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The Influence of Female Creative Directors on Women Entering Advertising

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THE INFLUENCE OF FEMALE CREATIVE DIRECTORS
ON WOMEN ENTERING ADVERTISING

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
University Honors Requirements
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

by
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Abstract

In 2012, only 3 percent of creative directors in advertising were women. Today that ratio has reached more than 11 percent and is on the rise in hopes to reach 50 percent. This ascent has been encouraging for me personally; I would love to take part in a movement for greater diversity in the industry, and I feel fortunate and thankful for the women who got it started half a century ago. But beyond the women leading the ad industry, how is this rise helping young women preparing to become creatives and project managers? How does this movement translate beyond the field, into the classrooms and mindsets of the future Mary Wells Lawrences, Jane Maases and Shelly Lazaruses?

So far, barely at all.

My research last fall began by surveying 80 women studying advertising across the U.S. to understand how they felt about entering the industry, what names they knew and whether they had any advertising role models - more specifically, role models who looked like them. The responses I received were surprising yet relatable. These women from Oregon to Arkansas to Georgia and New York all felt the same. We knew the percentage, but not the names, stories, or advice from the women out there paving the way for us soon to come.

Like any good advertiser, I saw a problem and set out to solve it.

After months of strategizing, ideation and thesis meetings with my advisors, I've created the solution. It's called Adspire. Or rather, Adspire.us.

Key Words: advertising, women, creative, directors, female, empowerment, students, inspiration, role, models

Dedication

I'd like to dedicate this project to the women who have inspired, empowered, championed and supported me.

Thank you Mom for raising me to be strong-willed, defiant and boundlessly ambitious.

Thank you Grandma for giving me spirit, enthusiasm and a proud, loud voice.

Thank you Maddy Patten for being the best ad friend, cohost & person to spend college with. I'm going to miss you so much, but happy we'll be in this wild, wonderful industry together.

Thank you Valerie Jones for helping Creative Commons add value for women at UNL, empowering me to create meaningful work and providing support through laughs and expertise.

Thank you Kelli Britten for being the best proofreader at CoJMC; providing guidance and growth for me and a myriad others; and being the reason Happy Hour News was born.

Thank you Patti Harney for being the sweet and kind ad mother I needed while teaching me how to write great, impactful, strategic copy. I can't wait to follow in your footsteps.

Thank you to the 80+ female advertising students throughout the U.S. who answered my questions. Your answers enlightened and encouraged me to create something for all of us.

Thank you to the accomplished ad women who took the time to tell me their stories and get this project off the ground. Adspire wouldn't exist if you weren't out there breaking ceilings and sharing how. Never doubt the impact your trailblazing leaves on every single one of us.

Project

In fall 2018, I sent out a Female Ad Student Survey to the advisors and presidents of every AAF-affiliated Ad Club in the U.S. I received 80+ survey responses from students in 15 different states and 17 different schools. The young women answered questions including:

- Who are your role models in advertising?
- Do you have any female role models in advertising? If so, who are they?
- Do you have any apprehensions about entering the advertising industry?
- If you could ask two questions to an accomplished ad woman, what would they be?
- What, if anything, do you feel young women might be lacking when it comes to resources, encouragement, or inspiration about entering the advertising industry?
- Check the box of each ad man and ad woman you've heard of before.
- Do you think it would be beneficial if you were aware of more female role models in the advertising industry?
- If there were a social website for female advertising students, which of the following elements do you think it should contain?

The responses were surprising yet relatable. More than 50 percent had no role models in the ad industry. Of those who did, 50 percent just named their professors. When asked what names they recognized, more than 80 percent knew a majority of men. 57 percent knew only men. These young women wrote that confidence, female support (i.e. girl power) and strong women to look up to were things they were most struggling to find. 89 percent were positive it would be beneficial to have more role models in the industry, and 98 percent were in favor of a social website for female advertising students to connect, discuss, share inspiring content and learn about accomplished female advertising professionals.

So, I went out and made one.

Adspire.us is a website designed to provide inspiration, advice and, most importantly, role models for aspiring ad women. I wrote features about these professionals' stories, creative work, mantras and recommendations. I created forums for students to ask questions to ad women, share inspiration, post internship opportunities and discuss current issues with one another. Overall, I constructed an online environment where women studying advertising can see, hear, support, connect with and empower each other.

Although the time allotted for my honors thesis granted me days, weeks and months to pursue and produce this passion project, it is not one that will end on the due date. This is just the beginning. I've tested the website with focus groups, wherein my target audience analyzed and engaged with the website. I received anonymous feedback including "I think it's going to be a great rallying cry for female creatives" ; "It connects women in advertising across the globe and lets them know that they are not alone" ; "It solves the problem of having ad women to look up to" ; "I loved how it was empowering to women without feeling like extreme feminism or just shouting rage" ; "Felt like it gives me an edge to be working in advertising; like I have this connected community of women behind me."

I've developed a newsletter plan so female students can receive a new feature about an accomplished ad woman each month, with a goal of heightening the engagement, knowledge and ambition of these future advertisers. By the end of March, I plan to pitch/deliver Adspire to media, ad clubs and women ad students across the nation. I plan to recruit volunteers to write and interview ad women with me, with aims to provide a creative writing opportunity for these volunteers' portfolios as well. In total, I plan to keep growing this site without an end in mind, even when my role eventually changes from student to creative, and eventually to a creative director one day. Representation matters, and this project helps female ad students know there's successful ad women just like them out there. Even more, they can finally see them.

Citation

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