How Purpose Can Shape Agencies in 2021



In 2019, deliberating Adweek's Agency of the Year, the jury noticed something about McCann's work that was submitted: there seemed to be a lot of work that leaned into *purpose*. The agency's signature campaign for Microsoft's Adaptive Controller was well-known and high-profile. But other work for brands like L'Oreal, Mastercard, Ikea and GSK proved that purpose and commerce could live in harmony.

Over the past few years, purpose has become a buzzy topic. For the most part, brands seem to understand (or are working on) their place in peoples' lives. They also know that they need to stand for something because consumers are looking under the hood of companies more frequently. To that end, agencies, the keepers of creativity, are assessing their own paths forward.

Sure, there is a long history of agencies putting out work for charities, NGOs and organizations that is admirable (and sometimes award-winning). But we're likely in the brackish waters where one-offs shouldn't be conflated with actual "purpose," and both agencies and their clients are figuring it all out in real-time, with consumers watching closely.

“Purpose is about building a mission and ethos about how you act in the world,” said Deb Morrison, the Carolyn Chambers distinguished professor of advertising at the University of Oregon. “Agencies and brands have a selling proposition. The tension comes in about being altruistic and still playing in that realm. That’s the question. How do you balance that and do no harm?”

More and more, agencies put purpose at their core. Some built purpose into the foundation while others have evolved, becoming B Corp-certified, which is an official designation for companies that express a broader mission for spreading positive action globally. Others continue to figure out what it means while maintaining a business. Adweek spoke to leaders at five agencies to learn more about what purpose means for agencies and to get a better understanding of where this practice may evolve.

Baking in purpose from the start

Oberland and Oliver Russell are two agencies that baked purpose in from the start. The former was founded in New York in 2014, and the latter opened up shop in 1991and is considered one of the founding purpose-driven agencies.

Drew Train, one of Oberland’s co-founders (and former head of JWT’s social good practice), sees purpose evolving in the same vein as digital over a decade ago. At its nascent stage, digital was a practice shunted off to the side. Then, when technology took off, scads of digital agencies popped up, and the practice became baked in and less of a curiosity.

“It’s been interesting to see peoples’ evolution [on purpose],” said Train, noting that he believes larger agencies will create, adapt or evolve purpose practices. “When we first said it six years ago, we got quizzical looks. Today, it’s very different. I think we’re at the place now where people are starting to realize that purpose is a real thing and

recognized across the industry.”

Oberland’s other co-founder, Bill Oberlander—who first connected with Train on a project helping New York City veterans returning from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—noted that there are still some barriers to overcome. The big issue is that brands can no longer sit on the sidelines, even as they’ve seen brands like Dove, Ben & Jerry’s, Toms and others bake it into their success.

“If you asked the average marketer if they would consider putting purpose in their marketing plan, it was more of a ‘nice to have,’ and ‘we’ll get around to it as an act of charity,’” said Oberlander. “Now, with Black Lives Matter, coming out of Covid-19, a contentious election—purpose is the centerpiece of a marketing plan. You have to have a point of view.”

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