' time working in the advertising industry are also included.*

Findings – *Themes gleaned from the literature look at the gender gap, the creative department of advertising agencies as an “old-boys network,” reasons why women leave creative jobs, and why advertising targeting women as consumers is so bad.*

Practical implications – *Women opt out of advertising agencies for any number of reasons – more than just having babies. Keeping women's voices in creative departments would give a better balance to the messages agencies create.*

Originality/value – *Changing creative departments to be more accommodating and flexible to women's needs might not only make them better for women, but also better for men and for families. In addition, the messages from those creative departments may be more compelling to consumers*

A decade ago an article titled "Babes in boyland" appeared in *Creativity* and asked, why are there so few women in agency creative departments (Kazenoff and Vagnoni, 1997). Unfortunately, it is still a pertinent question today with at least one startling answer. On October 6, 2005, at a forum of top advertising industry creative talent – all men – celebrated the work of Neil French, the legendary copywriter. When French was asked why there were so few female creative directors, he replied that the work of women in creative departments is "crap ... and they don't make it to the top because they don't deserve to" (Sampey and O'Leary, 2005).

His words reverberated across the advertising industry, yet for many who have worked in advertising or the business' practices, his words come as no surprise. The reality is that men dominate the creative side of the \$300 billion advertising industry, and "... in his honest opinion [French] was voicing the inner thoughts of legions of men in the senior ranks of our business. Before us was a big part of the explanation of why more women aren't succeeding in advertising" (Vonk, 2005, p. 19).

According to data from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, women far outnumber men in advertising agencies. Overall women make up 66 percent of the workforce in advertising (Bosman, 2005). Yet, according to an informal study in *Creativity*, only one in three in creative departments are women (Cuneo and Petrecca, 1997), with even fewer in the higher executive ranks such as creative directors. Adweek looked at the top 33 agencies and found that only four had flagship offices with female creative directors (Bosman, 2005). More to the point, the 20th anniversary issue of *Creativity*

featured the 50 most creative people of the last two decades, and none were women (Creativity, 2006).

It's a Boys' Club, After All

When Diane Rothschild was inducted into the One Club's Creative Hall of Fame, the second woman ever so honored, she said that Neil French's attitude was emblematic of his generation. "Based on the world according to uninspired, rigid, time-warped and aging advertising men, I should be home right now in a little apron," Rothschild is quoted as saying. "Where I shouldn't be is here being inducted into the Creative Hall of Fame" (Bosman, 2005, p. 1).

Indeed, many creative departments are like male fraternities, housed in agencies that have men's names on the door. Marcia Stone once said Carmichael Lynch in Minneapolis had an old-boys mentality. "The whole culture was about going to ride Harleys together and go golfing," Journal of Consumer Marketing Stone is quoted as saying. "They'd go to biker bars and go fishing in Canada together. I wasn't invited in that clique. If you're a woman, it's very hard to be accepted" (Bosman, 2005, p. 1). Others tell the often-repeated observations of the quantity of business that takes place at exclusive all-male settings such as a private golf course. Men in the agency would take clients to play at a prestigious club that wouldn't allow women on the course or at the 19th hole bar.

Others fit in by "being one of the guys," such as being a tomboy with a good knowledge of sports or sports columnists so conversations could be filled with references to the topic of the day. Margaret Ellman, now a freelance copywriter in New York, said she made her male colleagues more comfortable by wearing baggy clothes and being funny. "Being a bit of a 'tomboy' was also an insurance policy against being moved over to women's products, which can happen when a woman comes off as being 'too feminine'" (Kazenoff and Vagnoni, 1997).

Women also tell stories of being excluded from certain accounts. Diane Cook-Tench was once turned down for an art director's position at an agency because they handled masculine accounts. "I was appalled and relieved at the same time," she said adding, "it seemed

ridiculous to me that women couldn't develop a campaign for a chainsaw" (Kazenoff and Vagnoni, 1997). Janet Kestin, now a co-creative chief at Ogilvy & Mather/Toronto, had a similar experience. "In my first job, women weren't supposed to work on beer or cars, and weren't allowed to tell if they did. I worked on beer, but I never went to a meeting, never presented my own work. The account director said, 'You can no more understand beer than I can understand tampons'" (Kestin, 1998). A similar argument is used for minority groups. "With an implicit assumption that women and members of minority groups are incapable of applying a marketing orientation to these different customers, these advertising people are seen as being only able to prepare advertising for people physically like themselves" (Rotfeld, 2003, p. 87).

Those in the boys' club made assumptions and showed biases when women entered the room. "It's still a macho world. At meetings, men thought I was in charge of taking notes," said Anne de Maupeou, a creative director at a European agency. Judy John related a similar experience. "When I was younger, no one looked at me. In a male-female partnership, clients only talked to the guy" (Kestin, 1998).

It also seems harder for women to win peer recognition. Many award shows had either all-male juries or one or two token women. It wasn't until 2004 that the chairman of the Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival mandated that women should have at least 25 percent of the judging positions, after decades of heavily male or all-male juries (Bosman, 2005). Of course, all-male or heavily male-dominated juries reward appeals, especially humor, created by men to appeal to men. "The best creative brains in the business are still cranking out provocative, edgy, often sublimely produced TV spots for young adult males" (Vagnoni, 2005). This, in turn, results in men dominating in creative awards or creative awards annuals (Mallia, 2006).

Where Have All the Girls Gone?

Looking at the literature and listening to what other creatives say, the often-repeated comments describe guys wanting to be comfortable with guys (e.g. Bosman, 2005). One explanation for the exclusion of women is homophily in network relationships; that is,

people tend to interact with others who are similar on attributes such as sex, race and education (Ibarra, 1992). Put more plainly, men hire people like themselves, namely other men, creating the old boy's network.

Sally Hogshead once said that "creative departments are Darwinian, and men have the strengths that are encouraged and rewarded in the ad business" (Parpis and Anderson, 2005). Other successful creative women echo that a certain breed of women tends to be successful in the business, and they tend to have what are traditionally male characteristics.

French implied the lack of creative women had to do with children when he said women wimp out and "go suckle something" (Vonk, 2005). For some women, perhaps, it isn't just a parenting issue. Maybe women don't care about the power that men strive for. "Advertising is so competitive and so tough," said a freelance copywriter, "maybe women just don't want to put up with the bullshit. Maybe they're more well-balanced. Maybe they're not willing to drop everything to get up there to the power positions" (Kazenoff and Vagnoni, 1997).

French's rationalization for why there are so few women raises another question. After making his "women aren't committed" statement, he later said that "he was merely articulating cold, hard truths: being a creative director is a hell of a job, and anyone interested in looking after a family just can't devote the required time and energy" (Iezzi, 2005). So does this imply that men have no interest in their families? Marie-Catherine Dupuy, vice-chairman and chief creative officer at TBWA France (and a mother of four) said, "You always have this stupid question, 'How can you manage private life and business?' Nobody asks this question to men" (Iezzi, 2005). In fact, it has been reported that only 8 percent of men encounter assumptions about their job commitment because of their gender compared to 30 percent of women (Thomas Yoccatto and Yaeger, 2003).

But perhaps the biggest issue with the French attitude is its self-fulfilling prophecy. "If a male creative director is already convinced a woman is extremely limited in her ability and value, what lens is he

seeing her work through? Would you expect him to offer the same support and guidance and consideration he gives men? ... Might she respond with less than her best effort when the adored leader expects little of her? Might she want to leave, not to have babies but because the conditions for her to succeed don't exist and the message 'she can't succeed' is too discouraging?" (Vonk, 2005, p. 19).

This is a daunting situation for any young woman in a new creative position, but there is another issue as well. The male-dominated department undoubtedly affects the messages that are created to target women consumers.

"Why Is Advertising that's Aimed at Women So Horrible?"

Jane Talcott, a senior creative director at Young & Rubicam, asked this question for so long that in the late 1990s she helped found The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly Awards. Managed by the Advertising Women of New York, these awards are "to recognize intelligent, respectful, insightful images of women in advertising – and to chastise demeaning, sophomoric, tasteless work" (Vagnoni, 2005, p. 53).

The fact that women make up to 80 percent of household purchase decisions makes the dominance of men in creative departments especially striking. To some, the gender imbalance helps explain why polls and focus groups report some advertising as sexist (Bosman, 2005). Those in the ad business are still pretty clueless about how to talk to women (Vagnoni, 2005).

Just as children aren't little adults, you can't appeal to women by starting with the premise that they aren't men. Yet that is often the perspective men have when targeting women. Lorraine Tao of Zig noted, "For decades, women have been spoken to in the voice of men. Creative departments have always been made up of men, so naturally – through no fault of their own – they tend to create advertising from a distinctly male perspective. This is changing, but they still represent the majority" (Thomas Yocato and Yaeger, 2003, p. 193).

Giving women more influence within creative departments would enhance the advertising industry on two fronts: better

advertising messages (for women and maybe even men) as well as a better work environment. First, potential talent is lost when half the population in the creative pool is overlooked, and better talent is the genesis of better advertising. Second, while the work-life balance is important to women, especially those with children, it is also important for men, though they might be less likely to admit it (e.g. Hall, 2000).

Giving women a voice may do something important for every advertising agency – making it more productive, making its advertising more effective and, in the process, making the agency more money. And it could be a win for consumers as well as the advertising industry.

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