

Media Strategy Formation: An Exploration of unmet information needs in media briefing and implications for strategic development

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Abstract

This research is focused on media strategy and planning, a specialist area within marketing communications, focused on selecting media channels and defining the strategic approach for their use to communication an organisation's messaging to their desired audience. The media planning task has become more complex over the last decade, due in part to the continued proliferation of media options, rapid evolution of digital technologies and changing media consumption patterns. In this environment planners have expanded their remit through investment in research and technology solution to meet these conditions.

In this context the study explored the information exchanged between marketing managers and their agencies when briefing in requirements for new campaigns, with the intention of contrasting current practice with best practice advice offered through the literature.

The literature indicates that planners need to understand both short and long-term goals for the campaign and that the briefing should include all details from the marketing plan and wider marketing environment, together with current consumer insight, to enable the best strategic decisions to be made. However, current practice indicates planners are not gaining access to marketing information and that relevant metrics, analytics and insight into the wider campaign aims are not always shared, indicating siloed and role focused structures still prevail. Further research is needed to explore why this is happening and identify potential solutions.

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Introduction

This research focuses on the area of Media Planning, a specialist area within marketing communications and an integral part of every marketing plan. Media Planning, is defined as the selection of communication platforms to be used to transfer the organisations' messaging to their desired audience and establishes the strategy for how they should be used (Regan, 2014; Soberman, 2005). Crawshaw (2004) and others, use alternative terminology, such as 'channel planning' and 'media selection process' defined as identifying the right mix of media to achieve the objectives (Crawshaw, 2004, p. 81; Foley, Engelberts, & Wicken, 2005). In addition, many organisations now use titles such as 'Head of Communications Planning' and 'Chief Strategy Officer' for this role (Davis, 2018); however to avoid any confusion, the term Media Planning will be used throughout this paper for the role and function under discussion.

Specifically, the research looked at the frameworks and processes undertaken by Media Planners to determine the media strategy and channel selections they recommend. There is a wealth of literature that seeks to outline these processes and how decisions should be undertaken, dating back to the early 1950, when some of the first discussions around media selection and optimisation took place (Calantone & de Brentani-Todorovic, 1981; Carlin, 2005; Pasadeos, Barban, Yi, & Kim, 1997; Turk & Katz, 1992). However, with the rise of digital technologies, such as real-time and programmatic trading, AI and chatbots, both industry and academic rhetoric around this subject suggests that processes developed in the pre-digital era may not be fit for purpose. It is important therefore to explore the impact of digital transformation on traditional media strategy and planning making techniques to identify if new processes are emerging (Clift, 2014; Fulgoni & Lipsman, 2014; Ghaznavi, 2016; McConnell, 2015; Pringle & Marshall, 2011).

The aim of this current study was to explore the very beginning of the planning process and identify ways in which Media Planners and clients approached the initial media briefing that underpins any such media strategy making process. This is an important area of research given that in 2017 an estimated £21bn was spent on advertising and promotional campaigns in the UK, to persuade and engage; driving participation, facilitation, and conversation to build relationships (IPA, 2014); with a global estimate of \$530bn (WARC Data, 2017).

Background

Marketing messages can be communicated via a plethora of platforms, from traditional media, such as TV, outdoor and newsprint, through to websites, mobile, social media or even experiential events. However, with the ongoing fragmentation of media, increase in customer touch points and growing complexity of consumer media habits, media planning, the process of setting the media strategy and selecting the media channels continues to grow more complicated (Krajicek, 2013; Sasser, Koslow, & Riordan, 2007; Soberman, 2005; Tafreshi, Aghdaie, Behzadian, & Abadi, 2016).

This in turn, has been seen to reinforced the complex, silo driven, intra-media planning environment with channel decisions being taken in isolation via unrelated and unconnected media measurement (Assael, 2011; Sasser et al., 2007; Schultz, 2006). Marshall (2011, p2) added that, not only has the world of media become more complex, but also the definition of media channels has been expanded to include new categories of paid, owned and earned media¹. Exacerbating this is the changes in agency structures and the rise of the giant agency networks, the foremost of which is WPP, which is seen to have driven an over-commoditisation of tactical media buying (Farmer, 2015; Ragothaman, 2015). As a result, agencies have had to expand their range of services still further (with areas such as: analytics, accountability and ROI; branded content and activation; SEM, SEO and social) to drive continued growth (Ragothaman, 2015). Healy (2016) suggests that the emerging discipline will differ from what went before and will focus primarily on designing a total consumer experience rather than being consigned to

¹ Paid media: any marketing that you pay for. Owned media: content you create and publish on your own channels: website, blog, social media, etc. Earned media: content/conversation around your brand/product created by someone else, published somewhere other than your owned channels (Smith, 2016)

separate silos, such as advertising, media, and digital; with strategy having a crucial role to play in a technology-driven future.

More recently, Davis (2018) noted that with all of this, the role of Media Planners has grown, commenting that the tools they have developed and the expertise offered are now on the cusp of bringing transformation into the media agency proposition and suggesting that opportunity exists for more outcome-based marketing solutions to be proposed.

Literature

Media strategy, selection and modelling literature extends to many hundreds of articles, with the process being seen as being very complex and described as a multifaceted decision making problem, with multiple media and vehicles, and a considerable number of criteria to consider (Chang, Wu, Tseng, Su, & Ko, 2012; Coulter & Sarkis, 2005; Dyer, Forman, & Mustafa, 1992; Kwak, Lee, & Kim, 2005; Tafreshi et al., 2016). Analysis of the literature indicates that media planners traditionally employed classic deductive planning processes, using a range of frameworks to evaluate different media choices before proposing the optimal media selection to deliver the clients goals. This resonated strongly with the wider theory of strategic choice, whereby organisational leaders and planners undertaking extensive environmental analysis to explore the options available to them, before producing a detailed, prescriptive plan based upon the presumption of a stable, known reality. Faulkner (2002) identifies that strategizing such as this, is characteristic of a ‘rational approach’, being essentially deductive in its approach and summarised by the theory of strategic choice (ibid, pg 5). The decision process is seen to be initiated and driven by the senior leadership team who formulate strongly rational and prescriptive strategies in which the environment is assessed objectively and assumed to be ‘known and predictable’. This is underpinned by an ontological objectivity, or realist, stance that assumes that extensive analysis will allow the ‘rational actors’ to design the optimal solution, which, according to Stacey and Mowles (2015, p. 67) is not satisfactory under the conditions of turbulence, ambiguity and uncertainty that typify the current technologically driven digital organisational environment.

Looking specifically at media briefing, the overwhelming advice from the media planning literature is that it should be an extension of the marketing plan. Brown, et al (1957) suggested that media strategy is just a marketing strategy for the selection and use of advertising media. Barban, et al (1993) echoed this, stating that planners must not operate in a vacuum, but should be a component of the marketing plan. In relation to the formative briefing, they highlight that a best practice approach to media planning should include an array of background inputs from the marketing plan, including internal data, details of the marketing mix, and any ‘uncontrollable’ external influences, such as competition and economic conditions, feeding into a multiplicity of hierarchically linked objectives, and outlined in Fig 1.

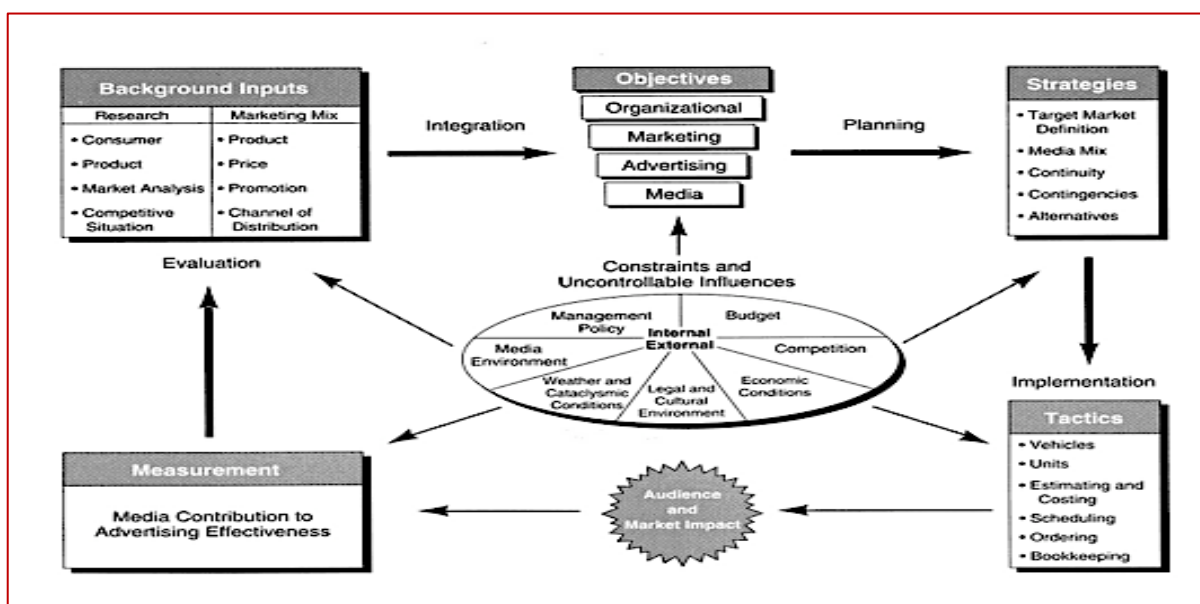


Figure 1: Summary of Background inputs for effective media planning (Barban et al. 1993, pp5)

Donnelly (1996, p. 25) echoed this and noted that media planner should be conversant with the marketing plan and the aims and goals for the product. Similarly, Katz (2016, p. 36) affirms that to develop the media strategy, planners should be cognisant of how the client has determined to achieve its objectives, as the marketing objectives shape the advertising goals and media objectives and guide development of the final media plan (ibid).

Looking at the wider discourse, industry support for best practice in briefing was articulated through ‘*The Client Brief best practice guide*’, jointly produced by the four main UK agency and client trade bodies, namely the IPA, ISBA, MCCA and PRCA (IPA, 2003). Their model advocated providing written client briefs, containing extensive details of the current internal and external situation (Where are we now?), together with the overall marketing objectives (Where do we want to be?) and what the marketing team are planning to do (What are we doing to get there?) (ibid, p7). Combining these sources provides an extensive best practice checklist of the information needed to establish a coherent media strategy and make a sound media decision. However, outside of subject textbooks, there are relatively few studies that deal specifically with the area of briefing or how this area may have changed in the light of the trading and technology led disruption discussed previously.

One such study was undertaken by Cowan & Abratt (1999) nearly two decades ago. Using the media planning process identified by Sissors & Petray (1976), they surveyed 100 South African companies and advertising agencies to test theories around the media briefing and media selection process (ibid, pp38) and identify whether marketers and media planners prioritised factors differently [See Appendix 1]. Their questionnaire covered 14 core subject areas, see Figure 2, with 68 sub items, and used a 10-point scaling to rank the importance of each items. They found agreement around four key sub-factors: budgeting, marketing communications and media objectives, targeting and media consumption data (ibid. pp 44), with communications objectives and budget constraints being the primary consideration of media planners (ibid. pp47). However, their main finding was that media planners’ did not give sufficient consideration to many factors deemed critical by marketing managers; such as the overall marketing objectives, product consumption patterns or competitor information. In fact, their respondent clients concluding that media planners were not able to plan strategically (ibid. pp 43), and would make more rational decisions if they referred to the marketing objectives and aligning their decisions to the clients priorities.

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Budget information | Communication planning and strategy information |
| Competitive information | Consumer behaviour information |
| Creative information | Historic information |
| Media information | Information concerning objectives |
| Product /brand information | Reach/frequency information |
| Sales information | Segmentation and target market information |
| Timing information | Market size information |

Figure 2: Categories of information used for media decisions (Cowan & Abratt 1999, p.44-47)

They concluded that media planners were inclined to focus on marketing communication objectives and traditional quantitative data in isolation. They recommended that marketers should brief agencies more accurately and comprehensively if media planners were to do a good job, and urged them to use their “expectations, evaluations and compensation of advertising agencies” to drive this forward (ibid, pp 50).

In terms of context, Cowan & Abratt’s work was undertaken at a time when frameworks such as integrated marketing communications (IMC) and media neutral planning (MNP) were being promoted in an attempt to deliver a more cohesive messaging in the face of the rapid fragmentation of media vehicles and audiences (Jenkinson, 2004; Kitchen, 2005; Kliatchko & Schultz, 2014; Laurie & Mortimer, 2011; Moriarty, Mitchell, & Wells, 2015; White, Grimes, Crawshaw, Regan, & Neill, 2004). These changes were noted by Cowen & Abratt (1999) who recommended that agencies themselves should include media planners in the strategic planning team if they intended to become more IMC oriented.

When Arul (2012, 2013, 2014) replicated the study across a number of regions of India, the ranking of importance for the major briefing elements appeared to be more equally distributed between clients and agencies. Arul again offered beset practice advice and concluded that the briefing meeting should act as a checklist to guide media planners to formally evaluate the current state, progress and growth of the brand and market, in the light of what the client wants. He advocated that differences in perceptions should be shared at this initial stage to avoid diluting the client’s objectives (Arul, 2014).

Both studies concluded that the Media Briefing should include the exchange of all marketing related information and goals, together with relevant media data and customer insights, to ensure that everyone can collate and envision what success should look like, and highlighted the need for agencies and clients to work much more as business partners, which reflecting much of the current commentary found within in the current trade press, from media agencies and clients alike.

But does this reflect the needs or practices of media planners when formulating media strategy in today's rapidly changing digital environment?

Current study

It can be seen that Media Planners are expected to work with a great deal of information to undertake their role but also that this market is changing. The research question for this study was whether the information articulated through the best practice advice is actually being received and/or being used by Media Planners. In addition, it sought to identify the media information needs and wants of today's media planners and elicit if there are new areas to consider. Unlike the former work in this area, it did not seek to prioritise the data numerically for statistical interpretation but took a more exploratory approach, and forms part of a bigger project utilising a series of in-depth interviews with senior agency media planners to understand how modern planners are defining, measuring and delivering the media strategy in this complex and turbulent digital environment.

Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of this research qualitative methods were used. Firstly, an open survey, incorporating open-ended/free-response questions, was used to capture the spontaneous and unprompted answers of respondents (Brace, 2010, p45). This method was chosen over closed questioning to prevent respondents merely accepting suggestions from a list of options. Recording spontaneous responses is also a good technique for determining what is at the forefront of a person's mind: being information they can easily access, which, according to Brace, can be interpreted as adding weight or importance to the items and attitudes mentioned, and potentially identifying new issues (ibid, pp 48).

The survey was built via Bristol Online Survey (BOS) and tests carried out over three iterations using think-aloud techniques to illicit real-time commentary in relation to the clarity of the survey structure (ibid). The initial question was *'what information do you use to develop a media plan?'*, but respondents voiced frustration about things they would like to use but do not have access to. Therefore, a second question was added: *'what information would you like to have?'* The survey output was evaluated to ensure it was analysable and usable. As per Cowan & Abratt, respondent identification was kept short to encourage participation completion, requesting only organisational type and role [See Appendix 2: survey design]

The survey was distributed using non-probabilistic convenience sampling, seeded via researcher's media contacts and relevant social media groups, such as 'Those in Media' and 'Media Minds', and 'snowballed' to fellow professionals. Seventy-eight useable responses were completed over the survey period. Of these, the majority (59%) described themselves as Media Planners (MP), 18% as Media Directors (MD) and 23% as Marketing Managers (MktM). No Marketing Directors (MktD) responded.

Detailed content analysis was undertaken using an interpretivist approach to identify possible themes and align common information to the categories used by Cowan & Abratt (1999). For example, both 'competitive activity/setting' and 'competitor activity' were allocated to 'Competitive Information'. Phrases or words that were ambiguous or not obviously associated with previous terms were left as independent statements within the analysis. One limitation of this technique is that data errors may be created due to omissions in recall or assumptions by respondents as to what might be 'obvious', and the failure on the part of the researcher to categories possible synonyms correctly. However, it was felt to be more valuable to gain unprompted insight at this stage to try to add weight or importance to the items and attitudes mentioned (Brace, 2010). To help visualise the content further and aid discussion, a number of impressionistic tools were used, such as word clouds and colour bars, to emphasised the incidence of statements across the respondent base, as outlined in Fig 4 and Fig 5 below, using colour coding and font variations helped to demonstrate statements and criteria receiving the most/least volume of mentions by MDs, MPs & MktMs.

Analysis

The initial round of analysis was to code the data and see how well it aligned, or not, to Cowen & Abratt's (1999) 14 categories of information used for media decisions, as identified in Figure 2.

All respondents mentioned some form of Information Concerning Objectives. The majority just said '*objectives*', but there were some variations. New business metrics such as *KPIs*, *ROI*, and '*success metrics*' were also mentioned many times as seen in Fig4.

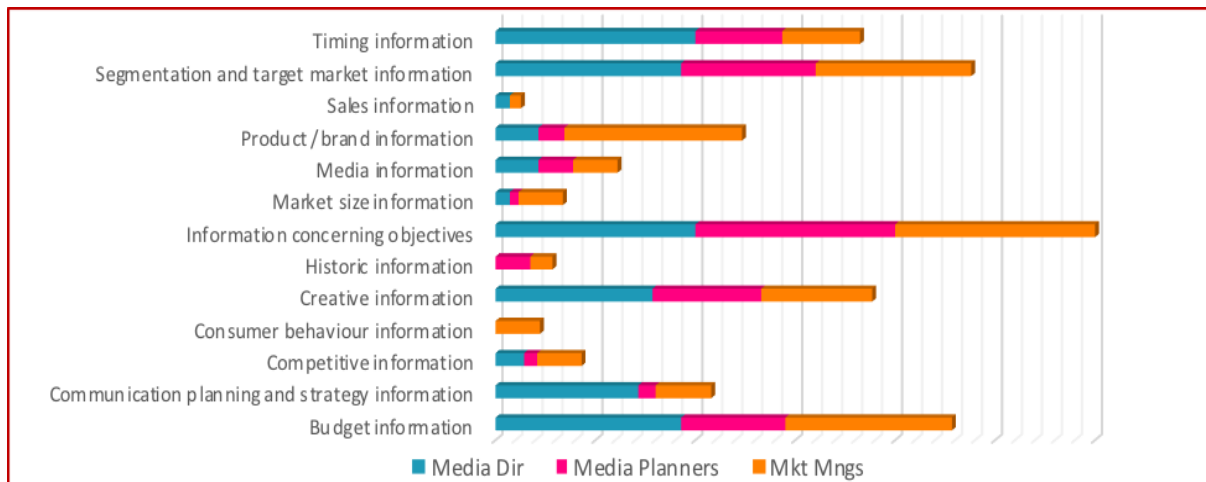


Fig 1: Data and Information types given or have access to for the development of media plans (All Resp. base: 78=100)

But despite agreement that some form of information concerning objectives was provided, this topic had the highest number of statements under the 'I want' section, as seen in Fig 5, where the majority from MPs demonstrated a demand for '*success measures*', '*KPIs*', '*Comms objectives*', '*Benchmarks*', '*Business objectives*', and even '*Media objectives*'

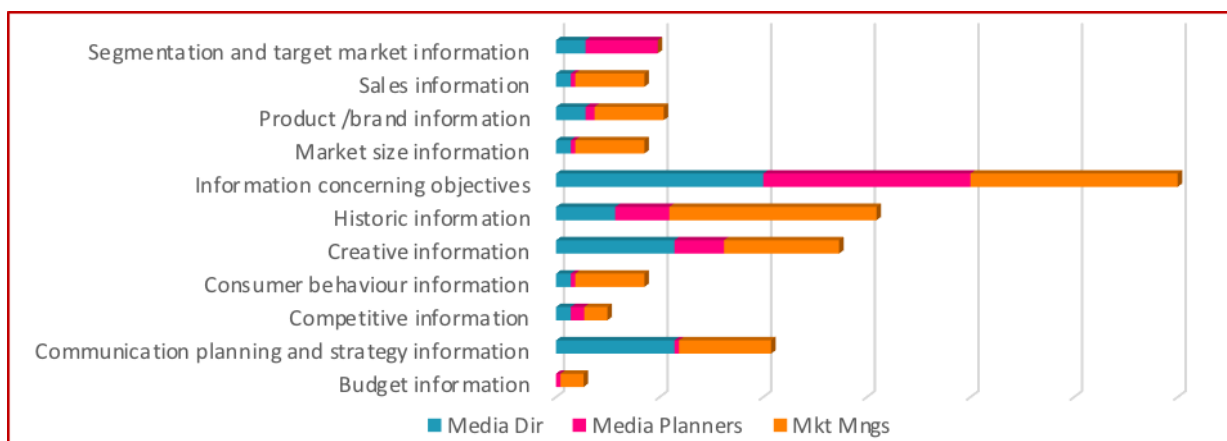


Fig 5: Data & information types you would like to have access to for development of media plans. (All resp. Base: 78=100)

As seen in Fig 4, Segmentation and Targeting Information was another area with multiple mentions. Virtually all respondents listing some details, such as '*target persona*', '*demographics*', '*segments*', or '*universe*'. However, over a third of MPs said they wanted more data, including: '*audience insight*', '*audience data*', '*demographics*', '*geography*' or '*regionality*'.

Budget information was the third highest element to be mentioned, with around two-thirds of respondents identifying '*Budget*' as information they have, although one MP ask '*What the real budget is?*'.

Creative Information was the fourth largest cluster. MDs mentioned ‘assets’, ‘preferred platforms’ & ‘commercial lengths’, whereas MktM mentioned ‘Propositions’, ‘successful messages’, etc, reflecting their different perspectives on the campaign. However, numerous MPs stated that they wanted more creative information, including: ‘creative message’, ‘available assets’, ‘idea of creative team capability’, ‘formats such as video lengths’, ‘cross marketing messaging’ or just ‘what the creative looks like’.

Timing Information, was mentioned many more times by media people than by clients, with key points such as ‘dates’, ‘timeframe’, ‘length of campaign period’, and ‘seasonality’ but no one indicated they did not get what they needed.

On the other hand, although only a small number, over half of the mentions around Competitive Information were that they ‘would like access to it’.



Fig 6: Categories and terms that were not seen in former research (All resp. Base: 78=100)

A substantial number of completely new terms were identified, and most of them listed under the second question – data ‘I want’. These fell into three related areas: analytics, information about clients owned media channels and tracking and measurement data as seen in Fig 6. This suggests that the in-house elements of the clients’ business are not being shared.

Finally, a lot of terms were clustered around the whole concept of ‘Briefing’, as seen in Fig7. These included ‘a brief’, ‘people responsible’, as information received, but also a lot of ad hoc comments around what respondents wanted, such as ‘feedback’, ‘what client wants’, ‘client requests’, ‘what are the restrictions’, etc. reinforcing the frustration at a lack of the right information



Fig 7: Briefing related terms that were not seen in former research (All resp. Base: 78=100)

Conclusion

The most prevalent terms seen were in the current study were in the areas of objectives, targeting and budgeting. This echoes three of the four key areas identified by Cowen & Abratt, which were: budgeting, marketing communications and media objectives, targeting and media consumption data (ibid. pp 44). It also echoes their finding that communications objectives and budget constraints being the primary consideration of media planners (ibid. pp47). And what it indicates is it that this information is still seen as being important, but that it is not always being received.

Looking more closely at the wish list in Fig 5, however, requests for data around objectives, historic campaigns, creative and other communications activity remain high, indicating that people are getting much less information than either they want or is recommended in the literature.

Surprisingly there were no mentions of Reach & Frequency. Similarly, only a small list of generic trading data seemed to fit with the extensive Media Information sub-categories noted by Cowan & Abratt. This may be due a number of factors, for instance, KPIs are often include a target for audience reach, therefore it could be implicit within the objectives category. Likewise, creative strategy statements will often suggest parameters for effective frequency and capping, because digital technologies can track user IDs more accurately than was seen in the past. Similarly, Media Planners often include statements of Reach & Frequency as an outcome, or output metric, of their plan, therefore it is possible that the term moved from one briefed in by the client, to one which is identified and recommended by the media professional.

Media consumption data was the other key data set that was described in the 1999 research. However, that term was not seen in the recent survey. Media consumption data in 1999 would have included media sources that are still used today, such as TGI data from Kantar Media, TV audience data from BARB, newspaper readership data from NRS, etc. This data is now appended with studies such as IPA Touchpoints, and a range of digital behavioural data from companies such as Experian, Nielsen and Acxiom, who collect behavioural, financial, and other psychographic data about consumers for agencies to use.

Another reflection of changing terminology and maybe practitioner roles, was the term '*insight*', which was the main source of ambiguity within the data. This was not allocated to any specific theme as it could be fit equally well within targetting insight, marketing insight, or consumer behaviour insight, etc. As seen previously, the term was seen mainly within the 'I would like to have' section of the more junior MPs, indicating further frustrations on in this part of the agency. This is interesting in respect to where the industry is positioning itself as the central data and 'insights' partner for their clients. It might suggest that information being used by 'Chief Strategy Officers' to develop the strategy is not being passed down to the channel planners.

However, this research does indicate that media planning has developed over the last decade, not only due to the increasing complexity of the digitized media environment but also by expanded their remit through the investment in research and technology solutions, and as Davis (2018) suggests, media planning may be on the cusp of transformation. It also shows that to make the best decisions, media planners would still like to receive a full and detailed briefing on all aspects of the marketing plan.

However, the study indicates that the full list of information advocated in the foundational literature is not being shared, and that there are now additional information demands. Media Planners seem to be frustrated by both a lack of basic data and the newer technology-based information and analytics. They are voicing unmet information needs particularly in the areas of: 1) creative messaging relating to immediate the plans and clients' wider activity, and 2) relevant metrics and analytical data around ongoing activity, previous campaigns and clients' owned media channels. Media Directors seem less frustrated in these areas, indicating that they may have the access to the data but fail to share it with their planning teams. This might reflect the problems seen within siloed working environments described earlier.

Limitations and further research

The key limitation of the research is that it is merely a snapshot of UK media agencies and is based upon a very open framework. This was intentional with respect to the overall goal of the project but it does raise more questions.

The research identified new terms that were not present within the former research. More in-depth analysis with the support of in-depth interviews or ethnographic studies of practitioners at work would shed light on why these various data sets are wanted, where they fit in to the media planning process and what potentially they have disrupted or replaced.

Further research needs to be undertaken to understand why these information sources are not being provided and used by clients when briefing their agencies. In addition, questions should be asked as to why agencies are not making their voices heard and getting the information that they want or need to determine their media plans effectively. Looking in a slightly different direction, research needs to be undertaken to understand the internal

dynamics of agencies and how the new roles and responsibilities shape the organisational development and business processes and what impact they may have on the decisions made.

It also identified areas of ambiguity within the vocabulary used. Ambiguous terminology could be indicative of areas of mis-communication between colleagues, clients or the researcher, and further research should be undertaken to explore terms and terminology with media practitioners to ensure clarity within communication.

The practical implications are that agencies and clients alike need to review their briefing and knowledge management processes to see how information can be stored, shared and retrieved more easily, to enable greater access to those that needed it, especially if they are to produce more outcome-based marketing solutions.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Research Questions explored by Cowan & Abratt, 1999

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Do marketers & media planners prioritize different factors when considering media selection? |
| 2 | Do marketers & media planners differ in the importance attached to the factors that should be considered in media selection? |
| 3 | Are media planning functions inclined to focus on marketing communication objectives in isolation and not in the context of the overall marketing objectives? |
| 4 | Do media planners base their media selection decisions on inadequate information and limited knowledge of current market conditions? |
| 5 | Do media planners focus only on traditional quantitative data and thus neglect non-quantitative data in the media selection process? |
| 6 | Are media planners neglecting strategic competitor analysis? |

Appendix 2: Survey design

| | |
|---|--|
| Section 1 | |
| <p><u>A little about you</u> In this section you will find some very simple profiling data that will help to analyse the data collected</p> <p>1. Please indicate which of the following most closely describes your current role and experience</p> | |
| <p>Select an answer ...</p> <p>If you selected Other, please specify:</p> <input type="text"/> | <p>Choices offered: Marketing Director, Marketing Manager Media Agency Board Director, Media Director, Media Manager, Media Planner Other</p> |
| <p>2. Please list the data and information types that you are given and have access to use for the development of your media plans.</p> | |
| <input type="text"/> | <p><u>More info</u> This information should only include the data that you do have access to - not what you wish you had access to :-)</p> |
| Section 3 | |
| <p>3. Please list the data and information types that you would like to have access to for the development of your media plans.</p> | |
| <input type="text"/> | <p><u>More info</u> This should include information or data that you feel would improve your ability to plan effectively, whether that be more creatively or efficiently, that you know exists and that could be shared with you but is not. So please list your frustrations! If you are feeling creative and there is information that is just not available but would be of great benefit to all, please put in brackets.</p> |

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