

Planning: the challenge of complexity

Anne Benvenuto, R/GA, challenges planners to embrace complexity and inspire greater meaning for their clients' brands

THE ADVERTISING landscape has changed. Yawn.

That statement is not so provocative, is it? If you are reading these words, you have probably already heard that one. Actually, you have not just heard all this, you have probably experienced it.

Why is it, then, that very few planners have inspired their agencies to change with the landscape?

Now *that* statement is not provocative – it is shocking.

Saying, listening and making things happen

Brands once said something to consumers. Literally. Advertising was their form of communication, and agencies created campaigns to tell consumers that Alka-Seltzer was quite the relief, Pepsi tasted better than Coke, and at Burger King you could, in fact, have it your way. Consumers just sat there mute, listening. In most cases, they had no choice but to listen.

But today, agencies need to do more than help brands say something to consumers; they also need to help brands listen and make things happen. This is much more than creating an integrated campaign, a communication that operates across multiple platforms. Rather, it is about creating an integrated brand solution that combines that campaign with two other important

brand expressions, the programme and the experience (see Figure 1).

The programme is a multi-channel expression that creates an ongoing dialogue between a brand and a single consumer over the life cycle of their relationship. Unlike a campaign, a programme is iterative. It is changed by customers' actions and, when done right, fulfils their (very particular) needs. For example, a Verizon Wireless customer who chooses to repeatedly call customer service to address a technical issue with her Treo 700 might receive a series of direct-mail pieces with messages and offers to help prevent the customer from turning to another mobile provider.

Programmes are doing more than saying something. They are also listening.

Another addition to an agency's deliverables is the experience. File under this heading products, interfaces, applications and communities – a whole new world of marketing possibilities. The experience is an actual system of interaction between consumers and a brand that creates new brand meaning.

Unlike both campaigns and programmes, the experience exists outside the temporal. Experiences can be engaged by different consumers, at different times or simultaneously. They can be entered into at different points of interaction. They can learn and change from those interactions. And they can live or die with a campaign, or evolve over an eternity.

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The experience takes saying and listening and adds a third activity: making things happen.

Take Nike+, a partnership of Nike and Apple (and an experience that R/GA developed). Nike+ connects two products, a Nike shoe and an iPod nano, through a software application. As you run, Nike+ footwear uses a wireless connection to send data to your iPod nano. By syncing your iPod with your computer, you are then able to compare your progress with your last run and the goals you have set for yourself, and also interact with an entire community of runners, to compete against them or simply see how you measure up.

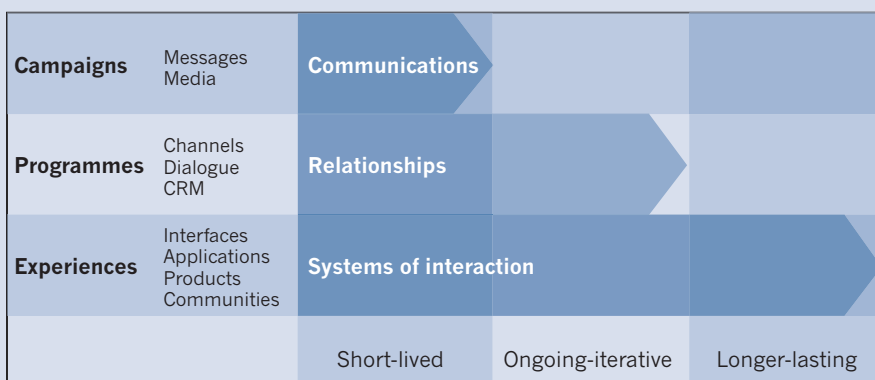
The end result is, literally, a system of interactions between products, people, and brands that transforms consumers into better runners and ascribes new meaning to the Nike brand by facilitating personal accomplishments: breaking that six-minute mile, outrunning their sisters in the 3K, or pushing through the entire 45 minutes of their run.

Is this something my agency should really be doing?

If you want to build your clients' brands in the new landscape, it is. Sure, the ▶

FIGURE 1

Broader array of brand expression





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experience blurs the lines that divide communications, programmes and actual products, but when your agency creates an experience for a client's brand, it helps the brand transform the way a consumer behaves and how she perceives the brand. And it builds new brand equities for your client, for example, the interface, a brand expression more valuable, and ownable, than Pantone 343.

By definition, the interface is the locus of a brand's relationship with a consumer, the place where the two come together, shake hands (hopefully), and actually do something to each other: negotiate the price of airplane tickets; download Arcade Fire's *Neon Bible*; perhaps even find a dance partner.

Like all other brand equities, the interface requires a certain degree of performance consistency. But unlike other brand equities, that performance isn't completely controlled by the brand. That's because the interface's value lies not in the interface itself but in how it facilitates a consumer's actual interaction with the brand.

This is why the interface is so important. If a brand does not have an interface that makes the right thing happen, your experience erodes the brand. Considering planners had better start planning for the creation of interfaces and the experiences they yield. And that means briefing a larger, more complex creative team.

Meet the Creative Hydra

Since my agency introduced the concept of planning just over two years ago, each planner who has walked through our doors has had to learn an entirely new way of working.

You see, the teams these planners had briefed previously were nice and simple. And their brief had been, well, brief. On one page it contained everything the creative team – that is, a copywriter and an art director – needed to build the campaign: some background information, a universal perceptual insight, and a big idea that the advertising would leverage to communicate a singular message about a brand or product. Perhaps, in addition, they provided some inspirational

materials to get that copywriter and art director going.

But coming through the doors at R/GA, these planners discovered that the creative briefing was no longer simple. There was a new set of deliverables the agency had to create – some that say something, some that listen and some that make things happen – and all of which they had to address in their briefs. And there was a new creative team to work with: the Creative Hydra (see Figure 2).

For the planners, inspiring this multi-brained monster required an entirely new approach to the brief, because each of the Creative Hydra's heads demanded different information. Failing to yield that information meant that the Creative Hydra would never successfully create campaigns, programmes and experiences. But if they treated the Hydra right, he would produce great work in all these areas. He would even become their best friend.

If you want your agency to succeed in the new advertising landscape, it is time he became yours too.

The Creative Hydra was born when a few new roles were grafted on to the traditional copywriter-art director team to help conceive programmes and experi-

ences. These included the technical creative director ('tech lead') and the interaction designer (also known as the information architect).

On the one hand, the tech lead is responsible for ensuring that an experience actually works. The ingenuity of his code, server architecture and planning guarantees that the engine of an experience runs, and runs in the right direction.

But the tech lead is far more than a mechanic. He is also an essential member of the creative team. That is because the tech lead is also an inventor. With a tech lead at the table, the team is no longer limited by known technology solutions. He can look at a particular marketing challenge and create an entirely new platform that addresses consumers' needs. Sometimes the creative solution stems from these inventions. Sometimes it is these inventions.

The interaction designer is another head on the Creative Hydra. The interaction designer is the architect of the experience. Her job is to take the insights and ideas the planner briefs the team on and translate them into solutions that help consumers fulfil their task at hand as they help the brand meet their own objectives.

FIGURE 2

The new Creative Hydra

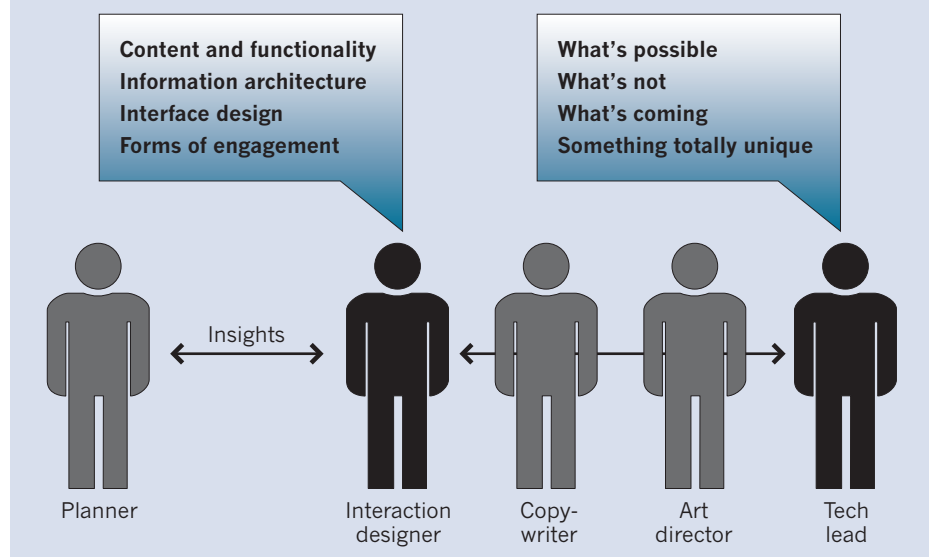
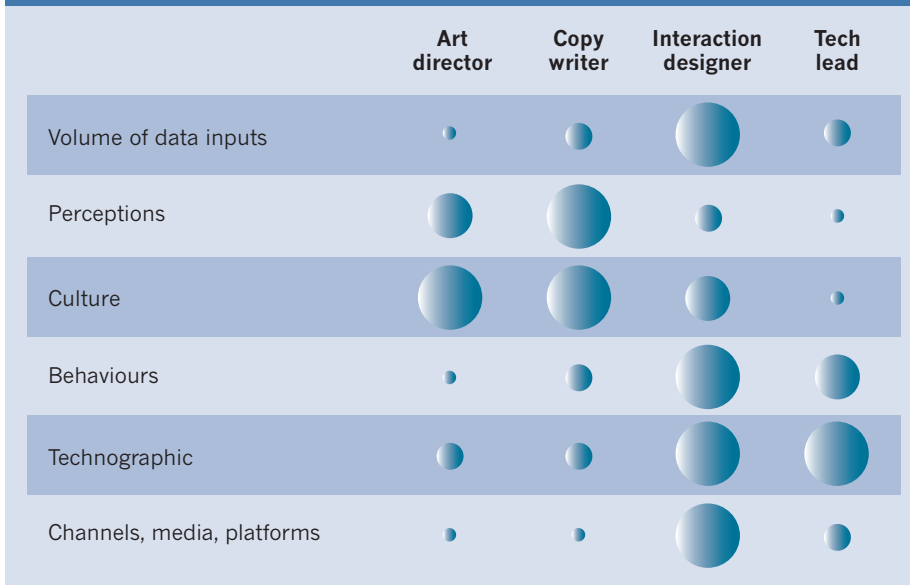


FIGURE 3

Posse of insights and varying focus



For example, let us pretend that clothing store H&M wanted to increase the overall amount of purchases customers – particularly young mothers – make in the store. In tackling this problem, and developing the brief, the planner might be interested in how Gen X moms' feelings about the H&M brand are influenced by the clothes being out of step with the current 'California Boho' trend and the fact that these moms tend to enter H&M stores with their children, who hate to shop. You can imagine what that brief might look like.

After being briefed, an interaction designer would be interested in the way these moms approach shopping for that T-shirt with their unruly children. As her child is easily distracted, how can the mom better prepare for the store visit to keep the experience brief? Does H&M have her size and colour preference in stock? Is complementary clothing merchandised together online and in-store? Using these insights, the interaction designer would create a cross-channel experience that helps each mom better achieve her task at hand (getting that T-shirt) while it fulfils the brand's strategic objective: selling her a pair of jeans to go with it.

You might say there is overlap between the role of the interaction designer and the planner. You would not be wrong. However, this is not a bad thing. If a planner joins forces with the interaction designer, the Creative Hydra is fed a stream of insights throughout the creative process, ensuring that the consumer's spirit lives in the process and the execution.

In short, planners need to learn to collaborate with the Creative Hydra and to create briefs that point the Creative Hydra in the right direction to do great

work. To do that, planners need to add complexity to the brief.

Complexity to the brief. You have got to love that.

The planner has a posse

When you are facing the Creative Hydra, you cannot just bring along one consumer insight. This beast needs to digest something more complex to develop advertising that says something, listens, and makes things happen. To satiate the Hydra's needs, a planner needs to develop consumer insights in four dimensions – perceptual, behavioural, technological, and cultural – and also synthesise a big 'aha' from the way these insights interact with one another.

You might say the successful planner has a posse of insights (see Figure 3).

In addition to the perceptual insights that most planners are comfortable – and good at – generating, planners need to get insight into people's behaviours to understand where their programmes and experiences can shape them to better fulfil the task at hand. Do this right and you will entwine their rituals with your brand.

You also need to have insight into the target's technographics, the applications, platforms and devices on which consumers are performing these behaviours. Understanding technographics helps shape your creative approach. It determines how to design interfaces that actually help impact consumers' perceptions and behaviours. It can also determine the correct contact plan for these consumers, telling you where they are so you can reach them properly, what the brand needs to say and make happen on that particular platform.

Beyond these insights, you also need to consider the larger gestalt, for these perceptions and behaviours do not exist in a vacuum, but rather in a network of human perceptions and behaviours. If you don't understand these dynamics, the dynamics of the culture, how can you understand how your disruption of culture will shape it?

This posse of insights requires planners to find a way to present the information to the Creative Hydra without overwhelming him. This involves both synthesising a universal insight from the feedback of these dimensions and also providing the elements of that synthesis for those team members who wish to delve more deeply.

In short, your briefs need to be both brief and deep. This is not a Zen koan; it is the planner's new reality.

Make it more than the advertising landscape that's changed

If there is one thing we all know about the times we are living in, it is that they are changing far faster than ever before. We live in an age where one week we are talking on a mobile phone and the next we are 't'xing r bffs n lol'. Or perhaps doing both at the same time. As we listen to *Like a Rolling Stone* on our iPods.

How does change feel? Not so good.

Tell me something I do not know.

What you also know is that planners are often the ones leading agencies to change. Planners, after all, are always trying to stay one step ahead of a consumer's culture. Why wouldn't they be one step ahead of their agency's culture?

So, is it not time we stopped talking about how things have changed and started changing things? It is.

That means expanding your planning repertoire to include planning for programmes and experiences.

That means exploring new research methodologies that uncover a posse of insights – longitudinal ethnography, prototyping and systems dynamics, among others.

Finally, that means inspiring your agency leadership to grow more heads upon your creative team. Show them the value that technologists and interaction designers can bring to your clients.

Cliché: it will not happen overnight. But just think, when finally enough agencies transform, you will never have to read another article about how the advertising landscape has changed.

If that does not move you, Jack, you are dead. ■



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