



FIRESTARTERS IN NYC:

The New Agency Operating System

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THE **RUNDOWN**

For our inaugural U.S.-based Firestarters evening, a panel of industry luminaries shared perspectives on how to evolve an agency so that it succeeds in an ever-more-digital world. The consensus was less radical than one might imagine but no less relevant or useful for being so: digital is different, especially in being nonlinear; people are the foundation of success; and processes really matter. Also, “it’s going to be messy.”

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It's doubtful whether there's ever been a more tumultuous time to be in advertising. Change is no longer a phase but a constant. The number of canvasses for creativity has exponentially increased, and the pace of just about everything continues to accelerate. While full of opportunity, this world can be confusing to navigate, for all of us.

A few weeks ago we managed to coax approximately 230 advertising folks—most of them planners and strategists—to Google's New York City office to hear five industry luminaries talk about change, about agencies, and about planning. Why planning? Planners and strategists in creative, media and digital agencies are pivotal to accelerating change within those companies. They are centrally placed within the creative development process, they help creatives (and clients) architect the overall campaign shape, they're frequently amongst the earliest of early adopters, and in many instances they are the champions of the user, the consumer... of people!

The event was called [Firestarters](#), the first U.S. version of a British event series that I have been following with some envy since 2011, run by [Neil Perkin](#) of Only Dead Fish. We had Perkin on stage for this first session, along with a few of the smartest thinkers in advertising.

- Sarah Watson, chief strategy officer, BBH New York
- Ian Fitzpatrick, chief strategy officer, Almighty
- Johnny Vulkan, founding partner, Anomaly
- Noah Brier, co-founder, Percolate
- Spencer Baim, chief strategic officer, Vice Media, Inc.

The theme was somewhat loftily set as “The New Agency Operating System”—referring to the processes and approaches used to produce creative work. The focus was on both what those might entail, and the implications they have for planning. Typically, conversations around change within agencies tend to focus on new skill sets, business models, scope, and the need to “go agile.” Our speakers took a subtly different tack, unpacking how the underlying culture and values of an agency—in short, the people and how they're organized—contribute to its success.

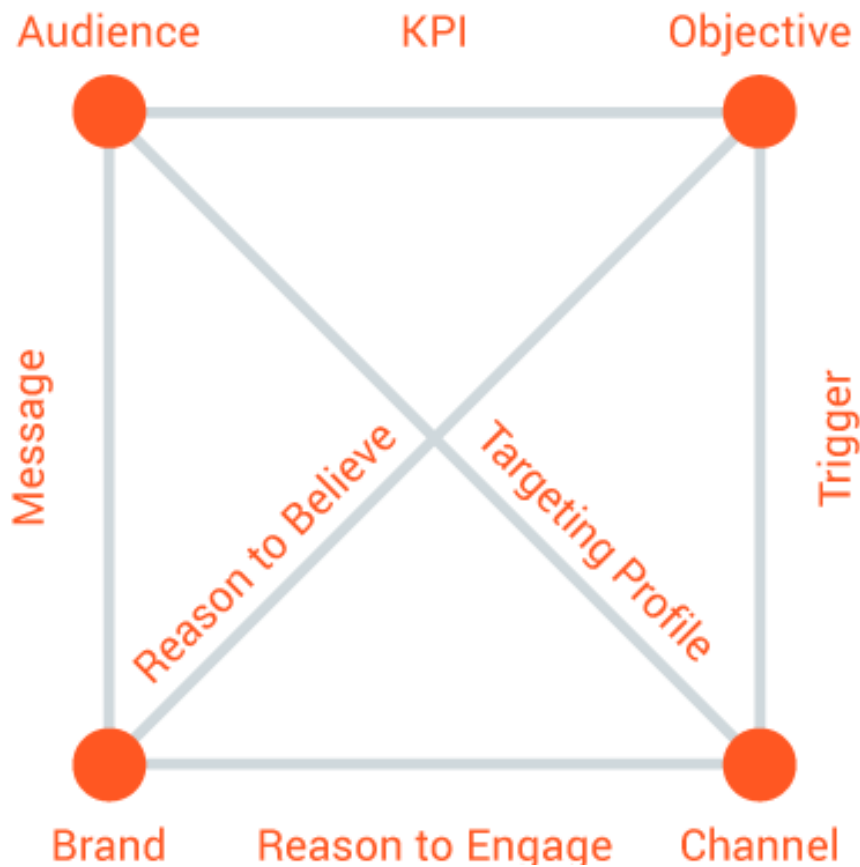
We asked our speakers to be brief and provocative, and they didn't fail us on either front. The five talks and ensuing debate hovered around three core themes: Digital is different, people come first, and process matters. These are not groundbreaking, yet despite how much things have changed, they're as true today as ever.

Digital is (still) different

There was no debate around one point: Developing ideas that thrive in digital requires a different approach. That's because digital differs from traditional media in a myriad of ways, enumerated here by Noah Brier:

- Digital is horizontal.
- Media is software.
- Campaigns are going or gone.
- Global is the default.
- Mobile is the new paradigm.
- Performance-based buying is here.
- The channel explosion continues.

That different approach must be baked into everything from planning to creativity, from production to launch, and beyond. "Brands don't fit nicely on a piece of paper anymore," said Brier, "so we need to be nonlinear; we need to become system thinkers." He went on to suggest that the best way to deliver better work is by "planning for complexity." We see that complexity in the explosion of channels and audiences we can reach and in ever-messier customer journeys. For strategy, this comes down to answering the following question: Who says what [brand] to whom [audience], how [channel], and to what effect [objective]? Here's how he sees the interrelation of those elements:



Noah Brier, 2014

Anomaly's Johnny Vulkan continued this track, arguing strongly for an organization built around solving a business problem, not a channel solution. He also proposed that there's no such thing as a successful operating system, just a lot of metaphorical code that needs constant updating. His approach is simple: "Get a diverse group of opinions, argue a lot, best answer wins, iterate continuously and openly."

"It's going to be messy," he noted, with a healthy slice of British understatement.



Anomaly's Johnny Vulkan

People (still) come first

I was struck by how much of the discussion centered on talent and how it is discovered and deployed. Just as software needs to run on a strong OS, the best people need a strong system. Without that system in place, developing awesome output will always be harder, less efficient, and less rewarding for the team.

Sarah Watson focused on the idea that the underlying culture and structure of a creative business can be either a powerful enabler of change or an anchoring source of inertia. "Agencies have their own operating systems, but they are different," Watson noted. "Ours are invisible, instead of being attached to a user experience. And the further you get inside them, the more invisible they are ... which makes them potentially lethal. The agency OS can be both the unseen engine of greatness and the silent killer of change."

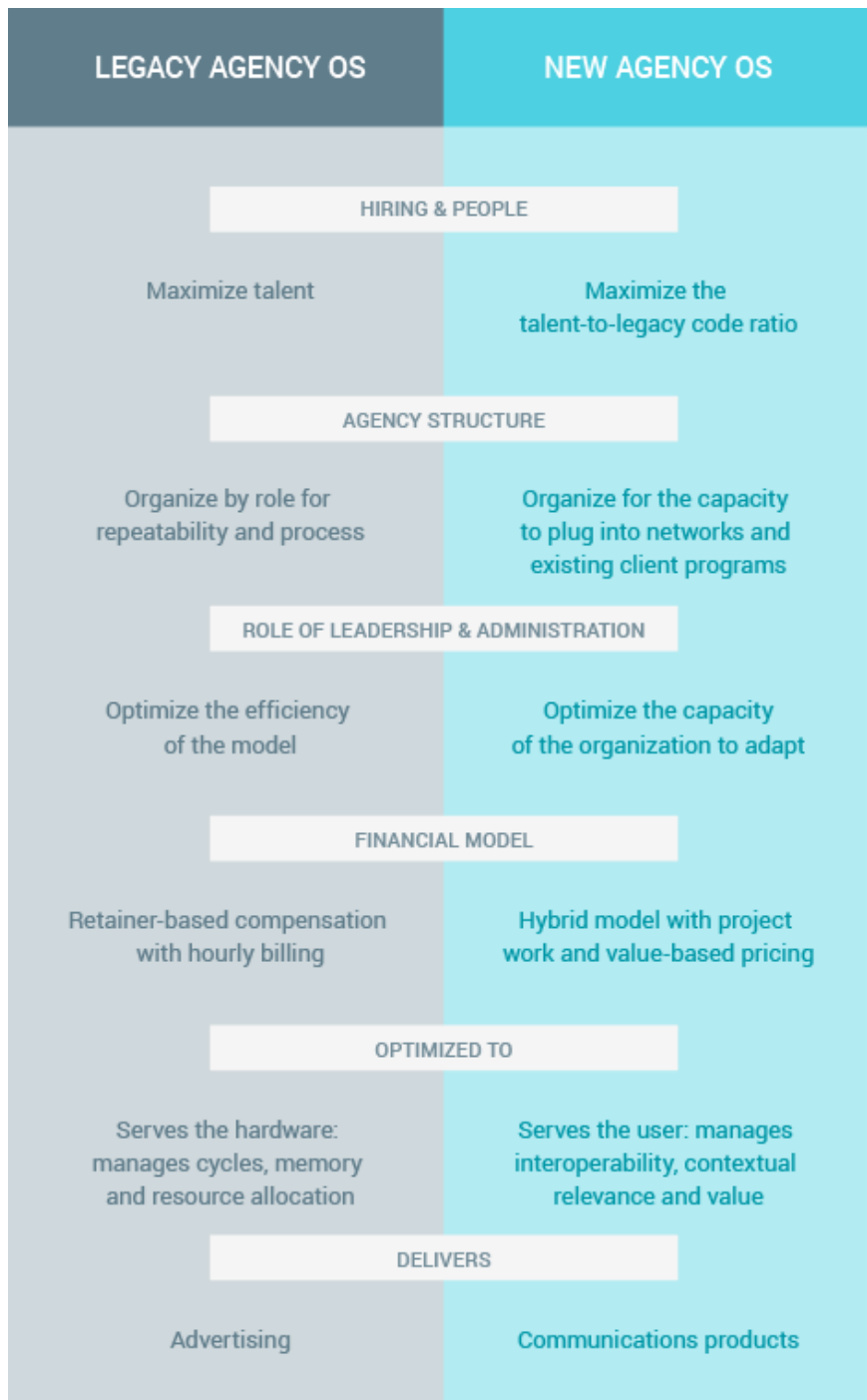


BBH's Sarah Watson

Process (still) matters

Many creative businesses would agree that they need to install an upgrade to their OS. What's not so clear, perhaps, is how they execute the install. So we spent some time on the how.

Extending the software analogy, Almighty's Ian Fitzpatrick argued that as operating systems age, they can get bloated with millions of lines of legacy code acting as a drag on the speed of the machine. The same, he contended, is true of agencies. "When we speak of agencies as nimble, large, or lean, we're talking about those lines of code, not the company's scale or billings," he said. "And when you ask someone about an agency they worked at and they say 'Oh, it was a total nightmare,' they're again talking about that code."



Ian Fitzpatrick, 2014

Just as with a legacy operating system, the trick to upgrading an agency's code lies in what can be stripped away, not in what can be added. Fitzpatrick suggested doing this by rethinking the people we hire, how we organize our staff, the role of leadership, our financial model, and what we ultimately deliver to our clients. Meanwhile, Vulkan focused on iteration. "We *should* be stealing from the coding world, where the emphasis is on iterating together as a group," he said. "We should be testing and tweaking openly and continuously, the way developers do. We're already heading in that direction, and because of that, we're sharper and better, and we don't waste so much time going around in circles."

Spencer Baim's take on this—that brands have to start acting and thinking like media companies—clearly stems from his experience at VICE. His building blocks are also simple, perhaps even timeless: get the purpose right, the people right, the touchpoints right, and the environment right. If these building blocks are in place, it's possible to shoot for the bigger ambition: to create "marketing as culture." And isn't that what we're all aiming for?



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