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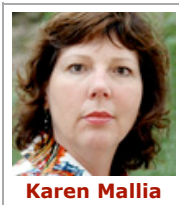
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Creativity Knows No Gender, but Agency Creative Departments Sure Do

Why Motherhood and Creative Directing Don't Mix

by Karen Mallia
Published: [August 31, 2009](#)



Karen Mallia

This year's [Advertising Age Women to Watch](#) were asked the question: Why are there so few women creative directors? The answers barely scratched the surface of this complex subject -- one I and several other academic researchers have been investigating for several years. I've interviewed dozens of women on the subject, both highly successful creatives and others who dropped out, detoured or reinvented themselves after spending years building creative careers.

There is no doubt an extraordinarily complex relationship between sex and the creative job, or it wouldn't still be an issue 100 years after women entered the field. Creative women have not enjoyed the level of success that women have found in every other advertising-agency department. The number of women in account management has doubled in the past two decades, resulting in equivalent numbers of men and women. More than half of planning and research employees are women. In media, women outnumber men 3-to-2. Yet, in creative, the ratio of men to women is 2.3-to-1.

Research shows that portfolio schools have had a fairly equal

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gender breakdown in the past few years. Women enter creative departments in numbers equal to men, yet they hold just 18% of creative-director positions -- the logical career progression after seven to 15 years. So what happens?

What's working against women

A convergence of cultural and organizational factors inhibits many women from climbing the creative ladder. First, there's the pervasive masculine culture in agency creative departments. While some women can deal with it, research shows being an "outsider" negatively affects careers -- and creativity. It's an environment particularly hostile to female leadership as well.

Second, while their portfolios may get them their first jobs, a great book alone doesn't get people hired in middle- to upper-level creative jobs. Creative directors show a conscious or unconscious prejudice for hiring people like themselves -- people they want to hang around with. That buddy system often plays a role in giving out plum creative assignments, too. If women get sidelined to tampons and diapers, they're unlikely to build award-show currency that furthers their careers.

Most important, the economic pressures of the past few years have made creative jobs tougher and more competitive for everyone -- with fewer people doing more work, shorter lead times and 24/7 client demands. Combine that with the inherent nature of creative work and the way creative departments function, and work-life balance is almost impossible. Few advertising agencies have embraced policies that foster flex time, job sharing and flexi-place, the very workplace programs proven to enhance women's careers.

Despite all that, women have succeeded in becoming creative directors in advertising agencies. And research has sifted out the traits they share: great creative talent, a competitive nature, resilience and an outgoing personality. They are politically astute, primarily focused on career and/or childless.

Aha, and there we have it: Gender isn't really the issue; motherhood is.

Can't have it all

No matter what your sex, a creative job is highly competitive, an unrelenting mind game that knows no timetable. As the second wave of feminism proved, you can't have it all. So sacrifices are made. For some, that's the agency career. For others, that's children. Years ago, McCann Erickson, New York, Chairman Nina DiSesa directly said, "I wouldn't have this job if I had kids."

Some brilliant women opt out of agencies for freelance and consulting, such as former Wieden & Kennedy Art Director Charlotte Moore and Sally Hogshead, founding creative director/managing director of Crispin Porter & Bogusky's West Coast office, who is self-employed as a consultant. Others, such as Linda Kaplan Thaler, CEO-chief creative officer, Kaplan Thaler Group, and Joyce King Thomas, exec VP-chief creative officer at McCann Erickson, New York, are lucky enough to have househusbands, or husbands whose careers give them more flexibility. Research didn't reveal a single major-league executive creative director who has both children and a husband with an equally demanding job.

A rare few get to job-share, like Ogilvy Toronto's co-executive creative directors, Janet Kestin and Nancy Vonk. They also work in

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Canada, where generous maternity benefits and flexibility further underscore the huge impact organizational culture and policies can play in helping women succeed. Still others work in smaller advertising markets, leverage individually negotiated flexibility or part-time deals that aren't widespread, start their own agencies, or freelance.

Sex roles are socialized. For creative women with fairly traditional expectations of motherhood, role conflict becomes untenable. They cannot have two 24/7 jobs. Creative work is just too consuming. Those women exit for alternate careers in real estate, academia and other fields.

The sad fact is that promotion and leadership in the creative department coincides with the ticking biological clock. And the creative job is much more difficult to balance with motherhood than any other agency position. Until huge institutional change occurs, women creative directors will remain an endangered species.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Mallia is a former copywriter and creative director who teaches creative strategy, copywriting and advertising campaigns at the University of South Carolina. She previously taught advertising at the City College of New York and at Fashion Institute of Technology/State University of New York. Her New York agency career spanned two decades and numerous agencies, among them Ogilvy; Scali, McCabe, Sloves; TBWA/Chiat/Day; and a host of smaller shops. She worked on brands ranging from cars to cosmetics, Fiberglas to fragrance to financial services. She continues to do strategic and creative consulting.

16 Comments



By JackJones | Chicago, IL [August 31, 2009 12:57:45 pm](#):

And yet, women (at least White women) still fare extraordinarily better than minorities. Is it really about gender or race - or is it really about the tactics of the ruling White male majority?

[Permalink](#)

By dperkins | Victoria, BC [August 31, 2009 01:48:35 pm](#):

Ya know...I was present during the now infamous 'A Night with Neil French' fiasco when he said (albeit a little more arrogantly) the same thing that this article is saying, and he was burned at the stake.

Neil said that it's close to impossible to hold the CD position if you choose to have a family, and that 9.9 out of 10 times when he came into an agency at 10 o'clock at night, it was a man, not a woman still working away.

In my opinion, it's got a lot more to do with the choice to have a family, than sexism or favoritism. Neil was onto something, but it's often the first person to speak up that gets crucified.

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By dearadvertising | Toronto, ON [August 31, 2009 02:53:15 pm](#):

Does it not start with the number of graduates entering into a creative career? I think it starts with the grads?

<http://dearadvertisingin.blogspot.com/>

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By element-hu | GREENSBORO, NC [August 31, 2009 03:15:18 pm](#):

Family time? Nope. Not buying it. Minorities are typically excluded from these positions just as well. The entire industry has been flamed for discriminatory practices since inception. The positions are mainly held by white males, PERIOD. The industry just needs to "man up" and get to the heart of the issue and stop treating everything like a research paper. It is blatant discrimination so lets cut the crap and get on with fixing the problem. If these positions were held by others than just typical white males, then the assessment of women wanting to avoid these types of jobs for other reasons could be applicable. But that isn't the case, now is it?

Terrence Covin - Agency Director

www.element-hu.com

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By jmsptrck101 | Chicago, IL [August 31, 2009 03:46:42 pm](#):

I agree, I don't believe it's as simple as blatant sexism. And the columnist said as much in her last two paragraphs. And she's right, it's not sexism. It's about motherhood. And because it's about motherhood, there will never be a level playing field. Because, unlike sexism, there is no inherent right or wrong in motherhood. And, obviously, men cannot be mothers. So we'll never reach an equilibrium because that is a variable (motherhood) we can't control for. (Well, unless you can convince a whole generation of women in advertising to willingly give up their chance to have children just to create a control group where motherhood is not at issue in their attempt to become a CD so we can check).

So, in other words, let's be realistic, both men and women who go after that role sacrifice a lot. While women might have to make that choice literally (family or career) because they have a womb, men still have to make that decision as well. Tough to say you have much of a family life (just because you have kids), when you're at the office until 10 o'clock and the kids are long asleep.

And is it really that terrible to consider that, just perhaps, there are some roles just better suited for men, and others for women, and that maybe this is one of them? I'm not saying that's the case, I'm just posing the question. (I've had both men and women CDs, and both were great).

I think the world of comedy poses a very interesting parallel. Have you ever wondered why the most popular stand-up comedians (i.e those who the majority of people find to be the funniest, and thus, are the most successful) are almost all men? (A very STRONG exception (and personal fav) being Lisa Lampanelli). There are certainly plenty of women out there who could support funny women stand-up comedians if they chose to, but yet, men still are the majority of successful comedians. Why? I don't have the answer, but I think it's an interesting phenomenon and something to consider.

And honestly, we'll never reach a happy conclusion. Because once we solve for one thing (i.e. sexism, racism) something else will just crop up in its place. It always does.

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By goldoneshow | los angeles, CA [August 31, 2009 04:04:59 pm](#):

I agree with most of your assessment of the situation. But I think there are points in your piece I disagree with:

- 1) You admit no one can have it all. Yet at the end, you call for institutional changes so basically, people can have it all. Sorry, but this is life and life isn't fair. It's only advertising, and there's always plenty of grist for the mill. Cynical, I know, but pretty on point.
- 2) Top male CDs also make sacrifices. Reality is, a large proportion of male CDs are divorced or don't have the best of home lives. We don't admit to it, but it's true. Show me an ECD at any of the top fifty ad agencies and I'll show you a father that barely knows his kids if he even sees his kids.
- 3) I think you'd also be hard pressed to find a top level male ECD who has children and a wife with an equally demanding job.
- 4) What's your argument? Female CDs? Female ECDs? Or female CDs who are mothers? If it's female CDs, there are a large number, and growing larger by the year, of female CDs. My last agency had more female CDs than male CDs at one point. As far as ECDs are concerned, most are over 45 with a large number over 50 which means they've been in the business for at least 20-25 years. I think in the next 10-15 years, as they retire, more female ECDs will come to power. But maybe that's just optimism.

Again, I don't think it comes down to sex as much as whether or not you're willing to make the sacrifices people think you need to get into power.

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By davidolivieri | Earth, AZ [August 31, 2009 04:49:55 pm](#):

if you referred to my wife, a stay-at-home mom, as a "housewife," there would be hell to pay. first from her. then from all the other stay-at-home parents who are working their asses off out of the office while their spouses work their asses off in the office.

in your attack on one stereotype, you're just winding up perpetuating another.

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By Marc | Staten Island, NY [September 1, 2009 08:24:32 am](#):

Agency Creative Departments know gender and AGE!

If you are a male with any grey hair on your head FORGET ABOUT IT!

An what's up with the questions they ask on a job application: are you a male, female, white, black, spanish...

WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO SOMEONE'S CREATIVITY?

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By Keith | Cleveland, OH [September 1, 2009 10:49:40 am](#):

Two decades and multiple firms. It appears you may have a problem playing nice with others.

[Permalink](#)

By wordchick | San Antonio, TX [September 1, 2009 12:04:34 pm](#):

The solution lies with progressive agencies like my own who "get" in order to retain talent you have to make allocations for the the lives that we all lead outside agency walls.

Case in point, this Creative Director is lucky enough to bring her little ones to work with her.

[gdc-co.com](#)

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By joyceleesy | SAN FRANCISCO, CA [September 1, 2009 12:38:58 pm](#):

The case may have been different in the US but in many parts of the Western world, Asians (Chinese, Korean, Japanese) were the minorities in the industry not too long ago.

Certainly not too many Asian folks at the management ranks yet (in the west), but there are plenty in the mid-senior levels in agency land. It's only a matter of time.

Regarding family-career balance...

I have worked under many female directors with families and some have made career sacrifices (though they will never put it that way), while others (from a young female's perspective) worked twice as hard as their male equals so they can run a blue chip account and a household with multiple kids of dependent age.

I don't know which I'd be when it's my time to choose, but both groups are equally admirable.

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By katrinalimbaugh | CHICAGO, IL [September 1, 2009 01:07:55 pm](#):

Karen, I applaud you for tackling this subject, one that Teressa Iezzi broached about a year ago in AdAge as well. It's a tough one, very polarizing. And while it's certainly part of the larger diversity debate, it is more so related to the struggle women in many industries face regarding family vs. career. In advertising, it's undoubtedly a more pointed struggle than in other industries. It's been my experience that discussion surrounding the issue is too often limited to a hushed conversation amongst female creatives. (As an aside, I find it telling that, with the exception of some random gender-less screen names, the majority of those attacking this content are men).

I also find the point about Canada very relevant. My agency has offices in both countries, and I envy the lengthy maternity leaves my Canadian counterparts are granted - of course, they seem lengthy to me only in comparison to our painfully short allowance in the United States. At least half of the high-level execs in our Toronto office are female, so I do think there is something there. But unless/until the USA adopts a similar

policy, we have to work with what we're given. Which I fear means this trend will only continue. Because unless you truly are not interested in having children, what other choice is there?

[Permalink](#)

By goldoneshow | los angeles, CA [September 1, 2009 01:55:37 pm](#):

No one is attacking anyone or their comments. Personally, I was disagreeing with Karen's points because I believe this topic is very multi-faceted while I felt her article wasn't as focused as it could or should be. I think this is actual three different issues.

1) Is there hiring disparity between women and men in advertising? Even Karen alluded to a fact, if you combine media, account management, support services, production and creative, the answer is no. It's almost even maybe leaning towards more women than men.

2) Why aren't there more female Creative Directors? I think Karen did a good job and was right for the most part on this topic. One thing most people forget. While the creative department may be the most high profile department in an agency it's also one of the smallest. That's part of the reason for it. There are fewer jobs available than other departments therefore there are fewer management jobs. Also when looking at the position of CD, the majority of shops in this country are under 100 people. Most of those shops only have one or two CDs. Most of those one or two CDs are part or full owners of the agency. In fact the agency I work at only has three creative directors, all men but all three have worked here for over fifteen years.

3) Finally, the biggest issue of them all: parenthood. I don't say motherhood because it affects men as well. As a very famous ad man told me in school, "Advertising is the cruelest mistress of all. If you give her the attention and time she wants, she will give you the world. If you don't, she'll leave you behind." He had been divorced three times. To me, everyone in this day and age knows how demanding our business is. So we all have to make choices. If a man or a woman choose to pursue parenthood, they know they are choosing a path that limits their time, limits their attention, and will probably limit or at least slow their climb up the management ladder. I don't see why people refuse to accept this reality. Yes, I do have kids.

While all three of these discussions are related, they aren't the same. Each one deserves its own article and discussion. I gladly welcome all comments and opinions.

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By hknack | EL SEGUNDO, CA [September 1, 2009 04:03:02 pm](#):

Addressing Keith's comment...you're actually questioning why someone in advertising may have worked at multiple agencies over the span of two decades? Do you actually work in the agency world? It's a revolving door and always has been.

[Permalink](#)

By JANET | New Hyde Park, NY [September 1, 2009 04:05:45 pm](#):

I am going to make this required reading for my Bachelor's level

university course titled Leadership & Professional Development where we study risk and reward, negotiation and permitting your gender to work for you - ie. Being PROUD you are a female and can achieve to the same standards, but perhaps differently. When I say I will get something done, my word is my honor, and by God, I do it. It's integrity, not gender! Feel free to contact me. Thank you.

janetoladyr@aol.com

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By tjordan | MILWAUKEE, WI [September 2, 2009 12:55:38 pm](#):

I thing a lot of people are missing the point. Advertising has become a lot of hip, white guys trying to impress the judges at the award shows...other hip, white guys. Yet over 80% of all purchase decisions are made by women. The consumer is seldom the consideration when the opportunity presents itself to do "edgy, cool work." You win awards...you get promoted. The women who do win, are forced to impress all the hip white guys. We conducted independent tests on some of the top award-winning work. Guess what? It bombed with women. Maybe if we let more women craft the advertising to the REAL judges (women) there would be more female CDs, instead of the "all-dressed in black, too hip for the room, snotty, egotistical" men.

And, yes, I am a guy. yes, I've won at Cannes. But I have come to accept that we need to change our business practices dramatically.

Guys...read a few books. Marketing to Women...The soccer mom myth...Re-render the gender...Mistakes were made. But not by me...The female brain...the 85% niche: marketing to women of color...

Change is on the way....

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