

OgilvyEarth: is this what a future communications agency looks like?

Carmen SCHAEFER

Red and Yellow School of Logic and Magic

Abstract

Viktor Papanek, in his seminal book about ethics and design, Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change (1971, revised 1984) declares that designers share responsibility for humankind's environmental mistakes, by all the products and tools that they have sold and created, either by bad design or by turning a blind eye (1984, p. 56). He is very critical of design that only measures its success against market growth. He talks for example about designers who create – and then win industry awards for – beautiful intricate packaging in order to sell what he calls 'worthless' goods at inflated prices (1984, p. 223). However harsh this may sound, the truth is that the definition of an advertising agency is that they offer a service: that of creating, planning, and handling advertising and other forms of promotion for its clients and their products and services (BusinessDictionary.com), and in the past this has mostly been done indiscriminately. But in recent years it can be argued that many advertising agencies have become more socially and environmentally aware and responsible. One such an agency is the WPP-owned Ogilvy group, which a couple of years ago launched OgilvyEarth, to focus on issues of sustainability. In 2009, just after the election of President Obama, OgilvyEarth published its white paper to launch what they call "The Dawn of the Age of Sustainability." Their website claims that they "believe sustainability is the growth opportunity of the 21st century, but it's not just about being green. It's about aligning revenue goals with responsible operations, to create an organization that better serves all of its stakeholders, from shareholders and employees to customers and others influenced by its progress."

This paper is a case study of the Cape Town branch of OgilvyEarth, based on personal interviews. The study will investigate whether they have been able to stand by their beliefs in their dealings with South African clients, what strategies they employ to drive the sustainability agenda and what their challenges and successes have been so far. The paper will use the OgilvyEarth case study as a framework to investigate the changing role of advertising and more specifically of a designer working in advertising today.

Keywords: *OgilvyEarth; advertising; sustainability communication; goodvertising; sustainable communications; future advertising agency; changing role of designers; human-centered design.*

Introduction

The research question posed in this paper is to ascertain if and how advertising agencies have changed because of the sustainability agenda, and more specifically to investigate if the role of the designer/art director in the agency has changed as well.

Traditionally advertising agencies have a notorious reputation in terms of ethics, selling customers products ranging from cigarettes to mouthwash *Mad Men*–style: indiscriminately (AMC TV series 2007 - 2015). As Nelson (2009, p.112) postulates, using the hypothetical example of a new product, a cellular phone for children: "So there is an ethical dilemma in the design and production of such devices and their dissemination by means of advertising. By and large designers look at such arguments but restrict themselves to the design of the phone and let others argue about the rights

and wrongs of it". In this context the role of the designer or art director is firstly to create a 'big idea' (mostly in conjunction with copywriters) to sell the product in a memorable way, and secondly to use their skills to make these commercial messages look appealing to consumers.

The current norm in advertising agencies is that the creative team (copywriter and art director) embarks on the ideation stage as a team, which is informed by marketing strategy compiled by brand strategist or agency planners. Consumer research forms a substantial part of what influences the strategy. Sean Duffy, a brand strategist, explains his role as such: *"Most brands have a compelling story to tell the world. But often the relevance and product advantages get obscured in the marketing process so that consumers never really understand. This can be because the brand focuses its communication on the wrong messages, because it uses the wrong communication channels, because it has lost touch with the real wants and needs of its target group, or all of the above"* (Firehead.net).

The First Things First manifesto, a manifesto in which concerned graphic designers declare what kind of work should be a priority, the first edition of which was published in 1964, and the second in 2000, (signed by a different set of designers), states the following: *"Designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact."* These are damning words indeed, but what would a more ethical advertising or graphic design agency look like? London-based graphic designer, and one of the signatories of the First Things First manifesto, Lucienne Roberts (2007), writes that there are two ways in which designers can be more ethical: the first is the clients they work for, or, what the message is they promote on behalf of their client (ie. the compelling story). The second is in terms of production methods, e.g. using responsibly sourced paper, inks that are better for the environment, being less wasteful and so on.

The 2000 edition of the First Things First manifesto proclaims that graphic designers should focus their time on designing "cultural interventions, social marketing campaigns, books, magazines, exhibitions, educational tools, television programmes, films, charitable causes and other information design projects" i.e. better messages for more ethical causes and clients. In recent years it seems as if advertising and design agencies are moving towards more ethical storytelling, but is this at the request of their clients or of their own volition? Thomas Kolster's popular book 'Goodvertising' (2012) showcases many brand and advertising messages for social initiatives, charities, and so-called "good" products. (It is important to note that "good" can mean a wide range of things, such as healthy, organic, GMO-free, environmentally friendly, socially responsible, resourced according to fair trade methods, etc.)

Kolster says in the introduction of his book: "Advertising has got us neck-deep in today's climate and humanitarian crisis, but this just makes me more confident that advertising can get us out of it. Nobody knows consumers, brands and the market better than those of us in the advertising industry and we need to take on the challenge."

Mike Schalitt, former Chief Creative Director of advertising agency Net#work BBDO in South Africa was among the people interviewed in Kolster's book. He claims that Net#work BBDO "will never knowingly lie or create false promises, or deviously manipulate or pollute" (p. 117). The solar-powered billboard they created for their client, local financial banking services Nedbank, still provides power for a local school's kitchen. This billboard/power source, created in 2007, is an excellent example of a trend that Jason Xenopoulos, CEO of NativeVML explains in *Why Advertising Agencies are now creating products instead of advertising* (2015), namely that advertising agencies are now creating useful products instead of advertising. He says that at the 2015 Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity there was a clear shift from creating "disruptive, innovative advertising" to "innovation in the business itself." He cites the example of Volvo producing a can of glow-in-the-dark spraypaint to keep cyclist safe at night instead of producing a traditional print advertisement to market them. This is to give consumers something they would deem as having "real value". He continues to explain that lines have also been blurred "between clients and agencies."

New York-based agency R/GA launched their own set of start-up businesses, and Crispin Porter & Bogusky want to “expand the role of creative agencies” and are developing and launching their own products. The directors of Crispin Porter & Bogusky explain that they handle product development, brand building and strategic direction at the agency, “but find partners for operations and business management”. They say that this new business model is in response “to the marginalisation of the ad industry’s craft and talent by the business world” (Swift 2015).

This shift in what advertising agencies do is not universally embraced: Thomas Kolster (2015, pers. comm., 10 August) recently tweeted: “The ad world is in an identity crisis: they’re storytellers, but want to be entrepreneurs: stick with your trade, Spielbergs Of Ad land” (@thomaskolster July 14). He says that advertising agencies aren’t entrepreneurs or start-ups and shouldn’t act as such (2015, pers. comm., 10 August).

What is clear is that many advertising agencies are not acting to the definition given to them by the dictionaries of the world any more, and that their role is changing.

Research methodology

I used a case study, OgilvyEarth, the sustainability arm of the well-known advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide, which has branches in most big cities. Firstly I analysed all the information they have made public on their website, as well as secondary information about them. Consequently I interviewed a designer and a strategist employed by them with their permission, specifically about the research questions posed at the beginning of the paper. I also had several informal conversations with various staff members of Ogilvy, who have asked to remain anonymous.

OgilvyEarth – Global and local practices

OgilvyEarth was launched in 2009, as Ogilvy’s global sustainability practice which promises to help brands in what they call the ‘Age of Sustainability’. The widely accepted definition of sustainability or sustainable development as penned by the Brundtland Commission is as follows: “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,” (Our Common Future 1987, p. 16). The sustainability model that is most commonly used is the so-called Triple Bottom line or the three pillars of sustainability: to protect the environment, to strive for social equality, and towards economic growth, especially in the countries that need it most.

Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide is owned by the multi-national marketing communication services holding company WPP. WPP owns about 400 companies. Although it is not clear in public press exactly where OgilvyEarth fits into the corporate structure (it isn’t listed as an individual company on the WPP website (<<http://www.wpp.com/wpp/>>), the OgilvyEarth website calls themselves a ‘mash-up’ of sustainability marketing experts from various companies in the Ogilvy group including Ogilvy & Mather, OgilvyOne, Ogilvy Public Relations, OgilvyAction and OgilvyEntertainment (<<https://www.ogilvyearth.com/why-ogilvyearth/network/>>).

OgilvyEarth published a white paper titled: “2009: A pivotal year and the dawn of the Age of Sustainability” in which they proclaim that brands should make the most of the new sustainable economy using the services OgilvyEarth offers. The language in the white paper as suggested in the title verges on the evangelical: they refer to the ‘sustainable economy’ as a ‘new world order’ and Sir Martin Sorrell, the Chief Executive Officer of WPP calls it ‘the new industrial revolution’. He also states that the importance of economic opportunities in this ‘new age’ should be highlighted.

The paper states that joining the sustainability movement is a good idea because it is driving new wealth creation; and that sustainability is now ‘mainstream’ and is becoming a legislated reality. They suggest that brands should ‘own the conversation’ by planning initiatives based on sustainability thinking; to ‘lead’ consumers on sustainability issues and gain their trust by being open and optimistic; to show consumers tangible and accessible paths to sustainability; and to do all of the

above, as soon as possible. They also mention 'The Big IdeaL' which is Ogilvy's trademarked strategic process. The 'Big IdeaL' is described as a way to connect a brand's 'best self' to an 'emerging cultural context or insight' by using techniques such as completing the following sentence: "(Brand/company) _____ believes the world would be a better place if _____." (2010 <https://assets.ogilvy.com/truffles_email/redpaper_june2010/The_Red_Papers-_What's_The_big_ideaL_Page.pdf>)

After studying the white paper, I started investigating the OgilvyEarth website. During the last six months in which I have accessed their website regularly, the same five case studies are listed. (<https://www.ogilvyearth.com/case-studies/hopenhagen/>). The first of the case studies is Hopenhagen, a 'climate movement' created for the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference (COP15) in Copenhagen. This seems to be the first project that OgilvyEarth completed using the tools and processes listed on their website, which will be explained later.

The next case study is the naming, brand identity and communication strategy they created for Coca-Cola's Plantbottle, a recyclable PET bottle made partially from plants. The third case study is for Dupont. The website describes how OgilvyEarth, together with Ogilvy Entertainment, created awareness about DuPont's involvement, using their new 'green' building technologies in rebuilding Greensburg in Kansas after a tornado destroyed it, creating America's first green town.

They also cite their work for the Environmental Defense Fund in New York, in which they commissioned artist Joshua Allen Harris to create polar bears from white plastic trash bags. The plastic bears are attached to air vents, and inflate as the subway rushes past underneath, and then slowly collapse afterwards. The message was "Ride Don't Drive" to encourage people to use public transport. A Public Service Announcement of this artwork was created and widely distributed. The last case study is for Qantas Airlines where they created the 'mybegreen' initiative to encourage Qantas employees to be more involved in the company's environmental programmes.

The website also states very specific processes and tools which help them to do business differently. The process is described in three steps: 'Discovery', (in-depth research into the brand's target audience, competitive brands, trends and company culture) from which insights are gained, 'DNA' (the ideas or solution phase) and 'Activation' (when the solutions and ideas are implemented). This is in essence the same process that agencies normally follow when receiving a client brief, and is a very similar process to that, for example, described in Ideo's field guide to human-centered design, called briefly 'Inspiration', 'Ideation' and 'Implementation'. This process is commonly referred to as design thinking.

The tools they list begin with a 'Landscape Audit' – to find out what is being said by news media about the areas of sustainability relating to the brand, then an 'Eco Audit' which is described as in-depth interviews with key stakeholders relating to sustainability and the brand in question which could lead to brand insights.

The next tool is the 'Three Pillar Employee Survey' where the organisation's employees are engaged around the three pillars of sustainability, (environment, social and economic) which then should lead into a communications strategy. 'The Lab' is a workshop in which a sustainability-based vision is decided upon. 'Expert Network' is when leaders, (not employed by Ogilvy) in the respective area of sustainability are approached to help with the brand's challenges, 'IQ Mapping' occurs when key influences are identified to help with the organisation's entry into the sustainability conversation.

The last tool they cite is the 'Global Ogilvy Network' with which they collaborate depending on the challenge, for example with Ogilvy Entertainment when they created a short film about DuPont's involvement in rebuilding Greensburg. Again, the tools are not new per se, except for their focus on the topic of sustainability. It does seem that, if these tools are used as per the description on the website, a thorough strategy of where a brand could potentially be more sustainable or communicate about their sustainability stories, could be created.

Locally OgilvyEarth launched in Cape Town, South Africa in 2010 and is currently trading out of the offices of another local Ogilvy subsidiary, Zoom Advertising. (<<http://www.zoomadvertising.co.za/services/>>). The Managing Director of OgilvyEarth Cape Town is also the Managing Director of Zoom Advertising. When OgilvyEarth Cape Town first launched, they published a hardcover book called 'The Conscious Industry' (Figure 1) which offers information about sustainability principles. The book was designed using a children's book aesthetic. An illustrated character represents a brand that comes to have a conscience after seeing all the destruction it has caused. During the course of this basic narrative, ideas are introduced including life cycle analysis, pollution, waste management, adherence to labour laws in order to prevent practices such as child labour, renewable resources, wasted wood & paper and more responsible packaging design. This book offers a concise and clear summary of basic sustainability practices. These hard cover books were distributed to Ogilvy's existing clients. It isn't clear what response this book garnered.



Figure 1: OgilvyEarth Cape Town hardcover book - 'The Conscious Industry'

The current list of clients bearing OgilvyEarth's name in Cape Town include the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), the Newborns Groote Schuur Trust, Volkswagen, WWF (The World Wide Fund for Nature), FairTrade, Endangered Wildlife Trust, Matlapeng Housing, and Sustainability Week. Some of these clients, such as Volkswagen and WPP, are also Ogilvy Worldwide's clients. Most of the clients listed are socially conscious, 'green' or sustainable in terms of what the business does already. It seems as if the 'green' agency attracts mostly clients who are inherently 'green' too.

In my interview with a senior designer at OgilvyEarth he explained to me that they mostly do work for clients who have already taken steps in the right direction (regarding 'green' issues), but that OgilvyEarth would have the function of telling their stories better, in a truthful and honest way. He believes that sustainability initiatives should come from the client side, and not from the agency's or designer's side of the relationship. (2015, pers. comm., 22 July).

When the senior designer was asked if he had had the opportunity to deliver more input in his clients' business (perhaps co-designing with them or educating them) he said, "Obviously we try and get our clients to work a certain way, using recyclable paper and sustainable resources." He also indicated to me that OgilvyEarth needed more clients, and that currently he still spends most of his time designing for Zoom Advertising clients (2015, pers. comm., 22 July).

The creative team consisting of a designer and copywriter recently created a promotion for OgilvyEarth in the hope of gaining more business for OgilvyEarth. They created a set of posters packaged together, each spoofing a brand category in which greenwashing is rife. ("Greenwashing is the practice of making an unsubstantiated or misleading claim about the environmental benefits of a product, service, technology or company practice, and can make a company seem more

environmentally friendly than it really is.” (*Whats.com*)). The copy on the posters read: “Need help backing up your sustainability claims? There’s more to being a sustainable brand than just claiming to be one, and although many brands are making great progress in this space, many still fall into the trap of making broad claims that discredit the work that they do. At OgilvyEarth our mission is to help brands communicate more authentically in the sustainability space so that they can truly affect change. Let Us Help You Tell A Better Sustainability Story For Your Brands.” It is clear from this quote that the service that Ogilvy is offering is a “better sustainability story” (Figure 3 & 4).



Figure 3: Series of posters developed by OgilvyEarth



Figure 4: Awareness poster by OgilvyEarth

For the production of the direct mailer they used materials that were sustainably sourced. It was locally produced and printed on recycled materials, using vegetable and eco digital inks and other eco-friendly production techniques such as eliminating the use of glue. In addition the entire piece was completely biodegradable. The carbon footprint of the communication was offset using a company called Credible Carbon.

Ten or eleven of the poster sets were handed out to Ogilvy staff, in the hope that they would in turn pass on the OgilvyEarth message to their existing clients. In the senior designers opinion the promotion was not a success. He seems to think that some of the Ogilvy staff might have felt ‘attacked’ or criticised by these posters (2015, pers. comm., 22 July). When I asked various staff members at Ogilvy about the OgilvyEarth direct mailers, none of them had put the posters up, or even knew where the communication was. It seems evident that the staff at Ogilvy didn’t embrace the OgilvyEarth message, and weren’t aware of the eco-friendly production methods used for the piece, and therefore it is unlikely that the message was relayed to their clients.

When asking a few Creative Directors at Ogilvy about working with OgilvyEarth, they didn’t quite seem to understand exactly what they were offering. They added that many of their clients had their own sustainability initiatives, for example long-standing client Volkswagen and their Bluemotion technology, and that they were creating their own ‘goodvertising’ stories for these clients ‘anyway.’ They also mentioned their pro-bono clients such as the District Six Museum, the National Sea Rescue Institute, and The World Wildlife Fund.

Ogilvy art director Prabashan Pather and copywriter Sanjiv Mistry created a series of print advertisements for Volkswagen Bluemotion (Figure 5) in which their idea was to donate some of the advertising space they bought for the advertisement to a charity or cause that wouldn’t be able to afford the advertising space themselves. The advertising campaign won a Black Eagle award, (2011, <<http://www.blogilvy.co.za/tag/bluemotion/>>) and is an example of using the ideation skills that agency creatives are famous for, to create a better message using a traditional media choice. Ogilvy also created an initiative called “Things to do in the dark” for the WWF to promote Earth Hour, by giving people a host of entertaining activities to do and events to attend in the dark (2013,

<<http://www.blogilvy.co.za/tag/ogilvy-cape-town/>>). Both of these campaigns were executed for clients who are also on the OgilvyEarth client list. It is clear that Ogilvy Worldwide are telling “better sustainability stories” for their clients themselves. My personal deduction is that Ogilvy Worldwide creatives just don’t understand what OgilvyEarth would offer to clients that they aren’t already doing themselves.

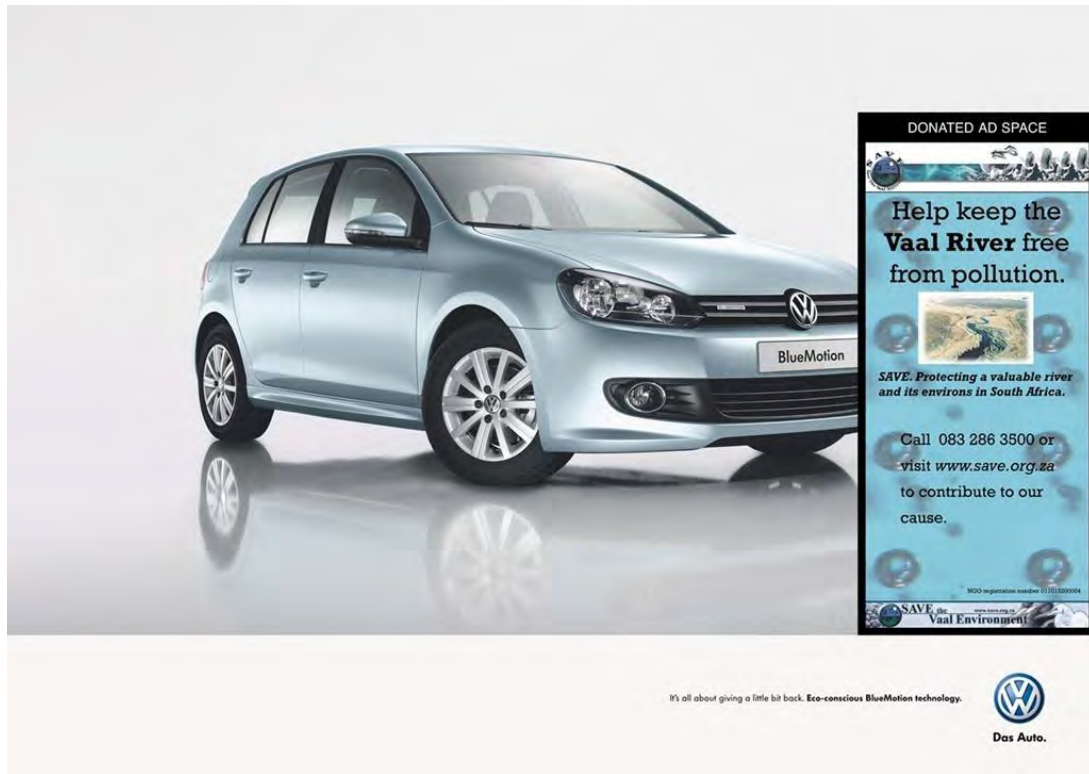


Figure 5: Prabashan Pather and Sanjiv Mistry Volkswagen Bluemotion Donated AD Space

Designing for sustainable change is not just about creating pro-bono work, or advertising clients’ Corporate Social Investment initiatives. Those stories have to be told, but in my opinion sustainable design is fundamentally about understanding all aspects of a client’s business, encouraging them to be transparent, and possibly inputting on other levels of their business and product life cycles, and not just on the promotion side. In other words, using design thinking to identify problems and offer possible solutions. As Hannah Jones of Nike Sustainable Business and Innovation states: “It goes beyond collaborating with the marketing department – sustainable business and innovation is integrated into every aspect of the business at Nike” (cited in Kolster 2012, p. 99).

Is the role of designers and art directors in agencies changing?

Papanek (1972, p.151) says that “Frequently the designer will ‘discover’ the existence of a problem that no one had recognized, define it, and then attempt a solution”. Papanek was an industrial designer himself, but why can’t this statement be true for graphic designers and art directors working in advertising agencies as well?

Looking at specifically the tools described on the OgilvyEarth website, there is ample opportunity for designers to become more than ideators, storytellers and the persons that make communications aesthetically pleasing. Internationally much has been written about designers taking on the role of initiators and authors (Wood 2007, p. 111), facilitators and co–designers together with both their target audience and their clients. In a telephonic interview with a director at OgilvyEarth in London, whose background is in marketing strategy, he confirmed that at this stage the Tools described on the OgilvyEarth website are the “ideal journey” they would like to take their clients on, and whenever the tools are being implemented, it would be by strategists such as himself.

He explained to me that the designers being involved in the research tools depended on the client and how much they are willing to financially invest in the process leading up to the ideation phase, and what their expectation of the role of the designers and the agency were. He also explained to me that the creative work that OgilvyEarth in London needed was at this stage still being executed by creative teams at Ogilvy Worldwide (pers. comm., 21 September). When I asked the senior designer in Cape Town (2015, pers. comm., 22 July) if they used the processes and tools listed on the OgilvyEarth website, he said that I should rather ask the OgilvyEarth strategist about them. The co-authors of Ogilvy's 'Big IdeaL', (2010) Colin Mitchell and John Shaw, are both planning directors. It does seem as if the strategists have been the main drivers of the sustainability communication processes at OgilvyEarth.

Yet in the internationally burgeoning field of service design the designer's role in the process is crucial. In the seminal textbook for this emerging field "Service design thinking" (Schneider & Stickdorn 2011), the authors include graphic designers as an essential team members on the multi-disciplinary teams required to successfully design a new service. The role of both branding design and information design are crucial in explaining new concepts or systems to users. "Every kind of visual positioning in the branding of services and service organisations, needs the experience and expertise of professional designers" (Schneider & Stickdorn, p. 77). They make a case for graphic designers to be involved in the service design process from the very beginning, when strategy is being decided upon, and not just at the end when they have to make the 'Implementation' look good, as it seems is still the case in advertising. This is because of designers' well developed visual imagination, good understanding of target markets (or 'end users' in service design terms), good mock-up, prototyping and visualising skills (Schneider & Stickdorn 2011, p. 78).

I believe that the problem also lies with the fact that designers are not confident enough, or lack the skills to assume these new roles required in design for sustainability. "Co-design requires designers to foster new skills. Designers must become or improve their abilities as enablers, catalysts, activists, facilitators, connectors, arbitrators, storytellers, visualizers and scenario setters." (Chapman & Gant 2007, p. 47). In the Richardson report on Design and Sustainability compiled in 2005 for the UK Design Council, they clearly state that sustainability modules are not yet included in design schools curricula, (it might have changed since then) but there was also (at that stage) not much demand for these services. Their research determined that more than 30 skills were required to practice sustainable product design. Some of these skills (including facilitation skills, people-centered skills, knowledge of manufacturing techniques and understanding of material and environmental impacts) can also be translated into graphic design (Richardson, Irwin & Sherwin 2005, p.10). Currently, these are not the skills advertising agencies are looking for in the designers they hire, or skills that designers are trained in once they start working for OgilvyEarth for example.

Conclusion

Fuad-Luke says that on issues of sustainability "designers lack skills, hold little influence with decision makers and receive inadequate support from business and government" (2007, p.26). This seems to be the case at agencies like OgilvyEarth, and therefore graphic designers are not in a position to solve problems that are more complex than telling a 'better story'. At OgilvyEarth in Cape Town and in London, strategists and account planners seem to take the lead in terms of sustainability initiatives and have the skills to implement the tools described on the OgilvyEarth website, that really could be used effectively by both strategists and designers.

Graphic designers could be much more informed about the issues surrounding sustainability and what it actually entails, which would give them more confidence in contributing solutions beyond communication to their clients. Designers and art directors need more skills from educational institutions, and new ways of engaging with other specialists as well as with their clients, in order to change their function in advertising agencies.

At this stage good storytelling is being done by agencies about the changes for sustainability in their clients' businesses, however big or small. And even though any change for the better, no matter how small, is good, why not encourage clients or brands to make even bigger changes and help them in the facilitation thereof? As Chapman & Gant say " ...if you embrace consumerism then a role is set up for the designer as a facilitator of objects and experiences that through their existence stimulate and steer real sustainable progress" (2007, p.7).

Agencies like OgilvyEarth and Ogilvy Worldwide are well versed in the art of 'goodvertising' or telling their clients better stories, but agencies seem poised and ready to go further than storytelling. Clients are certainly more conscious of what they are promoting and the impacts thereof than in the *Mad Men* era, or even when the last First Things First manifesto was published in 2000, but could learn to expect more from their agencies and the creatives who work in them. But then creatives need to be equipped with the skills and knowledge in order to be prepared to go further than compelling storytelling.

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