

Speech to the US APG Account Planning Conference

'Putting your advertising research into context'

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One quick apology. I am British. And although I'll do my best to address issues which I believe are relevant to you in the US, I'm going to have to rely for my examples on the UK, because I don't have an international network to phone up and bother.

But you didn't come here to hear about my personal problems. You came to hear about cultural context. I am going to talk a bit about that, but I'm also going to talk a great deal more about the importance of context in general in creative development research. So not so much about how the work taps into context *per se*, but about how in creative development research you need to take account of a very wide range of contextual issues.

My starting point in all of this is that there seems to be a great deal of advertising research particularly which focuses so hard on the advertising in question that it runs the risk of losing sight of the environment in which it will ultimately be received, and makes no allowance for respondents' (or viewers') own interpretations and understanding of the work in question, let alone that of the researcher. The most important aspects that good creative development research depends on, and bad research misses out on, are not how the specifics of the work are handled by the moderator, or how the work is presented or debated, but the context in which the advertising is received.

Context is important in any kind of marketing communications, and purely making that point would be teaching a breakout of grandmothers to suck eggs, but it's particularly important in advertising. The reason being that, whereas most other forms of media either have the time or the space to make clear the parameters in which they are meant to be viewed, advertising only has a tiny space in which to operate and it has to make the most of that space. Alternatively, other media appear in such a well-defined context that viewers know how they are supposed to interpret them, whereas an advertisement can take almost any path. Consequently, the most successful ads are the ones that take aspects of context for granted, and concentrate their efforts on the communication, and quite often the most 'creative' are the ones that not only take the context for granted but subvert it. These are the very same ads which suffer most at the hands of bad research, and which most deserve better.

Context in research terms almost always means cultural context, and this is indeed often the critical contextual issue. But I want to cover a wider range:

- Cultural context
- Market & competitive context
- Brand context

In looking at these three areas, I don't want to just list out the issues. I want to look at how aspects of each can affect not just the way advertising is created and how it looks, but also how people are likely to react to it. This last is the most important area for research to take account of, because this is the one that can lead respondents to say one thing in a research situation and another in real life. And it's often the area which research gives shortest shrift to, because in the pressure to move on to the next topic on the discussion guide, it's all too easy to accept a reaction from a group at face value rather than asking what led to the reaction, either directly in the group or subsequently in analysis.

Of these three, cultural context is the easiest and the most fun, so let's start there.

Cultural context in advertising is usually something that only gets talked about in the context of a multinational campaign. Many of the effects of cultural context are indeed due to the cultural heritage of the country we're in, and so the differences between them are highlighted when you compare response in more than one country. But I'd argue

that these cultural effects are just as important within just the one country.

First, because there are increasingly sub-groups within most societies who have a different heritage, or at least have a different take on what it means to belong to that culture. Nowhere is this more true than in the United States, where not just ethnic variations but also geographical spread can influence an entire outlook on life, let alone understanding and appreciation of the culture portrayed in advertising. But you do not have to be a huge nation to experience variations in cultural heritage and understanding: across Europe we constantly experience cultural tensions within one country arising from religion, language, sub-national identities, urban vs rural backgrounds and ethnic origin. Indeed, it could be argued that the more developed a society's culture is, the more likely it is to celebrate its diversity and consequently raise the issue for advertising to confront.

Second, and as a result of this diversity, it is no longer enough to rely on a researcher to understand the cultural context on the basis of their own experience. That a researcher from Chicago might not completely understand the cultural complexities of life on South Beach does not make them a poor researcher; it merely means that they need to be aware of the possible effects that a certain cultural context may have and add them to the list of subjects on their line of enquiry.

This degree of 'cultural fragmentation' is often at its most apparent when targeting different age groups. Youth culture as a concept is the long-established bogeyman of much conventional marketing, but increasingly other life stages have their own cultural codes to

celebrate: proud thirty-something singles can be alienated by images of domestic family life and vice versa; I can't be alone in noticing how many ads on British television these days feature smug bastards who've retired early and whose lives I can't begin to understand. You can't assume that I'll know what cultural baggage they bring with them when they look at ads featuring a section of the population behaving in a completely different way from their lives.

How do these cultural differences manifest themselves when you're understanding how advertising is received?

- Expectation can drive the whole approach to advertising. Perhaps the most obvious example is how, in the UK, there is such a strong expectation that the ad will entertain you. This can lead to strong criticism in groups of 'boring' ads, which doesn't necessarily mean ineffective, whereas in the US & many European markets, there is expectation of at least some form of product fact, which can lead to apparent misinterpretation in research, unlikely to be replicated in real life.
- Humour is probably the most obvious source of cultural confusion
 - everyone knows about how sense of humour is supposed to vary so much from one culture to another
 - less account gets taken in research of how much advertising humour depends on its context to supply the codes that it can play with
 - eg Tango 'Sebastian': offensive nationalism or subversion of nationalism?

- respondents won't be able to tell you the difference; researchers have to work hard to analyse how people are responding to it by listening to how they describe it
- Cultural context also provides the stereotyping that is so important in advertising
 - allows quite complex characters to be used without having to create them from scratch
 - avoids significant misinterpretation because viewers will default to the stereotype
 - but means researchers have to work hard to get behind the stereotype to establish how much of it is owned by them and how much is inherited from the stereotype
 - **eg Tesco Dotty** – funny mother in law or interfering old bat?
- Symbolism is like using stereotypes as short-hand, but cleverer and far more subtle
 - such that many creative teams will use cultural or media symbols without recognising them as such
 - in most cases, viewers will respond to the symbol subconsciously
 - if dimly aware of its symbolic value, are likely to dismiss it (especially if quizzed in group discussions)
 - a situation where the researchers need to be aware of the symbols and how they are being used or abused in advance
 - in some cases, they can be briefed by the agency, but often it depends on the researcher's experience to uncover the symbolic meanings, or on a semiotician or cultural observer to spot them
 - eg Lynx vs Gillette: obvious use of symbols vs subtle

subversion of them (eg *Dream Date*)

- no 16 year-old lad is going to be able to tell you about subversion of the rituals of courtship, but they can still appreciate the subtlety of the humour, which is poignant precisely because it does tap in to all their current fears and concerns

- to keep this approach fresh and up-to-date you need more than just qual – style panels, semiotics, youth monitors, you name it.

- Narrative

- you expect using celebrities to borrow some of the values of the celebrity: that's why they charge so much

- some can contribute more than just personality: using ET meant that BT had also acquired a narrative structure that drove interpretation of the ads

What practical advice can I offer in response to these issues? Most obviously, that it is always worth exploring more than just the scripts in research. Good research needs to give each execution a thorough going-over in order to understand just how each of the elements is or isn't working, but it also needs to explore the issues around each element.

Respondents find a character funny. That's a good starting point, but why is he funny? What traditions does he draw on for his humour? Is the humour coming from how he's portrayed in the ad or from what respondents know (or think they know) about him from what's gone before? How much of that humour is going to translate into real

humour when the ad is aired, or will the character just be seen as derivative – in other words, is he the brand's character or the culture's?

Now this might seem like overkill, and I know from many researchers that I've spoken to that this level of probing is extremely rare in many markets, and often not encouraged by the planning community for fear that researchers will somehow deconstruct the advertising in such an extreme way that it can't be put back together. But that sounds like a vicious circle to me, where the true potential of advertising ideas never really gets unleashed because everyone's too nervous of what else might get found out along the way.

Consider this example

(Castlemaine XXXX) Originally old-fashioned nationalistic humour. But it turned out that British lager drinkers found Australians aspirational.

It's not just a state of mind that you need to deal with cultural context. There are some specific elements that can be introduced, and some methodological tools that can be employed to maximise the amount of cultural context that comes through in research.

For instance, don't underestimate the value of warming up creative development groups with a discussion of current advertising, to get respondents into the mind set of thinking outside of a particular piece of stimulus material you've set in front of them. Consider dedicating part of this warm-up to a discussion of current trends in advertising, comparing one sector with another or looking at two approaches to a similar problem. It may be a tiny part of the group, but at least it gets

people thinking beyond what they may feel culturally conditioned to expect from advertising.

Research should always follow up respondent's references whenever possible. If the ad reminds them of a film, it should find out why. If they refer to a TV programme, you should make sure you know what it is about that TV programme that resonates. Most of this can be done in the group, but thorough analysis is also essential to make sure that the references stack up. In my view, there's a lot to be said for encouraging respondents to make comparisons with other media – actively asking them to find a TV programme or a film that the ad reminds them of. These questions should be used like projective techniques: not for entertainment value but to see why respondents are making the connections they are.

Of course there are established tools for applying cultural background to advertising. Every campaign could do with a regular semiotic pit-stop to check how the symbols it uses are being affected by other cultural trends and used in other media – all of this will come back to influence the advertising and the brand. I'd like to see greater use of semiotics in partnership with qualitative research, not just in strategic work but in creative development too. Rather than using semiotics as an abstract discipline, it works extremely well as an informed viewpoint that sets up hypothetical issues or connections for research to explore – all part of taking the game to the respondents rather than purely reacting to their response. And one area where I don't expect a breakthrough imminently – getting researchers to spend a bit of time with the creatives at briefing stage, so that the team can explain what themes have inspired them and what cultural references they've used.

It won't happen, of course, because half the time they won't be aware where they got the idea from, and the other half they'll be embarrassed because they've simply borrowed it from somewhere else and stuck the brand name in. But it's a nice thought.

So much for cultural context. An area of context that gets overlooked a great deal is **Market Context**, by which I mean not only the sector or product category that the brand operates in, but its competitors and other relevant brands.

This is an area where I think planners, and agencies in general, are more to blame than researchers, but where the effect on how advertising can be received in research (and on how it can *appear* to be received) is extremely marked.

The most evident is an expectation on the part of the viewer as to what the advertising is going to be like on the basis of what kind of brand it is or of what advertising model it appears to be following.

- Communication types
 - in a market where brands are expected to communicate functional product benefits, setting out purely to entertain, to build purely emotional bonds with the brand, can be heavily criticised in research
 - who ever heard of a car ad without a car in it? Or when you do see it, it's clearly owned by undesirable hit-men?
 - eg **Lexus**

- or, even worse, the brand that dares to communicate functional benefits in a market where respondents are conditioned to expect entertainment
- in both cases, researchers have to anticipate these reactions and, if the strategy is agreed, ignore respondents' complaints and get to the heart of the communication

- **Codes** of communication
 - often in more traditional, established markets
 - character or situation becomes so loaded with meaning that it's hard for viewers to interpret it differently
 - doesn't mean to say it won't fulfil its intended function, but in groups people are bound to spot it and claim some misinterpretation as a result
 - eg all clean-shaven men are yuppies; all old people are retired grandparents, 'convenience' food is for bad mothers...

- Norms
 - especially in a category where standards have been set by one or two brand leaders
 - can lead to apparent derision of other brands that can't cut the mustard, but constant pressure on the lead brand to reinvent (eg Nike, Levi's)
 - equally, can lead to wear-out (eg Nike – creative fatigue; **Road Safety** – shock fatigue)
 - rarely manifests itself in research unless there's the opportunity for wider discussion/comparison

- Targeting – might not sound like context, but
 - it's often the primary filter people apply to an ad
 - if it doesn't seem to be for me, I won't bother
 - unlikely to happen in groups (they're being paid to watch)
 - but important to explore and take account of
 - breaking the mould may be all very well, but not if it's broken to the extent that no-one recognises the mould
 - eg mistake made by many .com launches – the merest hint of who the site might interest could attract people other than unemployed net heads with nothing else to do

These points all feel terribly basic to me, and I'm sure you're thinking "but that's just what I do all the time, as a Planner". True, I'm sure, but take a step back and ask yourself honestly how much of your thinking is driven by the wisdom you've received since coming onto a piece of business? Many of these norms and codes exist precisely because of received wisdom and (on the part of the viewer) received expectation. It's easier that way, and respondents will happily go along with it in research because it makes their lives easier too. But unless you consciously take that step back and question what norms have been established in your market, you'll find yourself representing the mould, never mind breaking it.

Why is it that clever new observations about a market's communication norms only seem to crop up at pitch time? Could it be because agencies and (especially) clients can't get that objectivity at other times? Rather than allowing your focus on your client's business to blinker you to what's going on elsewhere in the

world, use research positively to look at what's going on around your brand.

Perhaps the most overlooked area in market context is that of competitive context. It's astonishingly easy to concentrate so hard on your own work that you forget that it's going to be viewed in a competitive environment. I've been guilty – the groups are going fantastically well, people love the ads to bits, you can hear the agency purring from behind the mirror – at the end you ask a chance question and someone says “well I can't imagine anyone really noticing this ad: it's just the same as brand y's”.

When I was a trainee account man, it was my job to do a competitive review. We all put our competitors' ads on a reel and then the client came in (usually after lunch) and we all sat around and laughed at them.

This is not the way to do it. Competitive activity provides one of the most important contexts that determine how communication is received. These days, people are interested in what brands are up to as much as what they're saying in an ad. Frequently respondents' understanding of the brand's own marketplace determines how they respond to communication. Is this a winning brand, or is it on the defensive? Is it confident or desperate? Prior perceptions are going to count for a great deal more than any tonal elements detectable in the advertising.

Here's one of my favourite quotes, from a Tesco group a few years back. Tesco had just overtaken Sainsbury's as the UK's leading

grocery multiple. This was big news, as everyone had grown up with Sainsbury as the no 1 and Tesco as the upstart. In response to the fairly standard advertising research question 'why do you think they're running this ad, then?' we got:

Respondent (full time housewife, mid forties): "It's obvious really. Have you seen Tesco's share price recently? They've overtaken Sainsbury's and now they're kicking them when they're down. Sainsbury's probably can't afford to hit back at the moment..."

These days, of course, it's more likely to be 'those big bad Americans from Walmart are coming so prices are going to be tumbling'.

Either way, the effect is the same. People are approaching advertising, in research and in life, with preconceptions and expectation generated by competitive activity. But how often do you find the time to explore these in groups? How often do researchers follow through references to competitors, or do they try and avoid them in case someone says something the client doesn't want to hear?

But unless you explore what your competitors are saying in their communications, how can you understand why people are reacting to yours in the way that they do? Competitive communication, referred to the campaign in question, should be part of any serious investigation, even if only in terms of how the work compares with what else is on TV.

And competitive advertising is not restricted to the immediate market sector. It includes most importantly advertising which ploughs a similar furrow, no matter what category it comes from. If your campaign involves cute kids, be aware that cute can come from anywhere, and in respondents' minds will all be part of the same game. If you're an icon brand like Coke, you need to be looking at other icon brands – not just soft drinks, but sportswear (Nike) and fashion (Levi's). If you're Lynx, you're not so fussed about Gillette. You're much more interested in Levi's or the cutting edge style brands to see what trends are being picked up.

That's why addressing market context is as much a planner's job as a researcher's, because a lot of it is about observation, stepping back and being objective. And the onus should be on planners to avoid unwittingly getting stuck into the norms of the market. But there are things research can do to help, and that planners can help researchers with:

- Anticipate expectation
- Use historical learnings
 - not just in campaign development, but in research as well
- Actively explore norms and codes in research
- Analyse the effect of expectations
 - of style, of tone, of communication model
- Encourage comparison
 - of the sector
 - of the advertising competition

And finally to **Brand Context**. The last of the three, hopefully the easiest to describe, but often the most overlooked. You could split it into two:

- What the brand is like
 - its values, personality, how it behaves
- What else the brand does
 - how it speaks
 - how it is delivered

It goes without saying that this is key to good advertising research, but I'm shocked at how many researchers prefer to talk exclusively about the script on the table rather than big picture it fits into. Not putting advertising into its brand context is artificial to respondents too - the main issues for most respondents are to do with the apparent message of the advertising and how that relates to the brand in question, often with regard to its future intentions rather than what it has done in the past (*'you know, I always thought of brand x in such and such a way, but if they're going to do advertising like that, maybe they want to be seen as so and so'*). Respondents themselves rarely consider likeability as the key criterion, except where that is recognised as the advertising strategy. Comprehension, originality, enjoyment of the ad - yes; but mostly the values and promises the brand seems to offer in its advertising, and how these fit into everyday life.

Brands have

- Momentum that one piece of advertising won't shift
 - built up over years

- inherited
- eg the Pillsbury Dough Boy – even in the UK
- Personalities stronger than their advertising campaigns
 - eg Richard Branson vs Bill Gates
- Values that people have become aware of by more trustworthy means than advertising
 - eg Mc Donald's

A good piece of advertising will challenge some of these effects, or enhance them perhaps. So respondents in groups will happily tell you that Microsoft has turned into a warm and humble community-spirited organisation, or that Pillsbury makes lovely homemade organic sheeps milk yoghurts, but the moment they leave the room they'll be back to where they were. Especially, and this is my final point, in the light of Brand Delivery.

Ultimately, it's not what brands say about themselves that creates the lasting impression, it's the totality of how they behave. Many a bank advertising pound or dollar has been blown away the morning after the warm and cuddly advertising when a hard-nosed mail shot or a stropmy overdraft letter arrives through the post.

There's no point in avoiding these issues if they are the ones that are determining perception, as doing so will at best perpetuate a sense of make-believe that respondents can easily go along with. At least acknowledge them, and see how the advertising fits into that.

Is it trying, at any rate? Or hopelessly wide of the mark? If so, why? After all, many a campaign has *led* changed perceptions of a brand, but not by failing to recognise the gap between advertising and reality, which may be far larger or smaller than the way respondents see it.

It's not just how the brand is delivered, context also includes where. The clever conceits that made such an appealing construct in the research studio quite quickly pale into insignificance in a crowded supermarket with the kids running amok among the confectionery. The appealingly trendy drinks campaign that offered a modern, more unisex approach to cocktails can seem dangerously feminine when you're standing your mates a drink after work in the sports bar.

Respondents are respondents, especially when you bus them across town and sit them in front of a one-way mirror. They suddenly become people again when they've left, and those clever intellectualisations they pleased the moderator with sound gauche or pretentious. And when the ad that was so interesting as a script is on TV, surrounded by others, laughed at, ignored, or idolised by their friends and families, their responses will be a distant memory.

Taking account of these elements of brand context is not hard, but a great deal of advertising research seems to avoid it rather neatly. I realise that it takes more effort and more time, and consequently more money, but I'm convinced it's money well spent. Good advertising research should:

- Encourage retrospection
 - compare this activity with what the brand has done before
 - put the work into its historical context
- Explore other communication elements
 - at least for consistency
 - by perception if not actually presenting elements
- Explore the relationship the work has with the brand
- Explore the perceived intentions
 - without taking the answers at face value
- Use relevant projective techniques
 - to try and get under the skin of the superficial responses we're most likely to hear in groups
 - not great big sophisticated mind games; simple third party projection to see what respondents think underlies the campaign: if you were the marketing director, what would your hopes be for this ad? Or what do you think the brand's competitors will think when they see it?

But it's in the area of brand delivery that research needs to make some structural changes, to get away from the 'ivory tower' of the intellectual discussion and closer to the real world of consumption – both of product and media.

Some suggestions of methodologies we've found particularly useful in reflecting something of the advertising's brand context.

- Structure the methodology to reflect the advertising type
 - if it's a simple price ad, don't devote a whole 90 minutes to it
 - think about researching press individually
 - if all you need is basic comprehension/communication check, lots of 20 minutes in a hall test is better than 2 hours in a studio
 - if it's a cinema ad, talk to people who've just come out of the cinema
 - sometimes the front room can be the most appropriate place
 - Look at conducting (some of) the research (even advertising research) in appropriate environments
 - business to business round the boardroom table
 - supermarket advertising in supermarkets
 - drinks advertising in bars
 - family brands with the family, in their homes
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To sum up, I'm arguing that to understand advertising context fully, you need to look at

- Cultural context
 - by exploring trends, connections and perceptions during groups
 - by considering the wider connections and symbolism using desk research, analysis and semiotics

- Market context
 - by understanding the norms and communication models of the sector
 - by considering the competitive situation and its effect on brands and expectations

- Brand context
 - by anchoring the advertising in its brand environment
 - and by encouraging appropriate methodologies and venues to relate the advertising closely to its brand experience

I'm conscious that this probably feels a bit Utopian, and I'd be the first to admit that in the majority of cases the pressures of time and budget will rule the majority of these considerations out. But it's important to know that they're there, so that you can make as much use of them as you can. At one stage or another, I've used or experienced every one of the suggestions I've made, and I've only been a researcher for seven years, so it can't be that hard.

One thing that will stand in the way, though, is a lack of trust and confidence between researchers and their clients – most particularly agency planners. For this kind of approach to work, you need to involve researchers early in the development process, keep them informed as part of the team, and share the brand’s history and ambition with them. Let them have some ownership of the brand’s communication ideals and you’ll find that ultimately you’ll be rewarded with constructive research that helps you understand why your advertising gets received and interpreted the way it does, and allows you to use the context it appears in to your advantage – creatively and hence commercially.