

**THE UNITED STATES AND JAPAN: COMPARATIVE RESEARCH ON  
CREATIVITY AND THE EFFECT OF ACCOUNT PLANNING**

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## **ABSTRACT**

What is the difference in advertising creativity between the United States and Japan? Does account planning influence any differences? This paper conducts comparative research on the differences in advertising creativity between the two countries. We investigate whether there are any differences in advertising business customs, in the process of account planning, and in the characteristics of advertising creativity. In addition, we examine the backgrounds for these differences in relation to culture, art, and thinking. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with top planners in the United States and Japan to clarify the differences in account planning and the reasons for these differences.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Purpose of the Study**

Creativity research is one of the least advanced areas within advertising research in Japan. The comparison of advertising creativity between Japan and the United States (US) is very limited. Likewise, research on differences in account planning between Japan and the US is almost nonexistent. In this context, the purpose of this research is to clarify the differences in advertising creativity and the effect of account planning between the US and Japan.

Based on the research results from semi-structured interviews, a comparative study of creative briefs and account planning was completed. The analysis focuses on the following four perspectives: 1) differences in advertising business customs between Japan and the US,

2) differences in account planning processes between Japan and the US, especially the use of creative briefs, 3) differences in creativity and the creators' viewpoints in advertising campaigns, and 4) differences in background, culture, art, and thinking.

### **Preceding Studies**

Research on advertising creativity has been conducted from a wide range of perspectives. Sassor and Koslow (2008) classified creativity studies into the three categories of person, place, and process. El-Murad and West (2004) and Amabile (1983) analyzed the definition of creativity in advertising. Koslow, Sasser, and Riordan (2003) examined the different evaluations of creativity by creators and account representatives, arguing that creators considered appropriate advertising to be artistic and that they emphasized originality. In contrast, account representatives considered that advertising should be strategic and they focused on strategy. West, Cover, and Caruana (2008) researched the different views on advertising creativity among advertising professionals and consumers, finding that advertising professionals emphasized relevance, originality, and goal-directed advertising, whereas consumers evaluated the execution of commercials. Kilgour and De Run (2013) insisted on the antinomy or contradiction between originality and appropriateness in relation to creativity.

This existing research on creativity was conducted in the context of Western culture and background. In contrast, the current research paper focuses on the difference in creativity between the US and Japan. Thus, the comparison was conducted taking into account the different contexts in US and Japan. In addition, the research pays attention to the differences in account planning, which is the key factor in the creative development process.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Personal Interviews with Top Planners**

For this research project, to grasp the characteristics of and differences in account planning, expert interviews (semi-structured interviews based upon case study method) were conducted during 2015, from February to October. The respondents were 21 top planners who worked for major advertising agencies in Japan and the US. The selection of respondents based on theoretical sampling. The criterion for the selection of planners was that they were managers or senior managers at major advertising agencies. In more detail, the respondents comprised eight planners from multinational agencies in Japan, eight planners from Japan's top 10 agencies, and five planners from top agencies in the US. The American Advertising Agency Association (known as the 4A's) provided supported for the interviews in the US to be conducted during the 2015 Strategy Festival in New York.

### **Questionnaires and Summary**

The questionnaires asked respondents a series of five questions regarding a format or creative brief for strategic planning. First, respondents were asked whether they utilized such a format (question 1). Then, the next four questions varied depending on whether respondents answered that they did (Group A) or did not (Group B) utilize such a format. The questions asked were as follows:

A: Those who responded that they have a format for strategic planning were asked:

- 1) Do you have a format for strategic planning in your company?
- 2) How do you utilize a format for strategic planning?
- 3) What is the reputation of the format among planners, creators, and account executives?
- 4) Why do you need the format? What is the role of format? What is the merit of format?
- 5) Have there been any changes in the format compared with the situation 10–20 years ago?

B: Those who responded that they did not have a unified format for strategic planning were

asked:

- 1) Do you have a format for strategic planning in your company?
- 2) How do you connect with the different sections in your company without a planning format?
- 3) What is the viewpoint of the planners, creators, and account executives on not having a planning format?
- 4) What do you think are the merits and demerits of having a format for account planning?
- 5) Do you feel there have been any changes in account planning compared with the situation 10–20 years ago?

The venues for the interviews in Japan were the advertising agency offices of the respondents. In the US, the 4A's prepared a meeting room at a convention center. Each interview session took 45 to 60 minutes. With the respondents' agreement, all interviews were recorded and typewritten after the interview sessions. The research results were summarized, and combined with existing data and text research to yield a more in-depth analysis.

### **Advertising Business Customs**

In Japan, advertising is an oligopoly market. In 2015, the top three advertising agencies—Dentsu, Hakuhodo, and ADK—accounted for close to 40% of the total advertising market. In the US, in contrast, the top three advertising agencies' market share in 2013 was only 3% (*Ad Age*, 2014). What is the reason for these differences in market structure? One of the respondents from a major advertising agency in Japan provided an answer: “Multinational advertising agencies follow the rule one company for one category in terms of their clients. They use the integrated format of planning (e.g., creative brief) and use the format for the global market” (Mr. K). That is, in Japan, an advertising agency can conduct business with multiple competitive companies within the same industry category (multi company in one

category rule), whereas in the US, an advertising agency can only conduct business with one company within the same industry category (one company for one category rule).

Multinational companies and worldwide sponsors, such as companies that sponsor the Olympics, follow the rule of one client for one category. However, when considering Japan's local sponsors, one advertising company may work for two banks or for two electronics companies. That is, in Japan, an advertising agency can have clients that are competitor companies within the same industry category. This is the business custom of the Japanese advertising business.

### **Differences in Account Planning**

According to the interview research conducted, almost all multinational advertising agencies have planning formats, and their use is obligatory. As one planner stated, "We have unified formats and we should use them" (Mr. Y). However, many of the major national advertising agencies in Japan do not have unified planning formats and their use depends upon the account group. This was indicated by the following comments by planners: "Our strategic planning is fully customized behavior" (Mr. K); "The characteristic of our planning is the private management way. Each client and each planner has their own way of planning" (Mr. W); and "Multinational agencies practice monotheism. We Japanese practice polytheism" (Mr. W). This is a fundamental difference in advertising planning between Japan and the US. These differences influence the process of creativity itself. One planning director of multinational agencies said "No brief, no work" (Ms. I). Table 1 summarizes the differences in the account-planning format (i.e., the creative brief) and thinking between the US and Japan based on the interview research.

The results of Kobayashi et al. (2008) confirm our interview research. They conducted research with 44 advertising agencies in Japan on account planning. Their results indicated

that only 36% of such agencies have an independent planning section and that almost 60% do not use creative briefs for advertising creative development.

Planners in multinational advertising agencies (in the US and Japan) tend to consider that the role of a planning format is to provide strategic direction, ensure agreement with the client, and to empower the creative. Planners in Japanese agencies tend to consider that the role of the creative brief or planning format is to provide basic confirmation of the brief, to act as a guideline, and to provide education to young, less experienced staff. Table 2 summarizes the research results.

### **Creativity in Advertising: The US and Japan**

The characteristics of advertising creativity are summarized in the following three points. First, advertising creativity has elements in common with creativity in other areas, such as originality, novelty, appropriateness, and imagination, but it also has goal-directed and problem-solving aspects. (El-Murad and West, 2004) Second, advertising creativity should resolve the issue faced by the corporation or organization and be useful in meetings its practical needs. Third, in contrast to creativity in the fields of art and science, which can be achieved by individuals, advertising creativity requires the consent of many relevant people involved in the idea development process, from the generation of idea through to the final advertisement or advertising campaigns. (Murao, 2017)

One of the major advertising awards in Japan is the Dentsu advertising award. There are only three simple criteria for judging the awards: 1) does the advertising move the target's mind? 2) does the advertising communicate the client's strategy? and 3) is the advertising challenging? In the case of major advertising awards in the West, the entry sheets for awards such as the Cannes Lions awards the Clio awards and the D&AD awards, include points such as the following: 1) what are the issues of the client? 2) who are the target group? 3) what is

the target insight? 4) what is the core idea? 5) how is the core idea executed? 6) what are the relevant and measurable results? In addition to these, other criteria cover whether the advertisement is bold, provocative, and capable of moving society. In terms of the emphasis in the creative process, the idea is fundamental in the US, whereas, in Japan, it is not necessarily important.

In the US, advertising creative development is based on an advertising strategy (i.e., the creative brief), which means that the targets, the role of advertising, and the core idea are clearly defined. As a result, American advertising is relatively strategic in its characteristics. In contrast, in Japan, advertising development is based on relatively vague guidelines, such as “who to say it to, what to say, and how to say it”. As a result, the core idea is not necessarily clear, and the execution tends to be sympathy oriented. In other words, it tends to be about creating an emotion felt by the audience. Thus, the key characteristics of Japanese advertising are emotional. As one of the top Japanese copywriters stated, “I have been making advertising for 40–50 years. And I confess that I have been ignoring data and marketing that is based on data. But I don’t feel any shortage and I have been achieving a sufficient advertising effect” (Nakahata, 2008). Japanese creators tend to ignore formal strategies. In contrast, American creative directors do not commence creative development without a creative brief. This provides a good illustration of the contrast between the US and Japan in the creator’s attitude toward the creative brief.

*Ad Age*’s top 10 slogans in the twentieth century provide a good example (*Ad Age* 1999) of the approach in the US. The number one slogan is De Beers’s “A diamond is forever” which was developed by N.W.Ayer. This is a typical example of a clear creative strategy. The issue is to establish the diamond as the number one gemstone. The consumer insight is based on the aspirations of women to own a diamond. The reasons for this aspiration are: 1) diamonds are the hardest natural stone, 2) diamonds are legendary in the stories of Cleopatra, among the



English Royal family, 3) the diamond is the most brilliant of all the gemstones. The idea is to combine diamonds and love, developing the concept of the diamond as a symbol of love. The execution involves promoting diamonds for engagement rings. The results were almost 70% acquisition rate for diamond engagement rings in the US, the United Kingdom, and Japan. (Quelch et al., 2000)

Koukoku Hihyou (Advertising Critics periodical) selected the top 100 Japanese commercials (CMs) of the twentieth century. Within the top 20, only three CMs received international advertising awards. The others were Japanese copy-oriented, Japanese tradition-oriented, celebrity-oriented, or humorous CMs. One award-winning CM was “Cheerfully” (Puppy), which received the Cannes Gold Lion award in 1982. A Japanese advertising critic said that this was a very attractive commercial, which used emotion to connect the brand and the consumer (Amano, 2008). However, one of the Western judges at Cannes at that time said, “I couldn’t understand why the puppy was just running and this was a whisky commercial”. This is a typical reaction of Western people to Japanese commercials. In addition, as the example illustrates, it is difficult to write a clear creative brief for such a commercial.

Table 3 summarizes the characteristics and differences in creativity between the US and Japan and Table 4 summarizes Ad Age’s top 10 slogans in the US and the top 10 Japanese TV commercials in the twentieth century.

### **Background: Culture, Art, Thinking, and Tastes**

What is the background for these differences in account planning and creativity?

Analyses are conducted in this regard for art, thinking, and culture. Takashina (1983) asserted that the Western ideals of beauty focus are strength, wealth, and the ideals of Greece and Rome. Western beauty is closely aligned to ideas of truth and right. He claimed that the characteristics of Western beauty are objective and rational. In contrast, Takashina asserted

that the features of Japanese beauty are smallness, purity, and the charm of the ancient. Japanese beauty is close to Japanese nature. He claimed that the characteristic of Japanese beauty is emotional.

Russel (1946) stated that, "Philosophy is the part of integrated social life and what I want to thought is philosophy like this." He wrote that Western philosophy is the basis of Western culture and that the essence of Western philosophy is rationalism. Greece originated the ideas of mathematics, science, and philosophy (Russel, 1946). In contrast, the Japanese history of thought has different origins and features to the Western philosophy. Instead, it is a combination of original Japanese culture and imported culture from the continent (i.e., China, Korea, and the West). Maruyama (1961) indicated four features of Japanese thinking: 1) a feeling of transience, influenced by Buddhism, 2) the concept of *mono no aware* articulated by Motoori (1763) in his book about the tale of Genji, 3) the netherworld mythology from ancient Japan, and 4) ethics from Confucianism. The Japanese do not insist on purely logical thinking, instead paying attention to feeling, tastes, and intuition. That is one of the reasons for Japan's emotional culture. Table 5 summarizes the backgrounds that inform the analysis of advertising creativity in the US and Japan. .

## CONCLUSION

To summarize the results of this research, the difference in advertising creativity between Japan and the US becomes clear through an analysis of business customs, account planning processes, advertising creativity, and cultural backgrounds.

- 1) In the US, the advertising business custom is one client for one industry category, whereas in Japan, the custom is to have many clients from one industry category.
- 2) Advertising agencies in the US have a formal creative brief and its use is obligatory. In

contrast, Japanese advertising agencies are not required to have a formal creative brief and their use depends on the account team's preferences.

3) As revealed by interview research, a planning director of a multinational advertising agency (based in Japan but operating according to Western rules) stated, "No brief, no work". In contrast, one of the top creators of Japan said, "I have been ignoring data and marketing that is based on data".

4) The core idea is a fundamental element of creativity in advertising in the US, whereas it tends to receive little attention in the Japanese advertising industry.

5) The characteristics of the US's creativity are clarity, strength and strategy, whereas Japanese creativity is emotional and sympathetic. One of the reasons for this is the different way of using the creative brief.

6) Concerning cultural differences, the Western ideal of beauty is strong, clear, and rational, whereas the Japanese concepts of beauty are clean, cute, and emotional. The Western way of thinking is based relatively more on rationalism, whereas Japanese thinking is based not only on logic, but also on feeling, tastes, and intuition.

To conclude, the key role of advertising creativity is to move people's minds and to lure them to take action. The use of creative briefs in pursuit of these goals varies greatly between the US and Japan. Despite these differences, there are creative works that move both Western and Japanese people simultaneously. People's minds can be moved beyond their origin or nationality. The purpose of this research is not to strive for superiority or inferiority of creativity. There are many routes to reach creativity, and to move people's minds. What we need is an open-minded attitude to accept all types of creativity from around the globe. Future research will investigate the creativity of current campaigns in the US and Japan.

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Table 1. Differences in Account Planning Formats between the US and Japan

	<b>The United States</b>	<b>Japan</b>
<b>Format (Creative Brief)</b>	<b>Unified Format</b>	<b>Haven't Unified Format</b>
<b>Way of Utilizing</b>	<b>Obligatory</b>	<b>Depend on Group</b>
<b>Reputation</b>	<b>No brief, no work.</b>	<b>Low attention</b>
<b>Role of Format</b>	<b>Strategic Direction Client Agreement Empower Creative</b>	<b>Basic Confirmation Education</b>
<b>Changes 10-20 Years</b>	<b>Insight to Incite Share &amp; Engagement Participation</b>	<b>From creative of mass media to all type (e.g. digital)</b>

(Multinational agencies in Japan were included to the United States.)

Table 2. Summary of Interview Research: Major US Agencies and Top Three Japanese Agencies

	Existence of format	Ways of using format	Reputation	Role & merit of format	Changes from 10–20 years ago
US Mr. M Multinational Agency Chief Strategy Officer	Yes, we have a format. 4Ps which represent human nature.	We use a format 100%. Some clients have their own format.	Creatives prefer a format. Planner can be involved in creative process.	The right format is important to develop common ideas, consent, and understanding.	Human beings do not change. Media and channels have changed.
US Mr. C Multinational Agency Previous Head of Strategy	Yes, we have a format. Format contains five sections.	We use a format 100%. We do not mind changing the order of the content.	People like formats. The challenge is the quality of the brief.	There are freelance staff. The role of the format is to ensure all the team members understand the strategy.	The outline of the format does not change. We should develop ideas for each type of media.
US Mr. CT Independent Agency Strategy Director	Yes, we have a format. It consist of 8 questions.	We use the format 100% in our company. 50% is shared with the client.	Both planners and creators like the format.	It is important to expand the opportunities of the creatives. Role of format as discipline.	Digital lifestyle has made changes to briefs, including the need to share and engage.
Japan Mr. K Japanese mega agency Strategic Director	We may have and we may not have. We have one to trainee education.	We are based on fully customized behavior. Multinational agencies have a unified format.	Creators and planners do not need a creative brief.	For education.	Multinational agencies have a one company for one category rule. They have a format and they act globally.
Japan Mr. I Japanese top 3 agency Chief Strategy Officer	We have a format but it is not standardized.	Each account team has its own format or method.	Proposition is good for mass advertising, but not good for web campaigns.	Improve the quality of the strategy. Maintain the service level provided to clients.	The agency's role has changed from communication to marketing.
Japan Mr. T Japanese major agency Executive Planning Director	We have a format. Both the company and the group have formats.	We do not use the format for our main jobs.	Younger staff want formats. Many people arrange formats in their own way.	Significant direction. Assist complex teams to work together.	Change from purchase to make the customer to royal user.

Table 3. Characteristics and Differences in Advertising Creativity: The US and Japan

	<b>US</b>	<b>Japan</b>
<b>Common understanding</b>	<b>Originality, novelty, appropriateness, and imagination. Goal-directed and problem-solving.</b>	
	<b>Should solve the issue of the corporation or organization and meet its practical needs.</b>	
	<b>Must obtain the consent of all related people to complete an idea development process.</b>	
<b>Differences</b>	<b>The idea is fundamental.</b>	<b>Little focus on the idea.</b>
	<b>Clarity, strength, strategy.</b>	<b>Emotional, sympathetic.</b>



Table 4. Top 10 Ad Age Slogans in the US and Top 10 CMs in the twentieth century in Japan

	Ad Age Top 10 Slogans(USA)		Top 10 TV CMs(Japan)	
1	A diamond is forever	De Beers	hungry?	Cup Noodle
2	Just do it	Nike	ie, ie	Renown
3	The pause that refreshes	Coca-Cola	Monkey	Walkman
4	Taste great, less filling	Miller Lite	Rimbaud	Suntory
5	We try harder	Avis	Christmas express	JR Tokai
6	Good to the last drop	Maxwell House	Ping Pong	Sapporo
7	Breakfast of champions	Wheaties	Sammy Davis Jr	Suntory
8	Dose she, or does't she?	Clairol	Uncle Toris	Suntory
9	When it rains, it pours	Morton Salt	Intense to beautiful	Xerox
10	Where's the beef?	Wendy's	In one's way	Fuji Film

(Source: US/Ad Age Advertising Century, Japan/Kokoku Hihyo 250)

Table 5. Backgrounds for Advertising Creativity: The US and Japan

	<b>The United States</b>	<b>Japan</b>
<b>Ad. Business Custom</b>	<b>One Client for One Category</b>	<b>Multi Client for One Category</b>
<b>Creator's Mentality</b>	<b>Brief is Essential</b>	<b>Brief is Reference</b>
<b>Characteristics of Art</b>	<b>Rational &amp; Objective</b>	<b>Emotional &amp; Sympathetic</b>
<b>Thinking</b>	<b>Rationalism</b>	<b>Intuition</b>