

Where has the Female Voice in Advertising Gone?

Ever since women began to infiltrate the job market there has been a slew of controversies. First it was over which jobs women should be allowed to have. Once women gained the right to work as professionals such as doctors and lawyers rather than secretaries, the issue over equal pay and breaking the glass ceiling began. Modern empowered women tend to believe that society has come a long way, with gender disparities in many job fields shrinking. In fact, many young women have come to believe that discrimination based on their gender is a thing of their parent's generation and fully expect to be granted the same opportunities and pay as their male counterparts. Sadly, if they are going into advertising they may be in for a rude awakening. Current trends demonstrate that while the industry itself is taking more strides towards gender equality, there are still massive disparities both horizontally and vertically within agencies, particularly the larger and well-established shops. This is due in large part to a lingering 'boy's club' mentality, the demanding nature of the industry, a lack of consideration towards families, and a lack of recognition for female creatives. This outdated practice of sexual-segregation is doing nothing but harming the industry and must be changed immediately.

All of this seems counterintuitive from a cursory glance at the industry as a whole. Women appear to dominate the workplace with nearly 2 out of every 3 employees of an agency being female according to a report issued by the Equal Employment Opportunity commission in 2003 (Bosman '05). This statistic commonly would lead people to believe that advertising is a feminized industry. However, when examining exactly where females are employed in the agency, the veneer of feminism begins to peel away revealing that the industry is in fact pseudo-feminized, meaning that while more

women are involved in it than men, these women tend to hold subordinate positions and are not in a position to heavily influence the industry as a whole. Vertical sexism is especially visible when looking at employment statistics over the past several years. For example, in the 2003 examination conducted by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, women held 76.7% of clerical jobs within an agency. Professional jobs requiring at least some form of higher education such as account planners, brand managers, and media purchasers were 58.2% female. However, the percentage of female employees continued to drop the higher up in the agency that was examined. Only 47% of middle to upper management was female and the situation regarding females as top executives was even worse (Broyles '08). Just two years later a study conducted by the American Association of Advertising Agencies found that of 400 member agencies consisting of over 1200 offices, only 265 women held senior management positions (Bosman '05). Another study found that in 2005, women held only 19.5% of senior management positions in the United States. (Ayhan '10). The good news is that statistics indicated that women are more readily able to break into top positions in agencies¹, but the trend is not changing nearly fast enough in the U.S. and certainly not elsewhere in the world either.

Unfortunately women do not just have to fight for equality in the hierarchy of the agency but also for which department they are able to be involved in. Despite the majority of advertising employees being woman, they tend to be relegated to the account side of the industry. The creative side remains overwhelmingly a boys club. In fact, only about one in three creatives in agencies are women (Ayhan '10). This fact combined with

¹ A previous study by the AAAA in 1997 indicated only 73 females held senior positions in over 1200 offices as seen in Bosman '08

the lack of vertical mobility means that it is still extraordinarily unlikely to see a woman in a high-ranking creative position. In fact, it's estimated that only 3% of creative directors are women (Unger '10). This is backed up by Adweek's 2005 examination of the top 33 advertising agencies in the U.S. They discovered that only 4 of those agencies had female creative directors (Broyles '08). The sexual-segregation of women is made even worse by the fact that they are commonly paid less than their male counterparts as well. It's estimated that women make on average about 10-15% less than their male counterparts in professional levels of the agency (Ayhan '10). However, women that managed to make their way into the top agency positions make on average 30% less than their male peers (Deemer '03).

Advertising agencies around the world demonstrate this same trend of vertical and horizontal sexism. For example, in 2004 in London, women accounted for approximately half of all employees at advertising agencies. However, they only hold 14% of executive positions (Bosman '05). The situation is similar in Spain as well. A 2007 report published by Martín in cooperation with the Spanish Association of Advertising Agencies indicated that women held 56% of all advertising jobs in the country and dominated the realms of public relations, account services, research, and production. However, they were grossly underrepresented in the creative spheres holding only 33% of the jobs. The situation is even worse when examining top management positions, 90% of which were held by men. The top women's positions were relegated to middle management. (Ayhan '10) Even data from Germany, the country with the 4th largest advertising expenditure in the world, displays data demonstrating the same exact trend. (Ayhan '10) This suggests that sex-

segregation in the work place is an industry based problem brought on by a combination of factors inherently unique to the advertising world.

One of the worst reasons why women are not represented in the creative departments is that many of them still retain a boy's club mentality making these departments unwelcoming for young women. For examples of this mentality, one has to look no further than interviews with several female advertising practitioners. Marcia Stone, a former creative for Carmichael Lynch, had this to say about her experience: "The whole culture was about going to ride Harleys together and go golfing. They'd go to biker bars and go fishing in Canada together. I wasn't invited in that clique. If you're a woman, it's very hard to be accepted," (Broyles '08). Another woman, Diane Cook-Tench current president of Cook agency commented that she had once been denied a job as art director at an agency because the products they handled were considered traditionally male. As she said, "I was appalled and relieved at the same time. It seemed ridiculous to me that a woman couldn't develop a campaign for a chainsaw," (Broyles '08). A third woman, Janet Kestin who is currently the co-creative chief at Ogilvy & Mather in Toronto mentioned that she too had a similar situation. "In my first job, women weren't supposed to work on beer or cars, and weren't allowed to tell if they did. I worked on beer, but I never went to a meeting, never presented my own work. The account director said, 'you can no more understand beer than I can tampons,'" (Broyles '08). Luckily for most women this kind of blatant dismissal is not the norm today, however the legacy of the boys club does still remain. Many women feel as though they need to act like tomboys in order to be accepted in the culture of their creative department lest they be assigned to only 'female' products. They are unable to be true to themselves

because in order to belong and succeed in the department, they have to find a way to be accepted by their peers.

This male dominance over the creative side of the industry also makes it harder for women to be hired and to move up the agency ladder. Portfolio schools report that almost equal numbers of male and female students attend which indicates that women are indeed interested in going into the creative field (Mallia '09). This offers a disconnect when examining the structure of an agency leading one to assume that the male domination over the creative department can often lead to an uncomfortable work environment for these young women, something not conducive to great creative work. There is also psychological research that indicates that women have a harder time getting hired in creative positions because of the boy's club mentality. People unconsciously want to hire other people like them, someone they could be friends with, and women just don't fit the 'buddy' bill (Mallia '09). Promotions and the doling out of exciting and possibly award winning assignments also work in a similar way. They are unconsciously given to the manager's friends making it even harder for women to get ahead in this aspect of business.

Another reason women tend not to hold senior creative positions is that their work is rarely given the credit it deserves. Studies have indicated that participation and success in awards shows is often a source of motivation for creatives as well as an opportunity to advance their careers through networking and showcasing their best work on a public stage (Ayhan '10). Unfortunately, most of the authorities judging these advertisements tend to be men and as a result, the women's ads are overlooked, as they do not appeal to this male audience mainly because they are not written in the 'male language'. Take for

example the Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival, one of the most important stages of advertising talent. As recently as 2004 judges at the festival were almost exclusively men with a token woman or two thrown in to attempt to claim equality (Bosman '05). As a result they tended to largely favor advertisements made by men with a male audience in mind. It was rare for a female to be able to gain any real recognition for her work. Luckily this fact has started to change because in 2004 the festival passed new regulations requiring judging panels to be at least 25% female to try to alleviate the severity of the problem (Bosman '05). However, this is a global problem. Another of the largest showcases for advertising work, El Sol, el Festival Iberoamericano de la Comunicación Publicitaria, is the largest advertising festival in Spain and faces the same problem the Cannes festival does, the under representation of women as judges with an average of only 14% (Ayhan '10). This leads to women's work essentially being devalued and proves to be a hindrance in their ability to gain social capital and further their careers because they are so often unrewarded for their creativity (Ayhan '10). Sadly this devaluation also comes as a direct result of the type of work women are allowed to do in an agency. Campaigns about technology and automobiles tend to be the winners of major awards because they are able to be extraordinarily creative and innovative (Ayhan '10). However, women are often assigned to the types of projects that rarely gain acclaim due to the fact that they are women and people still seem to want to believe that women couldn't possibly understand how to sell a car.

Reverberations of this sad trend can be seen all over the history of the industry just by looking at the people that are considered the best creatives of the past few decades. When the 20th Issue of Creative was released in 2006 featuring an article

recognizing the top 50 creatives of the past 20 years, not a single woman made the cut (Creativity '06). Some people may argue that this is because the list features contributions from the past 20 years and that times have changed and women's contributions are more welcomed. However, women have been working as creatives in advertising for far longer than most people believe and this mass exodus from the creative side of the field did not occur until the 1990s. In the 1930s when women were starting to work at agencies they were almost exclusively employed as secretaries. After they proved they were able to make a contribution to the business, they were allowed to work as copywriters and in the creative side of the business as long as they stayed out of sight of the corporations they were doing work for, which usually would not be accepting of a woman working on their account. Even more recent acknowledgements of advertising prowess tend to reveal that women are still being disproportionately excluded from the top accolades of an industry in which they make up the majority. For example, as of 2009 the American Advertising Federation's Hall of Fame includes only 12 women and 191 men (Ayhan '10). The situation is similar in other countries around the world as well. This leads to women feeling as if they have less support and recognition of their work, and often lends itself to a frustrating working situation. Imagine knowing that no matter what you do, your work will never be praised as highly as your male counterparts. Would you put in as much effort? Would you be able to produce highly creative work? Would you want to continue your career path? In almost all cases the answer would certainly be no.

As if it being virtually impossible to break into the boys club, move up the ladder, and gain recognition for your work wasn't enough, women in advertising also have to

deal with the 'old guard' not believing in them. This conversation was brought to the forefront when in 2005 one of the industry's top creative minds Neil French was speaking to an ad summit and when asked about the lack of women in the top echelon of agencies had this to say: "Women don't make it to the top because they don't deserve to. They're crap," (Hopkins '05). He also mentioned that women do not make it to the top of agencies because they will invariably "wimp out to go suckle something," (Hopkins '05). His comments invariably led to an uproar in public opinion and spawned a huge debate around women's role in advertising. Clearly women are capable to producing work of the same caliber as men and possess the same ability to be leaders and understand the business. So why do people need to question their abilities and their dedication to the job? Neil eventually attempted to clarify his statements by essentially saying that he meant that women are crap at the job because they are not able to dedicate themselves to it 100% and that by definition makes them bad at it (Hopkins '05). This is because many want to have families and lives outside of work.

So maybe French was at least in some part correct that women refuse to lay up their lives on the alter of advertising in order to get ahead. However, his accusations about them being crap at advertising because they have families is going too far. Many men wish to make time for their families as well, and they do. The problem is that women encounter assumptions about their abilities to have a career and family far more than men do. One study shows that about 8% of men have been question about their balance while nearly 30% of all women have to face those questions (Broyer '08). It's still a prejudice that clearly has a hold on American society that women cannot have a family and a successful career. It is true that many ad agencies lack family friendly

policies and require long and unpredictable hours for labor, but those issues should weigh on men the same as they do on women and do not necessarily preclude all women from a career. In fact, many women who have left large agencies to start their own more family friendly agencies have found that it is entirely possible to women to balance the demands of a high level creative career around the schedules of having children (Bosman '05).

Advertising agencies are doing themselves no favors in excluding women from both high ranking and creative careers. As of 2009 nearly 85% of purchasing decisions in the United States were made by women (Ayhan '10). However, advertising to these women has proved to miss the mark on many occasions. This is quite frankly because the creative executions of advertisements is created almost exclusively using a male voice. The men just don't know how to appeal to women. They generate ads that appeal to their minds and their sense of logic and seem to honestly forget that their target demographic simply does not think the way they do. Having more equal numbers of men and women in the creative departments would temper problems in advertising to the different genders because there would be an equalizing voice that could assert whether or not the particular advertisement would work.

Unfortunately the lack of women in advertising also harms agencies in the fact that it has led directly to one of the major social criticisms of advertising -- its horrific portrayal of women (Bosman '05). Everyone knows what locker talk is and that when groups of men get together often times they joke around about women. In a creative department where the boys club mentality is engrained, so is the locker room mentality and it tends to show in the stereotypical and often sexualized way women are portrayed in many advertisements particularly for a male audience. Many women in the general

public have taken offense to these images and frankly it damages the field of advertising. Sexist and stereotypical ads seem to become a fallback when the creative department can't think of a more innovative way to sell a product. It's easy, and it's effective but every time it happens it's a lost opportunity for creativity and experimentation. More women in a creative department would force this practice to end because many thinking women are sick of seeing themselves caricatured.

The final problem with a lack of women in advertising is that the industry as a whole is missing out on what could be some extraordinary talent. It's hard to believe that so few women have any creative merit and the ones that do are often stifled and taught that no matter how hard they try their work won't be respected so why should they even bother. Perhaps Unger said it best in his editorial, "I want our ad agencies to have the best creative people steering the ship. What are the odds that 97% of the best creatives in the world are guys?"

It's past time for the advertising industry to eliminate its sexist biases and to start reforming its agency culture. This process has already started, but it is not progressing at nearly a fast enough pace or effectively enough. The boy's club mentality must be abolished and women need to be accepted and welcomed into the agency fold because it can only help the industry. More family friendly practices, more recognition of women's work, and an understanding that women can sell any product as well as men needs to become the norm in agencies. It will foster a more creative and profitable market for all.

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