

LEVELLING THE FIELD

More and more clients see strategic planning as an essential part of an advertising campaign. But with associated costs of up to £100k, this is a service many regional agencies simply can't afford. Or at least they couldn't before Planning Express appeared on the scene...

One of the key lessons learnt over the last ten years has been the importance of planning in relation to the success of a campaign. Clients have come to expect a high level of planning in the pitch process, so the rule basically goes if you expect to pitch for the big-buck accounts, invest in a planning function.

However, it's not that straightforward. To hire a top level planner, you can be looking at anything between £50k and £100k, which means you have to be fairly sure of landing the account. Step forward Planning Express.

The company is the brainchild of planning gurus Liz Bielinska and Katrina Michel, and the duo bring with them impressive CVs. Bielinska began her planning career at BDH Manchester before moving to the States to work for Omnicom. She returned to the UK in 2005, consulting for a number of Manchester agencies before joining BDH/TBWA for a year as a board director and head of account planning. Michel has worked for 20 years in account planning, for agencies such as Publicis Ogilvy & Mather and, more recently, Cheatham Bell/JWT where she joined as head of planning and then chairman.

Planning Express, which formed officially in January, aims to fill the gap in the market that exists in regional agencies. "We identified that finding a strong planner is difficult and expensive," says Michel. "There are certain clients demanding high levels of planning, but a lot of agencies just can't afford it."

"We're doing everything, from pitches and brand strategies for smaller agencies," Bielinska adds. "We're calling that 'levelling the playing field' – where smaller agencies don't have a planner or may never have had one on that particular type of account, they need to add that type of value for a pitch.

"At the other end of the scale, we're doing some classic brand strategies for marketing departments. That type of client has had experience of working with very large agencies and has had planners at their disposal – they just don't happen to have them at the moment."

Isn't there a conflict with working for agencies in the same sector though? "We've set out some simple rules," says Bielinska. "And none of our clients have experienced problems yet. One of our rules is that in a pitch, we will only work for one of the companies. For example, there was a pitch recently where over time, three of the different agencies involved approached us, but it was on a first-come-first-served basis so we could only work on one.

"On other accounts, where there's a roster of agencies – and this happened recently – if we've done a project on that brand for one agency, then a few weeks later a different agency asks us to do a project for that brand, your instinct

tells you you shouldn't do it. To be on the safe side, we called the first agency and said, 'How do you feel about this?' If we ended up with brands in the same category – if one agency asked us to work on one fizzy drink and another agency asked us to work on another – we would talk to the first agency and ask how they feel about the other one of us working on that project. I'm pretty certain they would say no. It's all about being as open and honest as possible so that nobody is caught in a conflict situation."

Agencies and clients seem to be more open to using a third party at the moment, with all agencies telling prospective clients that they're using Planning Express. Bielinska and Michel encourage this.

"I think it would be a very awkward situation if they were pretending we were part of their staff," says Bielinska. "We encourage people to talk about us as their 'planning partners' or 'part-time planners'. I think we're now at a stage where clients are totally happy with that. They think it shows a prudence on behalf of the advertising agency that they're not having expensive overheads.



Planning Express founders Liz Bielinska and Katrina Michel both have impressive marketing histories.

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"I've got some agency clients whose client is extremely large and who I would have expected to think the agency had everyone on staff. But when they've explained the relationship, the client has been absolutely fine with it – as long as we can assure them about conflict and total confidentiality."

While Planning Express is just Michel and Bielinska at the moment, both hope to take on more staff and create a layered approach, so they can take on more clients.

"We have a lot of work, and it's just the two of us, so we'd always planned to take on more people," Bielinska says. "In some ways, we feel we can fulfil a need for agencies not only now, but also in the longer term. We're doing the training, we're standardising processes and we're making sure we're up to speed on the latest thinking in planning. They don't have to do that as they're borrowing our brains for certain periods, so want to have a large team of people to make that easier.

"We've even talked about having layers of staff. The top layer would be people like Katrina and me, who can sit with a small number of senior people and do really big thinking about our top clients. Then there are plenty of other projects where you don't need an expensive planner, so there may be a level of planner that's not quite so senior."

There's also talk of setting up satellite offices and a plan to expand the service the company offers into communications planning, channel planning and maybe even independent media planning. "But that's a long way off," says Bielinska. "The main reason we called the company Planning Express was that we are very down to earth and practical about usable planning, so we didn't want some airy-fairy abstract name. We wanted to do what it said on the tin."

Bielinska believes the regions are the perfect place for the company. "I don't think, a few years ago, this would have worked," she says. "I don't think clients – or agencies – would have accepted people coming in on a freelance basis, but you see it in all aspects of the business now.

"A lot of agencies in the regions have really phenomenal creative, but they can't get in the door of some clients because they have the strategic planning bit missing. That's where we're making the most progress, where forward-thinking agencies are spotting this.

"It's really satisfying knowing that we're making quite a difference to them. Even if it's just the fact that we're sitting at the table and they're able to say with pride that they have a strategic planner, because they've never been able to say that before."