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How Planners and Creatives Can Problem-Solve Together

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As client expectations evolve, planners are adapting to these changes by re-envisioning their internal role and, in turn, creative output. The first Google Firestarters events in Australia explored the ever-changing role of planners in the digital age.

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As the advertising industry continues to evolve, it's become increasingly important for agencies to embrace change. Not only do agencies need to ensure they are delivering on seemingly ever-more-complex solutions for their clients, but they need to adapt the way they respond to their clients' briefs and business challenges in order to produce successful campaigns. By testing new approaches, planners are helping to lead the way in disrupting the status quo in favour of more nimble processes.

In late April, [Google Firestarters](#), a series of events for the planning, advertising, and media community, made its debut in Australia. The events, which took place in Melbourne and Sydney, were the first Firestarters outside of the U.K. and U.S. Moderated by [Only Dead Fish's Neil Perkin](#), panel discussions on the theme of "Adapting Strategy for an Adaptive Age" focused on how planners and creatives can work together. Every participant was keen to discuss the current and future state of planning, sparking some lively debates. The panels included the following guests:

- [Dave King](#), Director of Strategy, The Royals
- [Eaon Pritchard](#), Strategy Consultant
- [Roger Box](#), Director of Digital, Clemenger BBDO
- [Abigail Posner](#), Head of Strategic Planning, Google
- [Simon Small](#), Executive Strategy Director, Isobar
- [Sudeep Gohil](#), CEO, Droga5
- [Jason Lonsdale](#), Executive Planning Director, Saatchi & Saatchi

Change starts from within

Dave King kicked off the Melbourne event with a tough question: Are advertisers and marketers truly up for change? Agency folks seek out data and trends that can help shape their approach to client work, but are they actually interested in getting better at the way they work? In this digital world, acting as agents of change on behalf of their clients is a given, but can that positioning trickle down into their internal day-to-day processes? King believes it's possible and offered his agency, The Royals, as an example.

By ditching the traditional strategy/creative process that often leads to a siloed discovery of insights and ideas, The Royals recently embraced a new "sprint" framework. The five-day process substitutes the traditional handoff between planning and creative to ensure there's no disconnect between parties. Similar to the process described by R/GA's Chloe Gottlieb at the [SXSW edition of Firestarters](#), King said the key to this new approach is to get all the right players together in a room from the onset.

Involving planners, creatives, designers, and developers from the very beginning has led to great results for The Royals' clients. By using a creative sprint structure that applies to "people's experiences, instincts, and intuitions," the user's needs lie at the heart of every challenge. King also emphasised the importance of accountability and responsibility for every member of the team regardless of prescribed roles. He described the process as one that "doesn't feel like writing a brief," but rather like "decoding an opportunity."

The best "big ideas" come from simple human insights

Instead of looking to the future, Egon Pritchard, a strategy consultant, began his presentation by discussing the past. He claims marketers can map out where they're going by revisiting historical moments and shifts

in advertising. Pritchard suggests focusing on getting the work right at all costs as opposed to maximising billing or keeping clients happy.

Pritchard's ideal scenario is one in which planners get to work with the data they see as most valuable, keeping in mind the importance of the consumer's response. He also discussed how the industry is wrong in its thinking that advertising effectiveness is about messaging. In reality, he believes, it's actually about display, signaling, and speaking to the fundamentals of human behaviour. For him, "adaptive strategy" means referencing what we know about human nature while admitting that we don't have all the answers.

Clemenger BBDO's Director of Digital Roger Box built an argument that stated the only way to understand how technology impacts behaviours is to observe and participate ourselves. Instead of using jargon and "industry speak" to overcomplicate basic behaviours, marketers should focus on the simple strategies that really work. Basic human needs are consistent, and history tells us that it's simply how we fulfill those needs, over time, that changes. He believes strategies are carbon-based, but ideas are silicon-based.

At the Sydney event, Droga5's Sudeep Gohil also focused on integrating simple human insights into strategy. According to Gohil, the most simple human insights often sit at the heart of an idea, and it's the planners that need to think of solutions that push boundaries. "Digital is good at continuously touting the 'next big thing,' but as much as things change, they also devolve back into the old ways that we used to do things," he said. Agencies are often tempted to rush toward the first good idea, but taking the time to unpack client problems will ultimately lead to better, more rounded solutions. Gohil believes marketers need to originate ideas that become part of pop culture itself.

Droga5's CEO Sudeep Gohil walks the audience through his thoughts on adaptive strategy.



Gohil theorizes, "Being part of pop culture is more important than any strategy you can come up with because no one turns around and says 'I love that strategy,' or 'I love that ad.' Instead, they talk about the things they love, which is generally not the stuff we create."

Action-oriented strategies solve problems

Abigail Posner, who presented at both the Melbourne and Sydney sessions, touched on what a humanistic take on problem-solving really means. For Posner, it's important to impact culture, and action-oriented strategies are key to doing so.

"In our planning team at Google, we realised early on that we were actually very much like our engineers in our approach to problem-solving," she said. "Within our field, we have always pushed ourselves to solve the big human needs. And, after talking to our engineers, we realised they do the same. But they don't just write strategies; they 'build stuff'... So, we quickly realised we had to come up and 'build things' too. We now turn everything into a thing. Words are cheap. You have to codify it, have

a name for it, turn it into something real, something tangible.” By taking an engineer’s approach to strategy and tackling challenges as a multi-disciplinary team, Posner believes problem-solving can be more effective and result in stronger outcomes.

Adapt to the evolving landscape and your clients’ needs

According to Isobar’s Simon Small, adaptive strategy is all about the ability to deliver to the ever-evolving business needs of our clients beyond the traditional marketing brief they have come to expect. Isobar’s remit has evolved to include everything from developing digital roadmaps to platform strategies such as CRM. Recent client wins have expanded beyond marketing to consulting and other critical areas, creating a new competitive landscape and a whole new set of rules. Strategists need to adapt to this new context.

Melbourne panel
fields questions from
the audience.



Jason Lonsdale, Saatchi & Saatchi’s executive planning director, also touched on the shift away from advertising-based solutions towards

“making acts, not ads,” and briefs that “do something” rather than “say something.” “I would argue that finding the human truth in everything we do is a collective responsibility of both the client and the agency. You could say creatives are obsessed with awards and doing cool stuff; suits are obsessed with keeping the clients happy; and us planners should be obsessed with the finding human truth,” said Lonsdale. As advertisers, we cannot “interrupt what people are interested in; we have to be what people are interested in,” he continued.

Today’s agencies have a big job to do. They need to help define client objectives, fill in the knowledge gaps, provide solutions that are both human and practical, and ensure robust reporting and optimization techniques. These asks will only grow as the landscape continues to expand. Client value doesn’t only come from big ideas, said Small, but from the often underrated impact that can come from smart but simple optimisation techniques. What are the biggest barriers to change today? Small says what often hinders meaningful change are entrenched mindsets, processes, and balances of power within agencies.



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