

## **Lessons from the United Kingdom: Employability, brand responsibility and a nation of 'ad lovers**

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Working for a top advertising agency is what many students dream about when they are studying marketing subjects at university. Whether they come to university to study for undergraduate or postgraduate degrees, many see advertising as a career that could afford them an exciting future. A job in an advertising agency or working on the client side, offers a chance for travel; overseas client-agency meetings and film shoots on location. And, for those who are lucky enough to land an agency job, they will be well looked after even when they're working in the office. For example, adam&eveDDB's London offices have on-site physio-therapists, nutritionists and even dedicated baristas to ensure agency staff get the perfect latte. What's not to like about such a glamorous and fun career?

Competition for jobs in the advertising industry is fierce and the challenge for any graduate is ensuring they stand out from their peers. I am sure this comes as no surprise to readers of the *Journal of Advertising Education* who, similar to educators in the United Kingdom (UK), try their best to equip students with the knowledge and skills they need to attract future employers. Indeed, developing students' employability skills has become a key focus for UK higher education. This presents particular challenges for graduates wishing to enter the advertising market.

### **Employability skills (for jobs which don't yet exist)**

A key challenge for advertising students is preparing themselves to work in jobs which may not currently exist. The rapid changes taking place within the advertising industry means that many students may end up working in areas that will emerge from Big Data, programmatic technologies and new forms of, currently uninvented, media. This makes it tricky to predict what applied employability skills will be needed for their careers.

Without the benefit of a crystal ball, students need to 'future-proof' themselves with core analytical, problem-solving and critical thinking skills. Developing a range of employability skills that encourages students to question and make judgements will help them make sense of new advertising environments as they emerge. For this reason, leading UK learning resources focus on critical thinking skills (Fill and Turnbull, 2019).

Critical thinking skills are developed through case study teaching which encourage students to reflect on real-life scenarios and question decisions taken. Students are required to apply theory to different situations to help them form a judgement about the appropriate course of action and assist in decision-making when facing new challenges. This learning is often continued through the use of 'live client briefs', where students are invited to solve real case problems.

## **Brand Responsibility**

As well as providing students with the employability skills to manage change in their future work environment, students are encouraged to think about how they can effect change themselves. In an era of brand responsibility, graduates embarking on advertising careers need to reflect on the influence advertising has on society and think about how advertising can change behaviours.

This is a divergence from traditional product advertising and a focus on brand profits. With the introduction of modules on Social Marketing for example, students can apply advertising theory and practice to real social issues and encourages students to think about how advertising can help address ethical and sustainable issues.

Case studies are a useful pedagogic tool for teaching brand responsibility. Here, the industry has helped by providing valuable case studies. The Fearless Girl case study from the USA written by Stephen Tisdalle, Chief Marketing Officer, State Street Global Advisors, is a good example of how real-life scenarios can be used to demonstrate how the industry is responding to real social issues (Fill and Turnbull, 2019).

The UK's advertising industry has provided many good case studies of advertising that are used in teaching to examine and reflect on how brands are addressing societal issues. The work for Sport England, "This Girl Can" (<http://www.thisgirlcan.co.uk/>) and Channel 4's Paralympics, "Meet the Superhumans" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=locLkk3aYlk>) are just two examples of campaigns developed in the UK to drive attitudinal and behavioural change.

## **A nation of 'ad lovers'**

It helps that the UK is a nation of 'ad lovers'. Advertising is part of the national conversation; discussed in the national media, in school playgrounds and is embedded within our popular culture. Even the start of Christmas in the UK has been defined by advertising, with media and consumers alike eagerly anticipating the arrival of the annual John Lewis Christmas TV ad.

Indeed, it is hard to comprehend the scale and impact of advertising like John Lewis' campaign unless you live in the country. As an example, John Lewis' 2016 Christmas ad, 'Buster the Boxer', became the number one global trend on Twitter 50 minutes after it was released and received 900,000 views within the first week. On the day of the launch, the campaign was trending in the UK ahead of the US Presidential elections the day before (Fill and Turnbull, 2019). Such an appetite for consuming advertising makes the UK a great place to start a career in advertising.

And the UK produces great advertising. In 2018, The Gunn Report ranked the UK as the most awarded country for creative awards (The Gunn Report, 2018) and rankings show that 4 of the top ten agencies worldwide are in London (Warc, 2019). The UK is a global centre of advertising excellence.

This excellence has attracted significant export income from overseas clients wanting to tap into the talent based in the UK and has contributed towards the current boom in the UK creative industries over recent years (GOV.UK, 2019). This growth in the advertising sector means that there are job

opportunities in the UK. Indeed, the UK has the largest number of advertising agencies in Europe and employs 17,000 people (EACA, 2019). Students graduating from UK universities are therefore well positioned to start their advertising careers in an agency.

## **Conclusion**

Developing employability skills and an appreciation of the social responsibility of advertising are important aspects of student development and learning. Providing students with the ability to think critically will equip them well for a career that values analytical skills and problem-solving. Equally, students should embrace the issues facing society and understand the impact advertising can have on attitudes and behaviours. Compassion will serve them well in any career.

While skills and compassion can be gained in any country, the UK offers access to some of the best global advertising, developed by some of the best agencies in the world. For graduates gaining work experience or starting their careers in the UK, whether in an agency or on the client side, having UK advertising experience on their CV is a valuable asset.

## **References**

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