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Can DDB morph into a 'swarm communications' shop?

Brymer's agency, known for its :30 work, refocuses on influence, community

By RUPAL PAREKH
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AFTER 18 MONTHS at the helm of DDB Worldwide, Chuck Brymer is betting that an agency known for interrupting consumers with splashy creative like Bud's "Wassup?" campaign can learn to speak the much more delicate language of community.

Mr. Brymer wants DDB's new stock-in-trade to be what he calls "swarm communications," an idea inspired by nature programming showing flocks of birds and schools of fish. The idea that group behavior mirrors how consumers interact with strong brands became a high-profile presentation to a conference of advertisers last month. Now, the 47-year-old Mr. Brymer is pushing to put theory into action. He's got his people thinking up research tools that measure influence and, early next year, he'll start to fill the new posts of regional chief community officers, who will be charged with figuring out how to predict consumer swarms.

A swarm happens when consumers find products they truly believe in and, once there, remain loyal enough to allow for such brands to make mistakes along the way, Mr. Brymer said. Case in point: Apple, which remains a much-loved marketer even in the face of recent snafus such as software glitches and steep price cuts associated with the iPhone.

Advertisers, according to Mr. Brymer, must change the way they do their jobs to create influence in the marketplace. "We need to change the traditional models of the way we work, and be much more proactive in the ways we're influencing communities," which nowadays are YouTube, Facebook and the like.

The ideas are right, but making this actionable for an ad agency won't be easy. Things such as word-of-mouth, network dynamics and peer-to-peer influence haven't typically been the province of ad agencies.

"The idea of consumers driving the message is

absolutely where this needs to be going," said consultant and author Andy Sernovitz, who is the former chief of the World of Mouth Marketing Association. "It's the fundamental opposite of traditional advertising, where a bunch of smart creatives are paid to create a message."

But, Mr. Sernovitz cautions, "the role of an ad agency or a brand is to empower the existing conversation. ... Consumer swarm is happening because consumers have something to say, it's not going to be something that's started by an ad agency or a marketer."

Besides the questions of approach is the realpolitik of big ad agencies. They're composed of deep layers of account management and creatives,

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folks who are often set in their ways, making big ad agencies notoriously difficult to course-correct and DDB, at \$2 billion in revenue by Ad Age's reckoning, is one of the biggest. How clients such as Anheuser-Busch, McDonald's, and Clorox, all massive spenders in traditional media, will respond over time to DDB's change in direction remains to be seen.

Mr. Brymer isn't a stranger to skepticism. He faced it at his previous employer, Interbrand, which he helped to grow into a global branding giant whose concept of ascertaining corporations' brand value wasn't just embraced by the marketing community: It made its way onto corporate balance sheets. That success made Mr. Brymer the guy for the



BRYMER

DDB job back in April 2006 following the death of Ken Kaess. He joined up at a vexing time for big agencies, as they fend off smaller, newer and often more-nimble upstarts that often specialize in new mediums marketers are so determined to figure out.

"Getting our arms around peer groups and these insider social communities is a massive challenge," said Scott Davis, senior partner at the marketing consultancy Prophet. "The question from an agency perspective is, out of the gates, do they have the credibility? There are so many new digital and media agencies out there that it's going to be a little harder for a legacy agency to gain credibility to compete in both the old media and new media world."

Mr. Brymer presented swarm theory at the Association of National Advertisers conference last month, where it was well-received. "It was one of the highest-rated speeches in the overall conference. From the people I spoke to, it resonated wonderfully," said Bob Liodice, president-CEO of the ANA.

As far as implementation goes, the plan at first is to hire one of these newly minted chief community officers for each regional office and eventually appoint one for each client. Mr. Brymer is pushing DDB to develop metrics to establish an "Influence Index" that can measure and compare the influence different brands have. In a recent interview, Mr. Brymer said he will not rule out the possibility of making acquisitions in the growing word-of-mouth space.

The goal, he said, is "understanding the influence that brands have so we can create stronger influence, and therefore more success, for those brands."

"There will still be a place for advertising that speaks to the passive audience ... but I increasingly see people as media," he said.

Mr. Sernovitz's hunch is that Mr. Brymer "gets it." Still, the question is: Is it something agencies do? What's interesting is that these kinds of initiatives have traditionally been run by PR firm. "We're starting to see agencies cross over and get it ... hopefully this is one of those moments."

TRENDS TO WATCH IN 2008

BY BOB LIODICE, PRESIDENT-CEO, ANA

MARKETERS HIT A ROUGH PATCH

2008 will be about the economy and politics. Growth is slowing, fuel prices are high and credit is tight. That's a difficult mix for marketers to face as consumers will continue to pull in the reins as disposable income tightens dramatically. With caution flags waving, marketers will keep expectations and spending plans modest. Combined with lots of political "tax-raising" rhetoric, there will be plenty of room for nervousness. But political ad spending will more than make up for sluggish brand-marketing investments.

INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY RULE

Marketers' ingenuity will continue to expand as the competitive marketplace challenges brands to devise ways to reach their audiences online and via other "out-of-the-box" avenues. Targeting consumers using unconventional methods in creative places will be the gold standard for outstanding creative. Marketers won't run away from traditional media—but will leverage technology and new media to accentuate message delivery to consumers and customers. There is no turning back—and creativity will rule.

GET SERIOUS ABOUT ACCOUNTABILITY

In ANA's 2007 marketing accountability study, it was startling to find that, despite enormous efforts, 42% of marketers were dissatisfied with ROI measurements and metrics. In about half of the companies, marketing and finance don't speak with one voice or share common metrics. Enough! Recognizing the critical importance of accountability, companies will appoint a czar—the chief accountability officer—to lead a disciplined, internally consistent approach to marketing measurements, metrics and productivity.

DIGITAL, DIGITAL, DIGITAL (AND PORTABLE TOO)

As Steve Ballmer proclaimed at the 2007 ANA Annual Conference, all media ultimately will be created and delivered digitally. Can anyone legitimately argue with that? Naahhh. And the beat goes on in 2008. Digital offers richness in information management, communication delivery, metrics—and portability. Simply look at the iPhone and similar devices to know consumers will have all forms of media at their fingertips 24/7. The challenge: Are marketers skilled enough to take advantage of this rapidly changing landscape?

THE 'BRAND SWARM'

Marketers will move decidedly in the direction of DDB CEO Chuck Brymer's "swarm theory"—the notion that people and their opinions coalesce to form critical forces that massively influence marketplace ideas and concepts. "Swarm theory" will elevate social networking to new levels, confirming the immense impact that consumers have on each another. Marketers that embrace this trend can form consumer brand "advocates" and drive brand loyalty and trust to new heights—if done responsibly.

GETTING COMPENSATION RIGHT (PLEASE)

Compensation models will evolve in 2008. Agencies and clients will work together to create mutually fair value- and incentive-based approaches. The ANA 2007 Trends in Agency Compensation study showed that only 25% of respondents were very satisfied with their compensation models. Marketers will pay well for great ideas and superb media management. The key is to get expectations right between agency and client. Perhaps Procter & Gamble's just-announced compensation model is a blueprint of things to come.

NEUROLOGICAL MARKET RESEARCH

Going beyond traditional focus groups and consumer surveys, market research will embrace scientific approaches that literally tap consumers' brains to learn how they neurologically respond to commercial messages and make brand choices. The Four A's and ARF have begun researching this topic in earnest with an intensive study, "On the Road to a New Effectiveness Model." In 2008 we will start to see practical applications of these insights as advertisers and shops begin to truly understand engagement.

EMERGENCE OF THE 'RENAISSANCE MARKETER'

A new breed of marketing professional is emerging—individuals with a holistic view of the world and extraordinary observational powers. These "renaissance marketers" will be part humanist, part psychologist, part anthropologist and part technologist. Cookie-cutter marketing will no longer survive as marketers must take a broader view of the consumer and customer. This includes the need to be socially responsible and to embrace key trends such as green.

THE POWER OF STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Marketers succeed when brand messages are fully integrated and synchronized across all media channels. That requires strategic alignment—leadership that ties everything together—particularly when the forces of change can potentially pull them apart. Strategic alignment is one of the most important roles of the chief marketing officer, and in 2008 more CMOs will ensure organizations are strategically aligned. Lead agencies will be appointed to make sure all supporting agencies carry out the same brand message.

PRIVACY, PRIVACY, PRIVACY

In 2008, marketers will become increasingly sensitive to privacy issues. With "digital-intrusion" and identity-theft issues as paramount consumer concerns, marketers must be extraordinarily careful to respect worries of access to private information. This tug of war between consumer privacy and information access will require marketers to work hard to explain and justify the lifestyle benefits of highly individualized, personalized commercial communications.