How divergent beliefs cause account team conflict

Chris Hackley

Royal Holloway University of London

Pre-print draft

Published as

Hackley, C. (2003) How Divergent Beliefs Cause Account Team Conflict *International Journal of Advertising*, 22, pp. 313–331

**Abstract**

An exploratory, qualitative study of leading London and New York advertising agencies suggested that the differing disciplinary perspectives account team professionals bring to the advertising development process may have a deeper basis. Analysis of in-depth interviews suggested that they conceived of their respective roles in terms of implicit models of the consumer. These models were represented through particular epistemologies of consumer knowledge. The contrasting ‘epistemological models’ held by account team professionals were apparent in the differing stances on the role and function of consumer research in advertising development. The paper attempts to substantiate these speculative models with the dual aim of generating insight into the underlying

dynamics of account teams and also of contributing to extant work on implicit theory in advertising practice.

INTRODUCTION: IMPLICIT THEORY IN ADVERTISING AGENCY WORK

It is a truism that advertising professionals do not generally theorise their day-to-day work. Yet it is also a truism that any practical action implies a theoretical standpoint. The standpoint may be theoretical only in the most rudimentary sense, but if it implies a general proposition about the world that has some predictive value, then it can count as theory. Researchers have begun to theorise the atheoretical world of advertising practice. Johar et al. (2001) found that copywriters seemed to draw analogies from mythic narratives to inspire their creative work. Such practices imply a culturally-based theory of communication and, in turn, a relativistic epistemology of the consumer. Many advertising agencies have attempted to make their ‘creative philosophies’ explicit as part of their corporate efforts to enhance and publicise their creative expertise (West & Ford 2001). Yet it is often hard to pin down agency practice in terms of such philosophies. Copywriters, in particular, often hold idiosyncratic views on their work. Kover (1995) conducted qualitative interviews with New York-based creative advertising professionals and concluded that they employed various ‘implicit theories’ of communication in their creative work. These implicit theories were not articulated in the normal run of daily work. They were inferred by the researcher from creatives’ ordinary-language explanations.

In a cross-national agency context, West (1993) found that senior creative professionals in the UK, the USA and Canada all held similar views of the ideal personality characteristics of creative staff. They valued intelligence very highly and also highlighted qualities such as ‘vision’, strategic thinking, confidence and resilience. In other words, senior advertising professionals in the three countries held similar implicit theories of the creative personality. These implicit theories were never articulated but would evidently guide the professionals in their daily practical judgements.

Implicit theories in advertising agencies are constructed and deployed against a background of latent and actualised conflict. Kover and Goldberg (1995) found that copywriters employed self-conscious

political strategies in order to try to control their creative output. These strategies are necessary because in most agencies there is a political contest for the ‘ownership’ of good ideas. Creativity is an

intangible asset of agencies and the development of advertising is a nebulous process consisting largely of debate on various levels. An advertising campaign can be said to have a socially constructed character in important respects (Hackley 2000). Who wins the argument in judging creative work depends on skills of articulate persuasion and the plausibility of evidence presented. As in any organisation, winning arguments and gaining influence also depend on raw political power deriving from rank, reputation or sheer force of personality. The deployment of implicit theories underlies much of the debate and argument that characterises account team activity.

Theories of advertising consumer research

In contrast to the above studies, this paper does not focus on the theorising of creativity in advertising. Rather, it focuses on the theorising of advertising research in relation to creative advertising development. This will not entail an investigation of the many psychological theories that have been drawn upon in academic research into advertising effects and effectiveness (for a range of sources see Wells 1997). Academic research into advertising remains an arms-length interest for most advertising professionals: research-based theories do not normally form an explicit part of the everyday vocabulary of agencies. Indeed, the theories of academics researching in advertising may be couched in terms of language systems (Cook & Kover 1997) that are incompatible with the language systems of practitioners. This paper will focus on the implicit theory that underlies the work of those advertising agency professionals charged with the task of generating consumer insights from advertising consumer research.

The paper draws on qualitative interviews conducted at six leading US and UK advertising agencies to make a new proposal for conceptualising the implicit theory that underlies the use of consumer

research in advertising development. Specifically, it proposes that differing epistemological models can be seen underlying the disciplinary perspectives of account team professionals. The slightly

cumbersome phrase ‘epistemological models’ is used here because account team professionals interviewed did not simply hold to particular ways of conceiving knowledge. They also seemed to

integrate their informal epistemology with a flexible model of the consumer. In turn, these assumptions about the nature of advertising knowledge and the nature of consumers resolved into a professional stance that informed working practices within account teams. Their respective positions seemed integrated, flexible and grounded in personal ways of seeing and understanding the world. They could not be described as philosophically coherent or formal positions on knowledge. They were positions that had a normative implication in the context of account team work because they implied particular courses of practical action. ‘Epistemological models’ seems to capture the theoretical character, the flexibility and the normative implications of these positions.

The following sections of the paper will outline the research approach before developing the discussion on epistemological models drawing on extracts from the interview data. In conclusion, the paper will discuss the possible implications for future research and advertising practice. Where relevant, the country of origin of quotes will be mentioned. However, the paper will not offer a detailed

discussion on cross-national differences in advertising practice between the UK and the USA. While some general impressions are offered about perceived differences in consumer culture and marketing practices in the respective countries, the small sample size, the concentration of interviews in London and New York, and the exploratory research design preclude the possibility of secure generalisations on this issue. An additional reason for not dwelling on this point is that the epistemological models postulated seem to reflect similarities rather than differences. Like the other work on implicit theory cited above, this paper postulates epistemological models as sets of linked assumptions that converge independently of differences in advertising culture and practice.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND THEORETICAL STANCE

The primary data for this research consisted of 22 semi-structured in depth interviews with advertising account team professionals in six top London and New York agencies. The data were gathered between November 1997 and June 2001. All interviewees worked on major, high-profile accounts and most had international advertising experience. Of these interviews 18 were recorded and transcribed

either in part or in entirety, or notes taken. Others were conducted by phone, email or in informal settings and not transcribed. The research was conducted in an ethnographic spirit in the sense that informal observations and subjective researcher impressions were acknowledged and incorporated into the analysis. The tangible data amounted to some 130 pages and 40,000 words of transcribed interviews, notes and reflections. In addition, a sense of the working practices of the agencies was grasped from agency documentation including case histories, creative briefs, finished artwork and artwork-in-progress, training material and video ‘reels’ of agency work. Interviews were conducted with creative, planning/ research and account management professionals of differing seniority,

sex, age and experience. Most interviewees were aged under 45 with experience of several agencies.

A discourse analytic theoretical perspective informed the data analysis. This entails a focus on the use of language in context. The interpretation of the language-use is informed by the researcher’s firsthand understanding of the broader research context. The analysis develops a theoretically informed creative interpretation of qualitative data. Findings are necessarily speculative, but transparency of reasoning is sought by using telling analogies and illustrating points with extracts of data. ‘Discourse analysis’ is a method that has been adopted widely in qualitative social psychology (Potter & Wetherell 1987; Edwards & Potter 1992). It remains a relatively unusual approach in advertising and consumer research, although some recent work (Ritson & Elliott 1999) has made explicit use of it in exploring the uses of advertising. There are also many examples of interpretive

research that uses ‘discourse’ as a unit of analysis (e.g. Thompson & Haytko 1977) without taking an explicitly ‘discourse analytic’ interpretive stance. Hirschman et al. (1998) have noted that the

discourse perspective has often been used to study the consumption of advertising as text but has rarely been used to link advertising consumption with advertising production. The present paper is

unusual in that it takes a method more often applied to understanding consumers and consumption and uses it to seek greater understanding of advertising practice.

The model of analysis adopted towards the data in this case entailed basic assumptions concerning ontology and epistemology. Ontologically, the perspective assumes that advertising can be seen in

a socially constructed light since it emerges from the conflict and negotiation of various parties and interests and is manifest in the discourse of account team professionals. The idea of ‘socially constructed’ advertising draws on the phenomenological social constructionism of Berger and Luckman (1966) but emphasises the social context of ideas to a greater extent. The implication of this is that the epistemological models deployed by account team professionals collectively and actively inform the kind of advertising that is eventually produced. The stance is relativistic in that it takes

‘epistemological models’ to be implicit theoretical structures held by professionals and grounded in personal, experiential reality. Individuals may deploy a given epistemological model that they feel

renders absolute truth but that is not necessarily the reason they deploy it. Such models are deployed because they resonate with experiential reality in their implicit assumptions about the world.

THE CONTESTED ROLE OF RESEARCH IN ADVERTISING DEVELOPMENT

The ‘ownership’ of creative work is a major source of conflict in advertising agencies (Kover et al. 1995). Research has always been an important part of the creative advertising development process in the best agencies (Ogilvy 1985). The value of having consumer and market insights frame and direct creative work is well-established. The idea of putting consumer insight at the centre of advertising strategy has, perhaps, almost become an industry cliché. The way in which this consumer perspective is manifest through the integration of advertising consumer research into advertising development has been more problematic. A board-level Account Executive confirmed that ‘we have to have a consumer perspective’ but added that it was largely the account planner’s responsibility to see that this happens. While the need for such a perspective is widely accepted, there are differing views on whether this can be achieved through informal and implicit means or through more explicit and overtly managed processes. The advertising industry has seen only partial success in its efforts to formalise this function. In the 1960s a number of agencies attempted to reorganise account teams in order to do this. Their broad aim was to develop a closer understanding of consumer problems to create more powerful and effective advertising (Barry et al. 1987). According to one account, the London office of JWT was an early player in this initiative when it merged its marketing department with media and research and called the new entity the ‘account planning’ department (Feldwick 2000, p. xiii). Other London agencies, particularly Boase Massimi Pollit, had been working along similar lines around this time (Pollitt 1979). The account planning initiative was imported to US agencies by Jay Chiat of Chiat Day (Kendrick & Dee 1992). Since that time it has become a well-established theme in major international agencies.

However, it was also clear from the interviews that there was resistance to the formalisation of the research function in agencies and, indeed, resistance to the very idea that advertising consumer

research can have a positive value in creative advertising development. As one senior New York account planner explained, account planning and its identification with advertising consumer research can still be regarded with suspicion by people within agencies who feel ‘intimidated’ by it and ‘resentful’ because it undermines their own authority for understanding the consumer. This sentiment reflects many others that suggested the use and interpretation of research in advertising development is seen as a major site of intra-account team conflict. The ‘people’ referred to obliquely above are account executives and creative professionals, each of whom may feel that they know what is right for the consumer and may not want to defer to the wisdom of the researcher. The resulting conflict comes, in part, from the differing disciplinary perspectives that the various account team roles bring to planning meetings.

Creative staff, in particular, are often unenthusiastic about research (Kover 1996). One senior London copywriter was candid about this: ‘We hate research. We just want the films to be made.’ Research was often seen as just another excuse for rejecting creative work. Nonetheless, it appeared from the interviews that many creative professionals are acutely attuned to popular and consumer culture and

immerse themselves in it. Effective creative professionals often practise informal consumer research, in the sense that they are intuitive observers of people. The copywriter quoted above claimed that he would typically explore the consumption practices in a brief by indulging in them himself when possible and by watching other consumers. If his brief was for advertising tea bags he would spend

some time buying and consuming them and watching others do the

same.

This informal and matter-of-fact view of ‘research’ as an intuitive, experiential activity was not one necessarily shared by other professionals. A senior New York account planner held a more

formalised notion of what research could and should be:

INTERVIEWER: When a client comes here, is consumer research engaged with as a matter of course right from the beginning?

INTERVIEWEE (a senior account planner): Um, it’s certainly a matter of course but first there’s an analysis of what information exists, what a client does, what about the category of an industry and then also starting to see what information is missing and what we might still need. We also have here a group called the Discovery Group and they do ethnographies…

For this interviewee, ‘research’ begins with conventional marketing research and moves into a more specified ethnographic consumer research phase once the initial problem parameters have been

established. Clearly, the positive value of research is taken for granted in this quote. Equally clearly, such a view is not held by all account team professionals. The construct of ‘epistemological model’ offers one possible way of conceptualising the underlying conflict in terms of differing professional perspectives.

The UK creative professional’s experiential epistemological model of the consumer is replaced, for the New York planner quoted above, by a more formally social scientific epistemological model. Consumers and their practices are subject to ethnographic study as if advertising professionals are anthropological researchers studying the culturally based meaning-systems of various consumer communities. The advertising professional as anthropologist would deploy a relativist epistemological model in his or her professional work since the meaning-systems of consumer communities would be seen as self referential systems, grounded in local cultural practices.

Epistemological models in account team practice: an initial analysis

It should be pointed out that interviewees did not express their assumptions about their working practices in terms of ‘epistemological models’. The notion of epistemological model came from a

creative interpretation of the data concerning what appeared to be the implicit theories of advertising consumer research that underpinned account team interaction. While the respective models were flexible and interconnected, they seemed to resolve into identifiable structures based around the three main account team specialisms of creative, account management and account planning/research.

THE ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

Account management seemed to think of the consumer in terms of an economically rational information processing entity. Their influence in account teams was driven instrumentally: the creative

execution had to have a ‘proposition’ that had a significant rational component. The proposition, in turn, had to cohere with the client’s marketing needs. Advertising is, as one account manager expressed it, ‘that lovely area where art and business rub up against each other…ads can be beautiful, but…someone’s paying for that…’ Account executives seemed to hold an implicit epistemological model of consumers as rational information-processors who made comparative

judgements on brands and products by evaluating explicit features of advertisements.

For one account planner, the information processing mentality of account managers was epitomised by ‘copy testing’. This mentality was attributed to ‘marketers’ and, by default, to the account executives who had to work directly with the client’s marketing representatives.

‘…a lot of the marketers want copy testing…and these copy testing methodologies have formulas. There are some that will tell you how within seven seconds you have to have the brand name in there and you can’t have too many cuts because people can’t follow them and its very formulaic and marketers live and die by copy testing…copy testing is the bane of our existence.’

Senior New York account planner

This trenchant view reflected the planner’s frustration that promising research or creative work could be vetoed by a negative copy-test result. The ‘marketers’ would assume that the consumer was highly rational and also highly responsive in behaviour to minute features of advertising such as the number of seconds for which the product is pictured. It appeared that, not only were there differing ideas of what counts as knowledge about consumers, but the very nature of the consumer was, implicitly, a source of disagreement.

THE ACCOUNT PLANNER OR RESEARCHER PERSPECTIVE

In contrast to this instrumental view of the consumer, the researcher or ‘account planner’ seemed to represent the consumer in terms of a socially situated meaning-seeking entity. This was inferred from their use of an interpretive social scientific vocabulary to express how consumption resonated with meaning for consumers. There was an element of creative interpretation to their reasoning, as there is with interpretive social science in general, but they were wedded to the idea of empirically grounding their knowledge of the consumer in situated social practice. The advertising professional-as-anthropologist perspective saw consumers as seekers after meaning who had to be carefully studied in their social context in order for actionable insights to emerge. Unlike the creative professional quoted above, the researcher-perspective felt that the collection and interpretation of empirical data were important in generating and substantiating these insights.

The account planning perspective is strongly associated with the use of qualitative data. While planners are usually also used to working with quantitative data, a major part of their craft has to do with the interpretation of qualitative research. This is clearly expressed in the corporate publication of one major (London) agency which offers an exposition of the planning philosophy. It maintains that ‘aggregated data’ can be unhelpful in creative research and argues that ‘the flexibility of qualitative research’ is more effective for understanding the consumer and facilitating the integration of this understanding with other brand and communications planning thinking. This expression of the planning ‘philosophy’ of advertising locates a broad model of consumer research at the centre of advertising development. It emphasises the value of qualitative research (‘owned’ by the account planner) in generating actionable insights. The research point of view is clearly aligned with a hermeneutic (interpretive) epistemology. This epistemology in turn is consistent with a model of

the consumer not as an information-processing entity reacting to stimuli, but as a self-directed entity actively seeking meaning through symbolic engagement with the world.

THE CREATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Creative professionals, on the other hand, seemed to hold an implicit model of a consumer as a busy, inattentive entity who could be distracted from daily routine and inspired by the advertisements that

depict consumption in aesthetically pleasing ways. Some of them admitted to using very informal versions of interpretive research in their own work because they felt that they needed to understand

consumers in order to communicate with them. However, mere communication was not enough: ads had to ‘motivate’ consumers.

The copywriter quoted above ‘hated’ research because it was seen as an obstruction to the acceptance of creative work: ‘about every ten scripts you write, one of them will see the light of day.’ Yet this same London-based creative expressed a high degree of acceptance of the account planning role. The fact that the advertising strategy was established through research and reasoning even before the brief was given to the creative team was seen as a matter for approval:

‘…it’s all fairly well sorted, exactly what they want before we even see it, at least it should be…we get a creative brief and they will have decided, media…either press, television, posters radio, whatever…and also in conjunction with the planners the account managers will have worked out a

strategy…’

For this creative the priority of tasks is important. Research that is conducted to inform the advertising strategy prior to creative development is OK. The implication from the earlier comment is that the creative brief should represent the end of managerial involvement in the creative development of ads. Research conducted during, or after, creative development is not necessarily so well received since it

can veto creative work.

Sectional interests and account team politics

It must be acknowledged that the epistemological perspectives outlined above may not only reflect personal ways of seeing the world of consumption and advertising. The perspectives arise within a highly political professional context. There is a contest for ‘ownership’ over the best ideas. Personal careers and professional standing are at stake. Advertising agencies may try to impose a corporate ethos on staff so that the product can be more effectively managed and employees more effectively controlled (Hackley 2000). For example, account managers may face a need to acquiesce to the consumer focused/ research ethos if they work in agencies where the planning/research role is accepted and promoted by senior management. An account manager may have to negotiate power in an agency in which account planners are taken seriously and the authority of the account manager is not unconditional.

Account team roles are no doubt influenced by the agency ethos and by how this ethos translates into a particular organisational ‘climate’. While the presence or absence of an account planning tradition by no means reflects a transatlantic divide, one interviewee who had worked in the USA and the UK did feel that there was a difference in the agencies for which he had worked:

‘…UK agencies have always been much more strategic partners with their clients whereas in the States agencies are much more suppliers [of advertising] and a lot of strategy is done internally…only recently…agencies are beginning to adopt planning in…terms of refining creative advertising ideas…the role that advertising agencies play is so much more compartmentalised (in the US) than they are here.’

One experienced US-based planner also implied that account team dynamics were informed partly by the agency ethos. This interviewee, like the one quoted above, expressed this in terms of cross-cultural differences:

‘I think that advertising is culturally different in the UK versus here…it’s a communication form that’s way more respected than it is here…I mean I don’t know if it’s just America marketers they, they really want things to be obvious they’re not good on subtlety or nuances…’

The planner quoted here began the interview by explaining that the planning perspective was widely accepted and practised in US agencies, yet admitted to many problems and conflicts in the

implementation of account planning within account teams. This is not evidence that UK agencies are radically different from US agencies in this respect. The agency that incorporates research seamlessly into every phase of its advertising development process, to the mutual approval of all account team members, does not exist. It appeared that agency ethos was influential in informing how and what kind of research could be integrated into advertising development. The agency ethos was sometimes articulated by interviewees in terms of cross cultural differences in agency practice even though such differences could be quite independent of national culture. This becomes clear from the views of some advertising professionals who attribute account team conflicts concerning the rightful role of research to differences in disciplinary perspectives. Kover (1996, p. RC9) quotes a copywriter writing in the New York newsletter of the AMA on why he and other copywriters ‘don’t like research’:

‘Don’t tell me that…[your]…little questions and statistics can pinpoint the complexity and richness of how people respond to my work.’

This copywriter evidently holds a view that all ‘research’ rests on an informal positivist epistemology and cites questionnaire studies and statistical data analysis as examples. In this paper it is suggested that the kind of research advertising copywriters ‘don’t like’ fails to capture the emotional connection that they feel is necessary to their work. The implied distinction between qualitative research that seeks insights through creative interpretation and neo-positivist research that seeks scientific facts about consumer perception, attitudes and behaviour is clear. Earlier quotes have noted the ‘copy-testing’ approach that reproduces the neo-positivist epistemology attributed to marketers and, by implication, account executives. At its most simple, copy testing surveys groups of consumers about aspects of a creative execution. It is frequently conducted in quasi-experimental settings and generates quantifiable data about consumer likes and dislikes regarding a single ad or its components. In spite of its clarity and apparent objectivity, planners and creatives alike resent what they see as the knee-jerk response of clients and account executives to negative figures on a copy-test. If the viewers say that they feel the product should be featured earlier in the ad or they don’t

like the product endorser then the client will often insist upon immediate changes in creative execution. Account planners and copywriters don’t agree on much, but they do agree that this approach fails to reflect their understanding of the way consumers respond to communications. Rather, they feel that it reflects corporate paranoia in the merry-go-round world of brand marketing.

CONTRASTING IMPLICIT MODELS OF ‘THE CONSUMER’ IN ADVERTISING CONSUMER RESEARCH

One account planner implied that faith in copy-testing could be attributed to the educational background shared by many account executives and marketing people. This background was often

characterised by a prestigious MBA with a typically heavy quantitative emphasis in its curriculum. In contrast to the neo-positivist epistemology underlying the copy-testing enterprise, planners and

creative professionals seemed, to some degree, to hold, implicitly, a hermeneutic epistemology. These agency professionals are urgently concerned with gaining insights and knowledge of the consumers they need to engage, but for them, copy testing and other quasi-positivistic representations of consumer research rest on incomplete models of the consumer.

On the one hand, there is the model of the consumer as a socially isolated information processing entity. This is a model of the person that underlies a great deal of academic advertising research (as Mick and Buhl (1992, p. 317) have suggested) and reflects a major concern within the industry with understanding how consumers perceive, pay attention to, remember and respond to particular advertising executions. This model is expressed through a neo-positivistic set of epistemological assumptions. On the other hand, there is a model of the consumer as seeker after meaning. This model implies that consumer research in an interpretive mode can generate insights into the meaning systems through which consumers understand advertising as a cultural phenomenon experienced in particular local social settings. The ethnographic research mentioned by the planner above would generate knowledge on a hermeneutic epistemology consistent with this model of the consumer. This distinction may be somewhat crude and simplistic, but it does reflect a binary that is implicitly drawn upon in agencies in the contest for the heart, or the mind, of the consumer.

The implicit model of the consumer held by account team professionals is not merely an abstraction. It has immediate and practical consequences for the work that is to be produced. If professionals hold to a particular implicit model of the consumer then it is likely that this model will inform the kinds of reasoning that they apply to practical problems of creative advertising development. In particular, the model will inform what counts for professionals, as knowledge about consumers. In other words the model of the consumer will dovetail with an implicit practical epistemology. This integrated epistemological model will include assumptions about consumers and the nature of their engagement with advertising. The way that research is conceived, designed and understood is clearly an important aspect of this. The contrasting models of the consumer held by professionals, and the epistemological models that dovetail with them, can be seen in terms of a long-standing industry debate: that between ‘creativity’ and ‘effectiveness’.

THE ‘CREATIVITY AND EFFECTIVENESS’ DIVIDE AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL MODELS

West and Ford (2001) cite a major figure in UK advertising suggesting that ‘great creative minds’ (p. 81) should be given credit for creatively exciting campaigns and not agency systems or philosophies. The alluring idea of ‘indefinable creative genius’ remains popular within the advertising industry (Kover et al. 1995). But creativity can be regarded as merely the sine qua non of effective advertising, since it differentiates and gets attention. None of the creative staff interviewed for this paper spoke of creativity as a special quality or mysterious thing. On the rare occasions they mentioned it at all (under prompting), it was with a dismissive statement such as ‘it’s just problem solving really’.

A view was expressed that creativity without a sense of strategy did not produce good advertising: ‘good creatives certainly are interested in the strategy, the consumer insight’. In other words, creativity had to have a point. The implied assumption was that advertising that resonates with meaning for consumers does not do so by virtue of blind luck or creative genius. For creative staff, effective advertising ‘inspired’ and ‘motivated’ consumers if it meant something to them. The creative work had to be meaningful for the consumer. The industry tradition of lauding ‘creativity’ as if it can be conceived as something distinct from knowledge about consumers can be seen as a reflection of account team politics. Creative staff need to make claims for their role in producing effective and powerful advertising so that success is not attributed solely to ‘research’ or ‘planning’ or indeed to

‘account management’. If you argue that creativity is the most important aspect of good advertising you are locating yourself on one side of a cultural divide in the advertising industry and signifying

membership of a particular group with shared assumptions, and shared enmities.

Similarly, the argument that creativity is a self-indulgent waste of resources and that ‘effectiveness’ is all that matters can itself be seen as a political statement. It reflects a view that advertising can be

grounded in consumer science so that the uncertainty and risk of the business is minimised. It implies that effectiveness can be usefully (or exclusively) measured in terms of sales response or awareness levels and that the emotional or visceral response of consumers to ads plays no role in this response. Whatever the virtues of each argument, this paper suggests that the speculative construct of ‘epistemological models’ that has been derived from the exploratory in-depth interviews can be linked to wider industry debates and positions. The creativity versus effectiveness debate rests on contrasting models of the consumer and contrasting epistemologies. The meaning-seeking consumer responds emotionally to advertising and can be inspired by the aesthetic quality of advertisements and product design. Such a consumer cannot be captured within the neo-positive epistemology

implied by copy testing or survey research. The consumer reasoning and behaviour of the rational, product-attribute evaluating consumer, on the other hand, can be captured by such methods. Creative

professionals and account planners might argue, however, that while consumers do indeed reason and evaluate, consumption plays such a significant part in their lives that these cognitive activities alone are only one part of the consumer engagement with advertising.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS: IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In much advertising consumer research no explicit model of the consumer is specified. Rather, implicit assumptions are made about the nature and character of this elusive entity. These implicit

assumptions, in turn, inform the epistemological stance taken by professionals. That is, what counts as knowledge about consumers is judged according to the model of the consumer that is assumed. This paper has attempted to draw out some of the characteristics of these epistemological models in order to generate insights into account team dynamics and agency conflict. The paper has also sought to contribute to a growing body of research into implicit theories of practice in

advertising. The paper derives its evidence from an exploratory study based on a small sample of qualitative interviews. The findings are clearly speculative, and offer only an initial analysis of possible sources of account team conflict. It was acknowledged that, while the respective epistemological models held by professionals were informed by subjective, experiential ways of seeing and understanding the world, they also reflected the disciplinary demarcations of the industry.

The paper has tried not to present these models in oversimplified ways. The research is an initial exploration of this relatively novel area. There is a temptation to say that the account manager sees the consumer as an android, the account planner or researcher sees the consumer as a poet and the creative professional sees the consumer as a cave-dweller. The android responds to stimuli in ways that can be discovered through experimental research. The poet responds to symbolic communications that resonate with meaning. The cave dweller is inattentive and preoccupied by drudgery; he or she responds to the beauty of advertisements in a visceral way, more like a child than

an aesthete. But resisting such oversimplified conceptualisations is important at this stage in the research.

In contrast to account management, creative staff articulate the way that they feel consumers engage with, and understand, advertising in terms of an aesthetic and visceral response. Some creative staff almost implied that they enlivened consumers’ lives by providing spectacle and reflecting consumers’ deep motivations and fantasies. This (not altogether flattering) model of the consumer is expressed through an epistemology of the aesthetic. The way that creative staff seek to understand this consumer, their method of ‘research’, is simply to become one.

Account planners and researchers held an implicit model of the consumer not as a seeker after beauty but as a self-directed seeker after meaning who engages with advertising and consumption at a richly symbolic level. These professionals implied a hermeneutic epistemology when they referred to the importance of relatively formalised models of consumer research. They seemed to feel that

systematic data-collection could provide material which, when interpreted by a skilled researcher, could yield powerful insights that could frame and give coherence to creative advertising development. The research (or ‘account planning’) function linked creative work, marketing strategy and consumer experience.

A number of broad implications for future research and practice emerge from the foregoing speculations. Practical action in advertising can be seen to rest on assumptions that remain unarticulated in day-today work. These implicit assumptions can be seen as rudimentary theories that can, in principle, be articulated. As more research seeks to do this, the various disciplinary perspectives that combine in advertising agencies might forge an improved mutual understanding. This, in turn, might lead to more effective working practices. For example, articulating models of the consumer and making clear the epistemological positions that are consistent with them might lead to

more rigorous planning and more effective integration of consumer research into advertising development. Theories that remain implicit cannot be evaluated, compared and critiqued, and therefore cannot be improved. The greater the extent to which theories of advertising practice can be articulated, the greater the possibility that advertising effectiveness might be addressed in new and fruitful ways. A research focus on implicit theory might also contribute to the mutual understanding of academics and practitioners in advertising. Theories of practice are the missing element of academic research into advertising management. On the other hand, many professional practitioners have little interest in theory because, for them, the word refers to abstract, rather than practical, thinking. A focus on implicit theory in advertising research might have a role in developing a mutually enriching agenda for academics and practitioners because it can illustrate the theoretically driven character of practice, while also showing that theories, even rudimentary ones, have practical consequences.

REFERENCES

Barry, D.E., Paterson, R.L. & Todd, W.B. (1987) The role of account planning in the future of advertising agency research. Journal of Advertising Research, 27(1), pp. 15–21.

Berger, P.L. & Luckman, T. (1966) The Social Construction of Reality. London: Penguin.

Cook, W.A. & Kover, A.J. (1997) Research and the meaning of advertising effectiveness. In W.D. Wells (ed.) Measuring Advertising Effectiveness. Mahwah, New Jersey: LEA, pp. 13–20.

Edwards, J. & Potter, J. (1992) Discursive Psychology. London: Sage.

Feldwick, P. (ed.) (2000) Pollitt on Planning. Account Planning Group, BMP DDB Needham, Admap Publications, Oxfordshire.

Hackley, C. (2000) Silent Running: tacit, discursive and psychological aspects of management in a top UK advertising agency. British Journal of Management, 11(3), pp. 239–254.

Hirschman, E.C., Scott, L. & Wells, W.B. (1998) A model of product discourse: linking consumer practice to cultural texts. Journal of Advertising, Spring, 27(1), pp. 33–50.

Johar, G.V., Holbrook, M.B. & Stern, B.B. (2001) The role of myth in creative advertising design: theory, process and outcome. Journal of Advertising, Summer, 30(2), pp. 1–25.

Kendrick, A. & Dee, K. (1992) Account planning: a history, description and evaluation of its use in U.S. agencies. Proceedings of the 1992 Conference of the American Academy of Advertising, L.N. Reid (ed.), pp. 200–203.

Kover, A.J. (1995) Copywriters implicit theories of communication: an exploration. Journal of Consumer Research, 21, March, pp. 598–611.

Kover, A.J. (1996) Why copywriters don’t like research – and what kind of research might they accept. Journal of Advertising Research, 36(2), pp. RC8–RC12.

Kover, A.J. & Goldberg, S.M. (1995) The games copywriters play: conflict, quasi control: a new proposal. Journal of Advertising Research, 35(4), pp. 52–68.

Kover, A.J., Goldberg, S.M. & James, W.L. (1995) Creativity vs effectiveness? An integrating classification for advertising. Journal of Advertising Research, 35(6), Nov./Dec., pp. 29–41.

Mick, D.G. & Buhl, K. (1992) A meaning based model of advertising. Journal of Consumer Research, 19 (December), pp. 317–338.

Ogilvy, D. (1985) Ogilvy on Advertising. Random House, New York: First Vintage Books.

Pollitt, S. (1979) How I started account planning in agencies. Campaign, (20 April), pp. 29–30.

Potter, J. & Wetherell, M. (1987) Discourse and Social Psychology. London: Sage.

Ritson, M. & Elliott, R. (1999) The social uses of advertising: an ethnographic study of adolescent advertising audiences. Journal of Consumer Research, 26(3), pp. 260–277.

Thompson, C.J. & Haytko, D.L. (1997) Speaking of fashion: consumers’ uses of fashion discourses and the appropriation of countervailing cultural meanings. Journal of Consumer Research, 24 (June), pp. 15–42.

Wells, W.D. (ed.) (1997) Measuring Advertising Effectiveness. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

West, D. (1993) Cross-national creative personalities, processes and agency philosophies. Journal of Advertising Research, 33(5), Sept./Oct., pp. 53–62.

West, D. & Ford, J. (2001) Advertising agency philosophies and employee risk

taking. Journal of Advertising, 30(1), Spring, pp. 77–91.