

boy-bias

an open letter to industry leaders
by cindy lord

After seeing the umpteenth cover of Creativity magazine featuring self-satisfied, casual-but-sophisticated guys, I got very grumpy. I rarely see a female face gracing the cover of this magazine. It is always the same guys. Well they are technically all unique individuals, but the same type of guys – kind of like Stepford creatives.

Well, as a girl with an evidentiary bent, I decided to validate my hastily-drawn conclusion about Creativity's boy-bias. I quickly surveyed the last 12 covers and did a body count.

Based on this data, women are tied with "wrestlers," in terms of image frequency. And it is worth noting that out of the five women featured, only one is actually in advertising, three are clients, and one is in film.

So what's the deal? No one can seriously mount the argument that women are not creative or that they don't have sufficient leadership capabilities (apologies here of course, to Neil French, former creative head of WPP, who had the spectacularly bad judgment to share publicly his real opinion about women in the ad business: "Women don't make it to the top because they don't deserve to. They're crap."¹

The sad truth is that Creativity is simply reflecting the creative advertising business it covers.

According to a 2005 report from the United States Equal Opportunity Commission (the most recent report available), women account for 65% of all advertising agency employees, but only 47% of officers and managers; and the disparity no doubt grows at the most senior levels. The real question here is not why doesn't Creativity magazine feature more women, but why are there not more women in prominent roles in advertising in general, and creative departments in particular?

Based on available research and my own 15+ years of observation, the following provides my take on the drivers of this continued inequity. There is no silver bullet. This is truly a multifaceted issue with many causes, including the following.

- The Boys Club Matters. Being liked by, and to some degree, "like" the guys in charge is important. Human nature

dictates that people tend to like to spend time with those who are similar to themselves (homophily), so boys beget boys.² Additionally, that affinity is often developed outside business hours. Women, particularly women with chil-

dren, are simply less likely to prioritize these encounters, due to other demands or interests.

- The Johnny Bravo Suit is a 40L. For those who don't recall, Greg Brady auditioned for the part of rock 'n' roller Johnny Bravo on an episode of the TV series The Brady Bunch. He got the part but was dismayed to find out that he only won because he literally fit the pre-made Johnny

Featured on the cover of Creativity magazine, February 2007 – January 2008

Men	45
Awards (one award did appear to have boobs)	6
Women	5
Wrestlers (not included in "men" numbers)	5
Caveman	1

Bravo suit of clothes. To some degree the ad industry does the same thing when it comes to senior positions. We don't just fill them, we cast them. We channel what we think our clients would expect to see in the role of a CEO or an ECD or a President and we unconsciously cast to those specifications – tall, of a certain age, good-looking, designer eyewear, double-extra-bonus-points for an accent and, of course, male. Our subconscious hypothesis is that a man will somehow be taken more seriously and be more persuasive with our senior, mostly male, clients.

- The lifestyle is a bitch (or fabulous – depending on your POV). Shooting in Europe for two weeks, editing in New York for three...you can be on the road a lot and in crisis mode for the balance. This makes it hard for those who want to prioritize anything besides their jobs to choose this path for the long haul. My observation is that women with kids are more likely than men with kids to prioritize spending time with their kids and are less likely to accept this lifestyle. I know plenty of "ad dads" with stay-at-home wives; I can count the number of "ad wives" with stay-at-home husbands on one hand (OK, one finger).

- Communication Style Bias. Research shows that women are penalized for assertive verbal communications and self-promotion, while men are not.³ This creates a conundrum for women in this industry...they need to present their ideas with great confidence (because, hey, if they don't think it's a great idea, why should anyone else), yet this great display of confidence can trigger negative feelings and perceptions by challenging deeply ingrained beliefs about female decorum.

- The Curse of Subjectivity. Our business is spectacularly subjective. We rely heavily on individual judgment when selecting one particular idea over another. There is evidence that suggests work done by women is evaluated less favorably than work done by men.⁴ The implication here is that there may

be systematic, unconscious bias toward anointing the men as brilliant and the women as mediocre. We are not, thank goodness, portfolio managers who can simply compare our highly quantified returns at the end of each quarter and assess merit dispassionately.

- What no one wants to acknowledge. Please don't send me buckets of hate email on this one, but my observation is that women are often simply outmaneuvered by men for senior positions. We can be a bit naïve sometimes. We actually believe what we are told – that if we do a great job, collaborate with others and have clients that love us, we will advance. We don't necessarily see what men see – that this is a game. A game to be won. And while us ladies are thinking about some value-add idea for a client, the men are schmoozing and positioning themselves like crazy to the powers that be.

Conquering the Bias

This bias needs to be overcome. With women making the vast majority of consumer purchases, agencies ignore them at their peril. Here are three things that we can start doing right now.

1. Set targets for women in senior leadership and track progress toward these goals. In corporate America, the companies that have been most successful at integrating women into senior management have literally identified improvement targets and tracked their progress over time. On an even larger scale, Norway recently implemented a law requiring 40% of non-executive company directors be female. I understand Norway is still in business. These goals can be at the holding company level to allow for idiosyncrasies at individual agencies. And the goals and progress reports should be made public. Think of it as the space race for girls.
2. Challenge the definition of what a successful "ad man" looks like. We need to burn in effigy the image of "that guy" we all carry around in our heads and realize that brilliant

thinkers come in all shapes and sizes – one of them might even look like an overweight 38 year old woman (let's talk about the prejudice against the overweight in this industry another day).

3. Get a life. Agencies need to drop their bias against individuals, male or female, who make the mistake of professing any substantial interests or commitments outside work – including their own families. It is expected that the promises we make to our clients and co-workers will be kept. We break them only under the most egregious of circumstances. Yet we routinely expect agency employees to break personal commitments. There is no reason we can't apply some of our creative energy to negotiating these barriers to achieve a win-win for all parties. It is reasonable for someone to want to preserve a promise to their child or their spouse or themselves. It is the request that is unreasonable. Start practicing now: Generation Y is around the corner and they think differently about these things.

Now is the time. Agencies are challenged on many fronts. We cannot afford to continue seriously under-leveraging the resources that walk our very halls. So get off your asses and get to it. And do it even though the women you promote may not laugh at your jokes, or hang out late into the evening at your favorite bars, or make you feel always completely comfortable.

- 1T. Leonard: Advertising chief loses job over French maid and sexist insults. Daily Telegraph, October 2005.
- 2S. J Broyles and J M Grow: Creative women in advertising agencies: why so few "babes in boyland"? Journal of Consumer Marketing Volume 25, No 1, 2008.
- 3A. Eagly and L Carli: Women and the labyrinth of leadership. Harvard Business Review, September 2007.

4Ibid.