

Does planning have a future?



When the great ballet dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov first studied at the Kirov, one of his instructors was famous for the simplicity of his direction. He generally used just two phrases. The first was: "Don't fall." The other was: "Get up."

His approach was similar to that of the Duke of Wellington, who, as his troops were about to go into battle at Waterloo, was asked by his nervous second-in-command to share his plans for the day. "My plan, sir," he replied dismissively, "is to beat the French."

In our business we spend a lot of time categorising and re-categorising people. For targeting purposes, we like to divide the public into neat, cleverly named segments, while to satisfy our own organisational cravings, we constantly invent, name and rename departments, and create ever more impressive titles.

In the planning world alone, we have account planners, strategic planners, communication planners, connection planners, digital planners and, doubtless, many more variations that I've chosen to ignore. But, despite the hours devoted at planning conferences to debating their differences, advantages or disadvantages, such titular distinctions are largely irrelevant.

In any advertising agency – and any planning department – you will find just two types of people. There are people like Baryshnikov's instructor, or the Duke of Wellington, who simplify. Unfortunately, they are surrounded by, and often greatly outnumbered by, others whose sole reason for being seems to be to complicate. At any given time, the ability of the simplifiers to outwit the complicators defines the success of an agency. Similarly, improving the ratio of simplifiers to complicators is the key to planning's future.

Of course, there's a very important distinction to be made between planning – the discipline or philosophy – and planners, the people who practise it. I could go on for some time about the importance of senior manage-

ment support, of planning directors having a seat at the top table, and creative directors having the confidence to hear 'no' and wanting to create something better. All of those conditions are vital to planning's present and future. But they will only happen, and only continue, if planners are useful.

What do I mean by 'useful'? I mean helping clients to create distinctive, relevant, effective communication. Helping to create

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'work that works'. And the emphasis here is on 'helping', not 'creating'.

Over the years, I have worked with a great number of planners, and a small number of great planners. Perhaps the best was a woman who, according to the criteria by which most planners seem to judge each other, was apparently not very good at all. She wasn't cool, she didn't have an encyclopaedic knowledge of arthouse movies, rap music or Japanese animation, and in her creative briefs and presentations I don't recall her ever making reference to archetypes, classical Greek literature, or post-modernism. She wasn't the world's greatest

writer, researcher or presenter. But consistently, over many years, the work on her accounts was among the most awarded and effective that the agency produced.

Some might say that she got lucky, but it happened far too many times for that to be true. The reality was that she had a wonderful combination of personality and common sense, and was fiercely but quietly determined. She asked good questions, listened carefully to the answers, and – just in case you're wondering – said 'no' as often as she said 'yes'. Consumers, clients and creative people all enjoyed spending time with her, because she made them feel comfortable. When it appeared that they might fall over, she supported them. If they did fall over, she helped them get up. And when the ideas came, she claimed no credit for them whatsoever. It was not just the ideas that she simplified – it was the process itself.

Great planning is not about having better ideas or being smarter than everyone else. That might make a planner popular on the conference circuit, but intellectual snobbery and arrogance tend not to go down so well in the creative department or the client's boardroom. No, great planning is about creating an environment in which other people are more likely to come up with good ideas, and in which clients will be more favourably disposed to running the best of them.

A young planner recently asked me how he would know if he was doing a good job, and I told him that apart from the ultimate effectiveness of the campaigns he worked on, along the way, the most reliable indicator would be the number of people – creative and client alike – who sought his opinion. Because if they did seek his opinion, and if they were happy to spend time with him when he arrived unannounced at their door, then he would know that he was helping.

Does planning have a future? If planners can keep it that way, the answer is simple.