

Analysis, Advertising, Marketing, Front and Centre

Soon Chen Kang 江欣珍 | Mar 20, 2017

What young women want from an advertising career

For all the misconceptions about what life in advertising is like for young women, most just want a fair shot at proving themselves.



At the table: While young women are often confident they can advance on their own merit, some still find it difficult to be heard.

During an early episode of the iconic TV series *Mad Men*, a male senior advertising executive infamously dismisses protagonist Peggy Olson's insightful comments as "like watching a dog play the piano". The show may be fictional, but the male domination in the industry and belittling attitudes towards women it portrayed were very real – and to some extents these still persist, half a century after the programme's setting.

Before Angela Kwok (not her real name) started her first job in an agency last year, her family had expressed concern that she was going to an industry where “people dabble in vices” (no thanks to shows like *Mad Men*). They were also worried about the legendary long hours of agency jobs, yet Kwok was braced for the challenge because she felt she would enjoy its fast-paced nature after being on the client side during her internship.

This article is part of a package of features:
Gender inequality in APAC adland: Scope, causes and cures

Ten months into her strategist role at an agency in Singapore, the 24-year-old is happy although she finds out that the hours are indeed long and the pay is not great. Her idea for the first account she worked on was ripped apart, but she was glad for the opportunity given.

“I get to work on a pitch and present the strategy by myself. I don’t think anyone is rejecting my idea just because I am a junior,” says Kwok.

Granted, more young women have joined the industry with the increasing participation of women in the workforce. Perhaps very few young women now have to work their way up from secretary to copywriter like FCB Global’s Susan Credle, a real-life Peggy.

Amanda Woo was rather surprised to be asked to present before a client when she was interning at an agency in Kuala Lumpur.

“Although the experience did throw me off balance, it felt great to be included in meetings and have my ideas valued,” says Woo. Like many advertising majors, Woo was inspired to join the industry by the great ads she watched as a child.

As to the fabled “vices” in the industry, Kwok says drinking sessions are part of her workplace culture. “Most of the time it’s a bunch of [Caucasian] men. I am more hesitant to join in because I don’t know if I am intruding,” she says. “Sometimes, you get a feeling that some people are getting promoted because they hang out with the bosses. It’s very much a boys’ club thing.”

Whether there is a direct correlation between booze-fuelled male-bonding sessions and career progression is open for dispute, but there is no doubt that although the junior ranks are increasingly populated by women, leadership roles in the industry continue to be disproportionately men.

Male dominance is particularly apparent among creatives — there are only six women in the 24 creative directors listed on Hong Kong’s 4As creative committee, for instance.

These figures would come as no surprise to most young women joining the industry, since it is a fact which becomes clear to many during their internship — as it was for 22-year-old advertising student Prasanna Narayanaswami.

(Story continues below)

Breaking into the boys’ club

As great as it sounds for agencies and corporations to have initiatives to promote gender diversity, it could be helpful for the industry to take a step back and look at the inherent practices it needs to change.

“One of the things that I personally notice during agency meetings is that women are being interrupted a lot more by their male colleagues, with men coming in to repeat what the women have just said,” says Marion McDonald, chief strategy officer, Asia-Pacific, Ogilvy Public Relations.

On other occasions, the women speak up but they are not being listened to. Jina Jang, director of digital marketing and strategy, new business, Asiance, remembers this subtle form of discrimination she suffered when she first entered the industry 12 years ago.

“If you are junior and female, and you are meeting a new client, whatever you speak about, they won’t pay too much attention,” she says. “Even in an international setting now, I feel that people think I am not as important because I am a woman. More attention is given to the male partner. This happens regardless of the nationality of the person I’m meeting, but it gets better once we start speaking.”

Nur Leila Khalid, an advertising lecturer at Taylor’s University in Malaysia, says she uses positive reinforcement during open pitching sessions to boost the confidence of female students.

Esther Wong, executive creative director at TBWA Hong Kong, has an easier solution: speak louder. She says young women should not be intimidated by the boys’ club either.

“You don’t have to act extra friendly if you don’t feel like it, there is no right or wrong,” says Wong. “You should perform to impress: that should be the way to make yourself stand out.”



“It’s really sad. Looking at the number of men who head the departments, it is clear that the men are coming up top,” says Narayanaswami, who is currently interning at a creative agency in Kuala Lumpur. She says some of the female bosses seem to have taken after their male counterparts so as not to be left out of the group camaraderie.

Having said that, Narayanaswami says this culture would not dampen her determination to join the industry. Perhaps advertising is in her blood – her mother and brother also work in the industry.

"I can see that the bosses appreciate good work and it should not matter whether you are a man or a woman," she says.

Nurturing young talent

For Narayanaswami and young idealistic women like her who believe that they can rise on their merits, it is crucial that they are given opportunities to grow an industry that's trying to leave its sexist past behind.

Joanne Lao, CEO of TBWA Greater China, agrees that women are underrepresented in the industry's creative departments but says that, from her personal experience, this is not due to sexism. Rather, she says it is more about the industry being conscious of nurturing female talent and inspiring them to excel.

"I believe role models are very important, we are all keen to be inspired," she says. "I think if more senior men and women of the industry are vocal about the importance of gender diversity, it would make a difference to women wanting to join our industry."

Tan Kien Eng, CEO of Publicis One Malaysia, echoes these sentiments. "At the end of the day, it is about passion and pride for the work done, rather than gender," says Tan. He points out that women have also made great strides in the creative, and discussions around statistics may not be as relevant.

"I personally grew up with a lot of women bosses. Even in my early days, I worked with female creative directors who were very strong characters," says Tan. "When I joined Leo Burnett, there was [the late] Yasmin Ahmad who until today is remembered as the most prolific creative, and then there was Linda Locke [former regional creative director at Leo Burnett Arc Worldwide], another strong personality, a fair leader who drove the benchmark for the industry."

Tipping the balance

Whether it is overt sexism or not, the invisible gender lines in the industry — more females in account servicing and fewer in the creative departments — could have been entrenched and ingrained in the graduates before they enter the industry, and it is a vicious cycle.

Nur Leila Khalid, a lecturer in advertising at Taylor's University in Malaysia, notes that female students tend to gravitate towards account servicing roles after seeing a higher representation of women in that department.



Prasanna Narayanaswami: "It is clear that the men are coming up top."

"They feel that it is something they will be able to do well, compared to the creative side which can be more skillset based," Khalid says. "Some of them want to start their career in account servicing, thinking that they could switch to other departments later."

This trend is reflected in enrolment, with higher numbers of female students signing up for marketing-related subjects. The Chinese University of Hong Kong records a close to 80 percent female enrolment in its marketing programme over the past five years. It is a double-edged situation that some feel could lead to female students being at a disadvantage in

particularly competitive job markets, such as China.

Xu Gehang, a final-year marketing student at CUHK, describes her frustration after failing in several attempts to get through the first round of interviews for major firms in China, including Tencent. She feels that male candidates, who were greatly outnumbered by female graduates, were ironically able to turn that to their advantage, as it made it easier to stand out from the crowd in group interviews.

Such anecdotal evidence says little about the industry as a whole — but it highlights the need for serious investigation into these issues.

Source: Campaign Asia-Pacific

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