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Bringing on the suits

By Eric Blais

A typology of account managers featuring the unique skills, strengths and weaknesses of the people who could make up the optimal agency department

"Ninety per cent of the industry's account management people are glorified project managers, who-by the way-are happy to be project managers," said Tony Wright, chief planning and strategy officer at Ogilvy & Mather North America, in an article titled "The Incredible Shrinking Account Executive," published in the May 26 issue of *Adweek*. Many so-called "suits" are likely to be offended by this characterization. It nevertheless points to a general malaise in our industry. One that's affecting the quality of our work and the value marketers receive from their agencies. Others will argue that there's nothing new here that former Interbrew CEO Hugo Powell didn't say out loud 10 years ago when he urged agency chiefs to "fire the handlers and bring me the thinkers." No matter where you stand on the issue, there's no denying that our industry is facing a human resource challenge in its account management ranks. Formal training in agencies disappeared along with the healthy margins, and those who have the skill set to train, coach and develop talent are either on the verge of retirement, leaving the field or just plain too busy. Reversing this trend will require new thinking, and I doubt that classifying account people as either handlers or thinkers will lead to the solution. What's needed is a new typology of account people. A sort of segmentation of the account management population that recognizes the unique skills, strengths and weaknesses of different types of account people who could be used to create the optimal department in an agency. After 20 years of working with and observing a variety of account managers, I have seen six distinct profiles emerge. And, like all segmentation models, no one fits any description entirely but most exhibit the characteristics and behaviours of one cluster more than the others

The Nurturer

Predictably, this group skews to females, which isn't surprising given women's role as primary caregivers in most families. Nurturers take great care of the brands assigned to them, their clients and their subordinates. They take a personal interest in everything and devote much personal time, late nights and weekends "caring" for the business. Nurturers are loyal, dependable workhorses who approach their work with a sense of "family." That sense leads many Nurturers to create a home for their brands and their team. Although not driven by empire building aspirations, Nurturers dream of running their separate group within the shop or at least having a dedicated space for the family. It also explains their obsession with team-building exercises and keeping an up-to-date org chart outlining roles and responsibilities. They also treat subordinates, not as children, but as their responsibility often referring to them as "my AE." This leads them to write the most thorough performance evaluations, to provide day-to-day coaching and, in some cases, to teach good manners. Working for a Nurturer can be an excruciating experience, but years later many look back and acknowledge that this was the only training they ever had.

The Glad Handler

The Glad Handler is what bad TV shows usually typecast as the stereotypical account executive: The smoothie whose favourite opener is "Hiawaria, howsbusiness?" and who believes this is all a big game one plays to win. And many win by becoming agency chiefs or head of business development. They rarely get caught up in the details, and are brilliant at delegating down, up and sideways. Their Teflon coating keeps them out of trouble and they rarely take a strong stand on anything. Clients love Glad Handlers even if they often don't know why. They provide little business counsel but will often go out of their way to counsel clients on their careers or on political navigation, put them in touch with a recruiter or get tickets to a game. Glad Handlers happily attend shoots and sales meetings. They hate focus groups unless they provide opportunities for bonding time at the bar. They spend little time reading key documents yet always manage to deliver the right sound bites. They were winning at the consultants' bullshit bingo long before it was invented. Glad Handlers also dress the part and many will grow a goatee if that's what it takes. They say you start losing the business the day you win it. Glad Handlers play an important role in postponing the inevitable

The Bureaucrat

They keep impeccable files. They thrive on status reports, status meetings, contact reports, up-to-date competitive reviews, U.S. updates and anything that can be put in a thick binder with tabs. Many clients love having a Bureaucrat on their team. They're an insurance policy and are the equivalent of Radar on *MASH*. They always know where things are but often fail to know why. They'll have the critical path to everything but might not understand whether the initiative is right or wrong for the business. Bureaucrats are also happy orchestrating everything and adding input to nothing. They outsource everything from media costings and production estimates, to creative and even strategy. Planners who usurp their strategic role never threaten Bureaucrats. Bureaucrats have had a good day when the in-tray and the in-box have been thoroughly processed.

The Professor

Professors read books about marketing, advertising, branding and other fascinating non-fiction publications. They think *AdMap* is a good read and await with bated breath the next Reader's Digest seminar on advertising effectiveness. Some actually become real professors or just consultants. If advertising is part art, part science, it's the science, the theories and the models that preoccupy them. In a field where intuition and guts often gets you further than an education, the Professor struggles to make sense of it all. Clients are reassured by the presence of a Professor. Their ability to synthesize the information, identify the problem and solution and draw from accumulated knowledge gives them status even if the day-to-day pressures and an often dysfunctional process prevent them from having a real impact on the outcome.

The Creative

Creatives wish they were. They spend a great deal of time socializing with creative people. They provide amusement for creative people on break from deep creative thinking with a heavy dose of trivia, reviews of recent movies and David Letterman's Top Ten list. Creatives' computers are bursting with downloaded TV spots they play on demand. They know the names of directors, editors, food stylists and foley artists. They're happiest in a pre-production meeting as it's the closest they'll ever get to looking into the lens. Some of them actually develop great strategies and provide great briefs because of their understanding of the creative process. Most, however, just prefer the couch and the funny commercial reels to the Nielsen data and the heavy spend test recommendation. They make great play buddies for creative people but rarely make great partners for clients.

The Weather Vane

Weather Vanes have no idea why they are in this business. They're doing time while they figure out whether to go back to school, start a cooking school or swim with a school of fish while on a sabbatical in Tahiti. They're young and able, and they managed to impress an account supervisor desperate to find a body to help with the crunch. Weather Vanes say very little in client meetings and their e-mail system processes more personal than business e-mails. They add life to the summer picnic and the Christmas party, and they constantly push the limits of the casual dress code. They're not exactly sure how the agency gets paid, why clients expect a media post-analysis or what's expected of them, but it's more fun working in advertising than working for a collection agency. Surprisingly, some Weather Vanes commit to a career in advertising, pick a Nurturer or a Glad Handler as a role model and end up knowing everyone at the Marketing Awards.

I leave it to you to guess the relative importance of each segment in the general account management population. But we're in trouble if the Glad Handlers and the Weather Vanes represent more than 50%.

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