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## **A manifesto for media neutrality**

### **The days when agencies could give way their big ideas for nothing are over**

One of the things that makes me a little sceptical about some alternative medicine is that practitioners claim that their own niche has a cure for everything – visit a herbalist with anything from a headache to dismemberment and you can be pretty certain the cure will involve herbs.

This criticism could be levelled at us. Visit a direct marketing agency with any business problem and the solution, however fine, will involve direct marketing. Take the same problem to an ad agency and it would involve 30-second TV spots. For PR, design, sales promotion and so on, people re-define every problem in terms of their proposed solution.

Yet agencies aren't wholly to blame for this. For neither WPP nor our clients typically have processes to answer (or even to ask) the two critical questions for any media-neutral organisation: how much should we spend on our marketing communications? And through mix of channels can we most rewardingly spend it?

WPP is starting to address this problem with cross-group country managers and client-co-ordinators. But this is a small step and it is not always mirrored. It isn't common to meet one person in a client organisation who can say: "If you want someone with total control, understanding and influence over all marketing expenditure here, just talk to me". In the absence of structures to encourage media neutrality, many clients' briefs to agencies just assume that any solution will be advertising-led, while budgets for different disciplines are set inflexibly and based on little more than habit.

But a few smart people have already noticed that great brands are increasingly being built in unconventional ways – virally on the internet; through events; through product placement. In a recent, highly innovative Mercedes campaign, you even have a brand advertisement masquerading as product placement. These people haven't forgotten that Orange was a design triumph before it was an advertising one, or that Nike was, first and foremost, a showcase for sponsorship. They focus on the ends and are fabulously determined disinterested in the means. They are neutral.

In some ways, however, we are getting better. The different specialisms now are capable of coming up with ideas that of their own rather than playing second fiddle to classic mass media and campaigns. It is only with enough specialist expertise that one can realise media-neutral ideas.

At WPP we fully support this new biodiversity of marketing services, and we hope to see this diversification happening fastest in the UK – perhaps nowhere else has such significant expertise in so many disciplines. If media-neutral planning is to start anywhere, it can be in Britain. This, too, is a good moment to achieve it. Recessions are a better time to innovate than in booms, when no one wants to change the status quo.

So we have the skills and the timing. What's missing? Apart from the question of structure, I can see three things:

- We need to train and inspire more media-neutral people.
- We need to make time available to define a company's problems in discipline-neutral terms and to conceive discipline-neutral ideas in response.
- And we need to make money available.

The first issue is one that has vexed many people since the end of the full-service shop. There are now people in senior positions in ad agencies who have never worked alongside a media specialist – and senior people who have never met a copywriter. This is alarming.

The issue is one that WPP has partly addressed with its fellowship recruitment programmes designed to immerse new staff in as many disciplines (and in as many markets) as possible.

The other thing we need to do is find those rare people who can tackle problems in the broadest sense. We need two types:

- Those who can come up with neutral insights into the marketplace and its trends – researchers, sociologists, futurologists, planners, media planners.
- And those who can conceive of discipline-neutral ideas in response to these insights – designers, writers, conceptualisers.

And no matter which side of the agency-client divide these people fall on, we need to make time for them to interact. Rather than the traditional lemming-like rush into execution that is the mark of much marketing activity today, we need to make time for them at the start to discuss problems in terms that transcend any given discipline or specialism. The extra time spend up front will be well rewarded.

And as well as making time for these people, we also need to make them valued, which means paying for their services directly – actually paying for their ideas. A radical solution, I know.

It is often said that nothing is known of the person who invented the wheel. I disagree. We do know one thing: they made absolutely no money from it. Why do we know this? Because it's fiendishly difficult to make money from really big, simple ideas. Our companies are well rewarded for turning ideas into communications, but the ideas themselves we generally supply at our own cost.

Perhaps this was fine when you were working in only one discipline. You invest enough time to have a good advertising idea, and then reap the rewards of the execution later. But in a multi-channel age it no longer makes sense. It provides no one with any incentive to have an idea that's any bigger than their individual discipline demands. Ad people have advertising ideas, promotions people have promotional ideas – that's all you need to proceed to the profitable business of execution. If you make money playing the piano, there's little incentive to compose for an orchestra.

If media-neutral planning is to have any future, people need to be rewarded for going further – for having ideas that embrace a variety of disciplines. No one really values what they're given for free/ I'm not saying we're underpaid – I'm saying we're mis-paid. I would love to see a world where we make the most money where we add most value, and that, truly, is in the realm of ideas.

**Sir Martin Sorrell** is chief executive of marketing services group WPP. This is an edited version of a recent speech to 150 marketing professionals