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ADVERTISING AGENCIES' ROLE IN RESEARCH PROJECTS

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Advertising agencies are in the business of communication. And communication — whether communicating about a brand-specific product or a generic agricultural commodity — involves both dialogue and interaction. It is a stimulus-response situation in which what we say is less important than what people hear. It is not a one-way street where we talk and then consumers respond. If advertising is the voice with which we speak, then research is the ear with which we listen. In this sense, the similarities between brand and generic advertising far outweigh any dissimilarities. The goal or objective of the advertising is always the same — to sell more product (and often to simultaneously sell an image associated with the product).

To accomplish this goal, we need a formal, structured systematic process which at the same time allows for flexibility so as to not hinder the creative process. At J. Walter Thompson we use a process which is simple but effective. We call it the "Target Plan" or "T Plan." It involves asking four basic questions. . . one at each stage of advertising development. The starting point is a situation analysis. Where are we? Where is the brand today? Why? Then we determine the objectives; that is, from a consumer standpoint, where could we be. . . realistically? Next we examine strategies, how can we get there? And finally we hold ourselves accountable. . . are we getting there? As is probably evident, research plays an important role in answering each of these questions.

For the first stage, the situation analysis, we rely heavily on secondary sources of information. For example, we look at sales trends. Are they up or down? What other products are we taking users from or losing usage to? What are consumers' attitudes towards our product? Rationally, what are the actual benefits? What are the perceived benefits? How do people *feel*, emotionally, about our product?

Once we fully understand where the product is and why, we can start thinking about where it could realistically be. We are developing a strategy here, and all possible positionings should be examined. The goal is to capitalize on the product's strengths and minimize or coun-

teract the weaknesses. We need to conduct primary consumer research to ask consumers what they think and how they feel about each possible position. We conduct both qualitative research, small-scale exploratory research like focus groups, and quantitative research, like the Gallup Poll which uses larger samples to measure attitudes. We are setting specific objectives for where the brand could be, and we are asking input on how to do it, how to accomplish the objectives.

Once our strategy is decided, the truly creative work begins. How can the brand get there? What should our stimulus be in order to get the desired response? The creative process by definition is hard to systematize. It involves a little "magic," if you will. Research can help, though, by getting consumer reactions to concepts or ads; by inputting consumer feedback along the way. We can test ads, or measure responses to commercials, in rough or finished form.

The question for the research is: As a result of seeing the advertising, did the target group respond as we wanted them to? In analyzing the responses, it is important to look at not only what people say, but how they say it, the intensity with which they say it and what they don't say. The goal is to provide consumer feedback into the creative process.

Finally, once we run advertising, we have to ask, "Does it have the intended effect?" Obviously sales measurements are key indicators, but other measurements are also important. What is happening to awareness and attitudes towards the product? Tracking studies are important for following the effect of advertising. Do they hear us? Do they understand? Does it affect how they feel? The process continues as this information feeds back to a new situation analysis — where are we?

In summary, then, research plays a key role in the systematic thinking process we use to create great advertising. The "T-Plan" incorporates the consumer point of view throughout, while allowing for the flexibility necessary for creative insights.