

Creating a “magic middle”, not a “them and us” of brand vs performance

 By [Johanna McDowell](#)

29 Apr 2024

To paraphrase Nick Law, creative chairperson at Accenture Song, “Branding is a mature culture of storytelling and craft, suspicious of the scientific world of algorithms, while the performance world is young and bright, with a deep understanding of modern media and technology, sneering at the hand-wavy romantics”.



Source: © 123rf [123rf](#) As marketing agencies continue to seek ways to deliver the goods, we are seeing ‘old agency’ bumping up against ‘slick martech’, writes Johanna McDowell, CEO of the Independent Agency Search & Selection Company (IAS) and Scopen partner

At this point, nobody seems truly able to fill the gap left by operating brand and performance separately.

On the one hand, traditional agency creativity is often off the mark where targeted content is required; on the other, performance teams seem to be continually throwing more martech at a communications problem.



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“How does this help the marketer and the brand?”

How do we deal with what has become known as the “messy middle”?

Understanding the need for data and analytics, the IAS believes that turning only valuable data into actionable marketing campaigns is necessary.

This will require a balance between brand and performance at an organisational level.

It's not more software that's required, but more soft skills – now effectively power skills - when applied to creating a marketing ecosystem that understands the job to be done.

Organisations must comprise people who understand communications and technology, and what each need to do to draw the two sides together.

The primary focus should always be, “How does this help the marketer and the brand?”

We see data management as a function that must shift from being a separate department within the marketing ecosystem to the responsibility of business leaders.



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Value in simplification

Agency Scope 2023 noted that marketers recognise brand building and the crucial creativity behind it, even as many keep chasing the analytics.

How do we make sure the missing middle doesn't handicap the process?

Simplifying processes could reduce the “messy middle” and its part in the agency ecosystem's often sluggish response to opportunities to turn data into sales.

The AAR, IAS' UK partner, suggests an incremental building of the industry by moving more creativity and budget to data-lead targeting, driven by clients.

Simplification in this context does not necessarily mean reducing or even streamlining the number of agencies within a marketer's ecosystem, but rather the understanding that clients need these skills that are becoming more specialised as technology advances at speed.

For example, the key area of consumer targeting has grown to incorporate essential data that requires specialists to extrapolate the precise analytics that will positively impact marketers' results and long-term brand success.

With each additional specialisation, marketers are left to determine which of their current agencies have the required capabilities and whether yet another agency may be needed.

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“Them and us” of brand versus performance

Here, the IAS suggests choosing one organisation with the skills and experience to find ways for existing agencies to collaborate better or to introduce a single, multi-channel organisation that frees the client to focus on core daily issues.

This enables each agency to stay in its lane, recognise each other’s strengths, and work to support the ambitions and objectives of the brand.

It’s time for the “them and us” of brand versus performance to combine their vast swathes of data and talent to create a “magic middle”, simply and swiftly, for the sake of the brand and its customers.

Fortune favours the brave – someone must stand up soon and say, “Enough...”

ABOUT JOHANNA MCDOWELL

MD of the Independent Agency Search and Selection Company (IAS), and partner in Scopen Africa, with a background that includes being on both the agency and the client side of the fence, Johanna McDowell is well-placed to offer commentary on marketing and advertising in the South African and international contexts. She built her career in marketing and advertising since 1974, holding directorship in both SA and British advertising agencies. She was MD of Grey Phillips Advertising in 1988.

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