

Why Advertising Needs to Focus on Solving Problems

Author : Kofi Amoo-Gottfried

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upon a time, not too long ago, being an adman or woman was a pretty sweet gig. Not just because of the glamour, the Mad Men-type excesses, the bottomless expense accounts and four-week shoots in Los Angeles where we mostly kicked back at Shutters—but because what we did meant something.

We solved big, meaty business problems with creativity. We made work that mattered, work that changed behavior, affected culture and transformed the fortunes of businesses. That's the gig that got us all into the business, kept us coming to work every day and attracted the best and brightest to this industry. Those were the days.

But like Biggie said, "Things done changed." We're now deluged with news of people leaving the industry in droves. We wring our hands over how to keep up with the latest advancements in digital, and how to keep procurement at bay. We grapple with razor-thin margins, and how to recruit and retain world-class talent.

And we get to see headlines like this pop up in our feeds almost daily: "Agencies unable to prove they are driving value for clients risk becoming little more than 'dust'"—an austere [warning](#) from a Diageo executive.

Us? Dust? How did we get here? One notion is that we stopped asking the hard questions. Or more appropriately, we substituted the hard questions with easier ones, with more readily apparent answers. So we got enamored with intermediary measures like awareness, engagement, brand appeal and impressions.

(Sidebar rant: Can we all agree that the "impressions" statistics at the end of every case study video mean very little? Basically we're celebrating that, maybe, perhaps, someone somewhere might possibly have had an opportunity to see the thing that we made. Rant over.)

The more enamored we got with these limited proxies of effectiveness and performance, the farther and farther away we got from the business. And the farther and farther away we got from the problem.

Charles Franklin Kettering, the American inventor, engineer, businessman and holder of 186

patents, once wrote: "A problem well stated is a problem half-solved." Without a clearly articulated and inspiring problem to align everyone around and focus our collective energies on, all that's left is a moving target and a contest of opinions. And frankly, there's only one winner in a contest of opinions—the person who pays the bills.

So we're relegated to taking orders instead of adding value.

And since we're not always clear about why we're doing what we're doing, the orders come thick and fast, with little time to consider the implications of each tweak, change, re-brief or—God forbid—repositioning. We're stuck in the hellish bottom-left corner of [Eisenhower's Decision Matrix](#), working nights and weekends on things that are always incredibly urgent but ultimately unimportant in the bigger scheme of solving big, meaty business problems with creativity.

The only way back is to go back to the beginning. To elevate and venerate problems. Maybe even more than we celebrate solutions. For that to happen, everything needs to change.

Client organizations need to be completely integrated among the finance, sales, product and marketing functions. Far too often, the marketing agenda is divorced from the business agenda, which puts the true problem beyond the reach of any advertising.

The client-agency relationship needs to start way upstream of the communications brief. Clients need to invite agencies into the depths of their business, to share all of their data and to welcome a fresh point of view on their business, marketing and communications problems. Instead of tissue sessions on creative ideas and campaigns at the outset of relationships, let's have brainstorm sessions to generate potential problems, then refine based on which problems have the most potential to transform the business.

And agencies will need to look entirely different. Today, we're the proverbial person with the hammer to whom everything looks like a nail; the solutions we can offer are, by definition, limited to our capabilities. Creatively, we'll need to cultivate an open-architecture approach to solving problems where the nature of the solutions is dictated entirely by the problem. We need to become true general contractors, willing to bring in whomever it takes to get the job done.

Talent-wise, this shift will require a new breed of multidisciplinary thinkers. These will be people not defined by functional departments or their role in the process, but by their ability to build strategy and create around a single transformational question that's designed to get to the heart of the business problem, and to express that problem as a shift in consumer behavior rather than just an attitudinal shift: What behavior do you want to change?

Without the clarity of necessity, there's no invention. And without invention, there's no value. And without value, we're, well, dust.