

# WHAT BECOMES OF THE UNDECIDED?

## **WPP's Jon Steel offers a personal view on the advantages of an unplanned career**

Writing in *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1997 on the difference between success and failure in the music industry, Chris Heath said, "It's not the plans you think up that make the difference. It's how you use the accidents."

He's probably right, and moreover the accuracy of his observation extends way beyond the music industry. Ask any successful writer, politician, athlete or business leader to tell you how they got to where they are, and they will probably admit that for all the ambition they had, for all the plans they made, they wouldn't have succeeded without a little good fortune, and the ability to adapt to unexpected circumstances.

Sadly, no one told me this when I was at school or at University. Instead, I was informed that if I wanted a successful career I must be focused, and have a plan, a strategy for the next fifty years. Indeed, I was surrounded by people with such plans; their GCSEs and A levels had been carefully selected to lead to a certain degree, which in turn would lead to a particular career and no doubt a happy and

fulfilling life beyond; I had friends who from the time they entered kindergarten had apparently wanted to be partners in law firms or national sales directors.

I, on the other hand, had no grand design. At both school and University I had chosen the subjects that I enjoyed the most and in which I performed best. My University (Nottingham) was selected for its pleasant campus and proximity to two first division football clubs and a test cricket ground. The future could wait.

While I had a good time and thankfully got a good degree, the shortcomings of some others' plans became apparent. My neighbour, an engineer, cracked under the pressure of exams and was found wandering Derby's city centre dressed only in his underpants. He had never wanted to be an engineer, but his parents had pushed him into it. Another acquaintance, an aspiring teacher, was so traumatized by her first school placement that a future in the profession was out of the question. But maybe they were the lucky ones; they realized their mistakes while there was still time to change direction.

I had vaguely considered teaching or postgraduate work, before a chance conversation with a friend introduced me to the previously unconsidered world of advertising agencies. The combination of business and creativity my friend described was appealing, as was the news that agencies paid travel expenses for interviews, and that he knew a number of fun-loving nurses in London.

I applied to about fifteen agencies for a position in account management (the account manager is the person who runs a client's business inside the agency). Within a few weeks I had been rejected by fourteen of them, including all the major agencies owned today by WPP. At the fifteenth, BMP, I was asked whether I might prefer to be an account planner. When I admitted that I had never heard of such a role, my interviewer explained that planners used consumer research to help craft advertising strategy. And I told him that it didn't really appeal to me.

BMP hired me as an account manager, but only when their first-choice candidate turned them down for a higher paid job in the City. Within six months I had transferred from account management to account planning. (Once inside the agency I had seen the job in a new light and had discovered that I might just have some talent for it.) Five years later I was surprised to find myself running a planning department in an agency in San Francisco, a job I held for a decade. On my return to the UK – again unexpected – I now find myself working on a daily basis with the management of agencies like Ogilvy & Mather, Grey, Young & Rubicam and J. Walter Thompson, all of whom had rejected me when I first applied more than twenty years ago.

My own career has been full of accidents, and it has been enriched by those who, like me, have stumbled into jobs they probably always wanted but never knew existed. At BMP I was trained in advertising by a man whose degree was in

aeronautical engineering and by another who was a classics scholar; in the ensuing years I have hired lawyers, doctors, and engineers and even a killer whale trainer who realized along the way that they didn't really want to be lawyers, doctors, engineers or (surprisingly) killer whale trainers. And today, while I remain in my accidental job in my accidental career, the majority of my University friends have left the professions for which their lives had been so carefully planned.

The problem with most of their plans was that they were often made without any detailed understanding of the careers at their centre or, more significant, the ways that they would evolve themselves as they left home and matured into adulthood. It's a rare person who passes through these years unchanged, and with every step forward we are inevitably presented with choices that had previously been outside our limited field of vision.

In addition to my work with WPP's agencies and clients, I run the Marketing Fellowship program, an ad for which can be found on the facing page. This graduate recruitment and training program is specifically designed for those who are, for want of a better word, undecided. The only focus necessary for applicants is an interest in marketing communications; those hired as Fellows spend a year in each of three different marketing communications disciplines, often across two or maybe three continents, developing more focused skills and interests. This year we have Fellows working on every continent in the world

except for Antarctica, in disciplines as diverse as advertising, design, brand consulting, digital marketing, sports sponsorship, branded entertainment, and research. At the end of the three years, Fellows take a permanent job with one of WPP's operating companies, and this job is often very different from the one envisaged when they first applied to join the program. The test of its success is that with individual plans evolving as previously unknown skills are discovered, and as hitherto unseen opportunities are revealed, more than eighty per cent of those joining the Fellowship remain with us today.

I wish the program had existed when I graduated. Except that I probably wouldn't have been good enough to get hired.

*Jon Steel is the Director of WPP's Marketing Fellowship, and author of "Truth, Lies & Advertising" and "Perfect Pitch" (John Wiley & Sons, NY). He still doesn't know what he wants to be when he grows up.*