EXPLORING ACCOUNT MANAGERS' ETHICAL PERCEPTIONS:

WHERE IS THE LINE AND HOW SHOULD WE REACT

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ANALYSIS

As technology advances, an individual receives a large amount of information daily, undoubtedly making the competition among businesses even fiercer. Under this circumstance, today's advertising companies and their clients are trying all possible methods to win over consumers' limited attention. However, while shouting to be heard, advertisers sometimes neglect the fact that they also need to show their responsibility to stakeholders to ensure sustainability.

Several researchers have found that advertising practitioners, at times, fail to identify ethical dilemmas, or they choose not to exercise the ethical reasoning abilities they have. Ethics has long been a mainstream topic in advertising research, yet few studies have directly explored the views of industry practitioners. Account managers, unlike other positions in advertising agencies, are sandwiched between the creative team and the client. Therefore, they are more likely to encounter ethical issues. Using long-form interviews, this project directly explores the ethical issues facing account manager, their perceptions of ethics and the organizational impact on their decision-making process.

Participants

The participants for this study included one senior account executive, three account executives, three assistant account executives, two account supervisors and one account coordinator. All participants were asked 12 basic questions covering career history, job description, ethical issues and solutions, values and organizational culture. Participants' current companies ranged from advertising agencies in Minneapolis, St. Louis, Chicago, Dallas, Tampa, Kansas City and New York City. Participants' work history as an account person varied from five months to five years and their experience level ranged from entry level to senior professionals in the industry. To create a comfortable environment for participants to talk freely and to obtain valid interview data, their real names and other identifiable information including employer names and workplace names were not disclosed in the study. Besides, I did not interview anyone at the agency where I did my project.

Methods

Among all the qualitative methods, interviewing has been a vital one in mass communication research (Holloway and Wheeler, 2010). For my project, I used semi-structured interviews to directly explore account managers' perception of ethics. The nature of semi-structured interviews gave my study more flexibility. Unlike unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews require the interviewer to have a question list

before the conversation starts, but at the same time, the interviewers can seek new path during the process if he/she wants to (Gray 2004).

I conducted 10 interviews and they were enough to provide me sufficient information. Qualitative research will hit a point of saturation where incoming data produces little new information after a certain number of interviews are conducted (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Researchers discovered that 70 percent of the themes identified turned up in the first six interviews, and 92 percent were covered within the first 12 interviews (Guest, et al., 2006). Other researchers also confirmed similar conclusions, saying that five to six semi-structured interviews can cover most concepts and over 80 percent of themes could be identified within 10 interviews (Morgan et al., 2002; Francis, et al., 2010; Namey, et al., 2016).

As for interview tools, given the fact that the locations of participants' companies varied a lot, I spoke with 10 account managers via phone calls. Research shows that conducting a phone interview increases respondents' perception anonymity, which is good for sensitive topics like ethics (Greenfield et al., 2000).

The 10 interviews were transcribed after they were completed. I managed to keep the conversation authentic while omitting words such as "like", "you know", "umm" or incomplete sentences that were meaningless.

Findings

Analysis of interviews produced three different perspectives to explore account managers' ethical perceptions: ethical issues facing account managers, individual values and organizational impact on individuals. These elements influenced how account managers viewed advertising ethics and reacted to the ethical issues they encountered.

Ethical Issues Facing Account Managers

RQ1: What are the ethical issues facing account managers?

Account managers work as bridges between their creative teams and the clients. An account executive based in St. Louis described her work routine and indicated that this is not an easy job to do. According to interview #4,

> "There isn't really a typical day (in the office), but I can run you through today at least. On a typical day, I will usually have at least two to three calls with a client. Sometimes those are just status calls, checking in on all the projects that we have going on at that time. But sometimes it's presentation. I also coordinate timelines with all of our creatives. Here to make sure everyone's hitting the date they need to hit in order for us to meet our larger deadlines with the clients. So that's like some of the bigger stuff I do throughout the day. And yeah, lots of other little things."

The content of this job determines that account managers are under pressure from both internal and external sources. Therefore, the ethical issues they encounter are also from both creative team and the client.
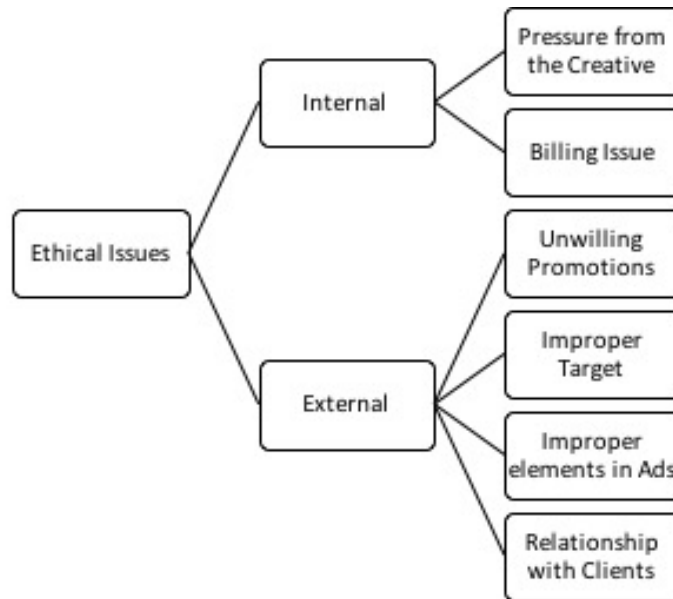

Figure 1. Ethical issues facing account managers

Externally speaking, clients sometimes pay advertising agencies to promote certain product that the account manager feels uncomfortable doing. For example, an assistant account executive working in St. Louis was once asked by the client to promote e-cigarettes. She said in interview #2,

"I hadn't really thought about it before, but I kind of felt, you know, I didn't feel good about that. I didn't feel good about trying to persuade people to engage with that kind of lifestyle. So that's an example. There's been things like that."

Such pressure is also a game changer for account managers when they are trying to decide whether or not to start a new position at an agency. An account executive located in Tampa once turned down a job offer because the employer she interviewed with focused on pharmaceutical advertising. She stated in interview #5,

> "I did not agree with some of what I've been tasked to do or clients that I would have had to work on at that agency. So I expressed my belief in that. Ultimately, I pulled out of that. I'm still young in this industry, but people come across clients that they may not agree with, like having to work for it. Even though I didn't end up working for those clients, you have the possibility of having to work for a pharmaceutical account pushing medicine that may not actually be necessary or beneficial. I just didn't want to put myself in that position."

Undoubtedly, promoting products such as e-cigarettes and medicine can be controversial. However, even if you feel comfortable promoting such products, sometimes the target your client is trying to reach can also make account managers think twice before they say yes. The account executive in St. Louis shared her experience in interview #4. Her agency mainly promotes alcohol and most of the time she is totally fine with it. However, there was an exception. According to her,

> "There is one of my brands that is targeted at urban multicultural communities.I kind of felt a little iffy about that because you're targeting poor minorities, which feels very bad. But at the same time, you know, I don't think that there's malicious

intent behind it. I think it's more like this is who is drinking it so that is why we're talking to them. But it has crossed my mind before like, Oh, is this right?"

In addition to controversial products and minority targets, elements such as race and ethnicity also needs to be taken into consideration by account managers while conducting campaigns. In interview #2, the assistant account executive said she ran into a situation where the client asked them to promote a dark stain cleaner, but in the advertisement, two African American babies were featured in a messy kitchen, which made her feel terrible. She questioned if such promotion was perpetuating stereotypes. As an African American herself, she was also concerned about that kind of perception.

Another interesting point indicated by the interview data is that some clients may cross the line while trying to build relationships with account managers. One account executive working in Dallas has experienced this. In interview #3 she said,

"My client added me on Facebook. I got friend requests from them. I got the responses to my Instagram stories. They were texting me on Friday night at 10 p.m. So there definitely was blurred line."

However, an account coordinator viewed this differently, saying that this shows the level of trust between an account person and the client. According to her in interview #10,

"I think the reason that some of our internal team has that personal relationship is because they've been working with this client for a very long time. Some people at the agency and that have worked with a client that I work with for over 20 years. So I think it's more of that relationship had time to mature and grow. "

Each individual might have different interpretations in terms of the ethical issue with the relationship between account managers and their clients, but the first three cases are quite common.

Compared to ethical issues caused by clients, the internal pressure mainly from the creative team look even more complicated. A good account manager must be able to compromise, but the account coordinator in Kansas City said that it was difficult not to ignore everyone's emotions, especially when she got a lot of different opinions and they were all valid. It can be very uncomfortable to be sandwiched between the clients and the creative team. The account person has to be careful when dealing with such issues. According to her,

"I think the creatives take it very personally because when they create something and the client doesn't like it, you know, that is very personal because they created that. There's a lot of that tension that you have to navigate. You have to understand the emotion that went into the project from the creative side. Sometimes I think the creative team thinks that the account team takes the client side. It can sometimes be tricky."

Similar opinions were seen in interview #4,

"There's obviously a lot of disconnect between what both groups (clients and creatives) are interested in. So it's more like translating it and being careful about how you're setting it up. So I wouldn't go so far as to say I've ever had trouble with it, but I do have to be, you know, careful."

Another ethical issue is about billing clients. Three out of the nine participants mentioned this. The assistant account executive in St. Louis said that they would intentionally increase hours working on a project so they could make more money from the client. She said in interview #2,

"The technical part of account is hours. You know, what kind of time is being put into certain projects. I think that's an area where we've been forced to flub a little bit. Something is taking more hours than it should, and it's artful."

The account executive in Dallas also noticed her old company tended to estimate a billing number way more than they actually spent on projects. In interview #5, the participant expressed similar concern several times.

Personal Values

RQ2: How do account managers make decisions when ethical issues arise?

We all know how important the client is for advertising practitioners, but the interview data shows something different. Ten participants were asked to answer what they value the most while doing their job. Most account managers said they valued their company or their team the most. Only three of the participants answered "clients."
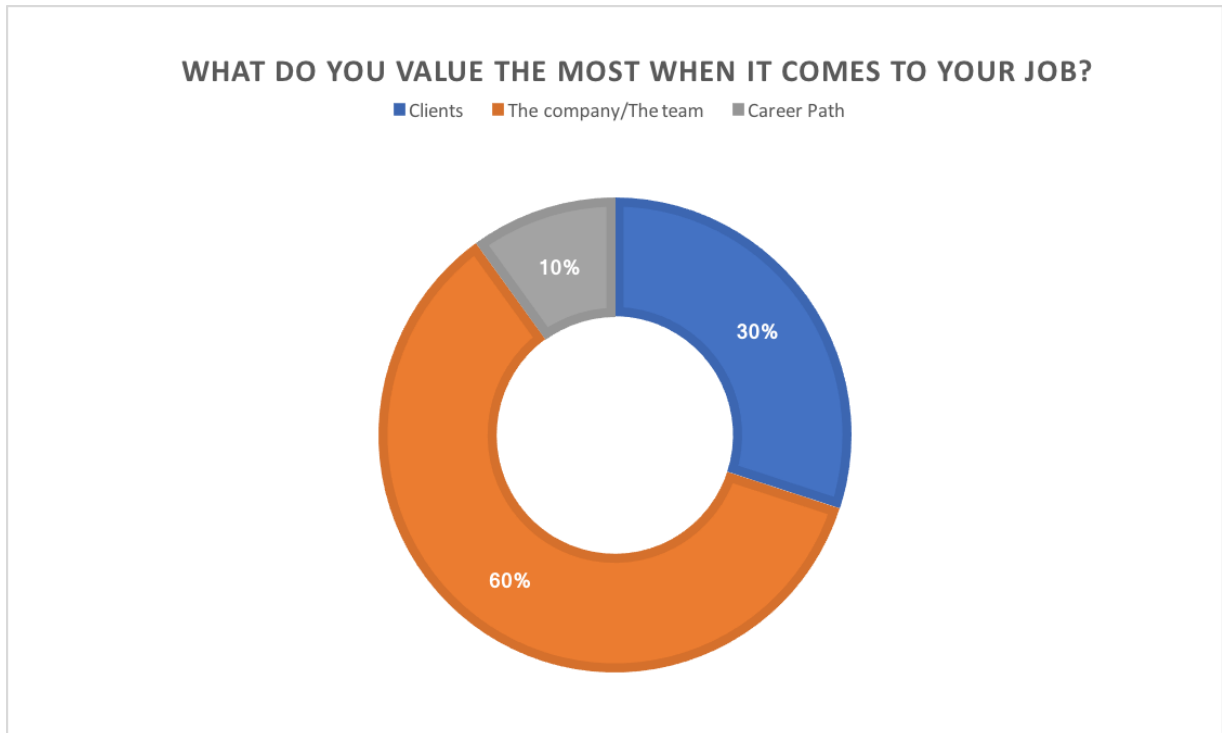

Figure 2. Personal Values Interview Result

The account coordinator based in Kansas City responded to this question in interview #10,

"I think I value the relationships internally the most. I think that's what can make or break a job if you don't like the people you work with, and you're not going to like the work and it's just all going to trickle down. But I think that at least having

a good relationship with even a couple of people that you work with, can just make the entire experience."

The assistant account executive in St. Louis expressed different opinions. She said,

"I think as a general rule, we service our clients first. I would say that we're a client-first agency, but I think that we're able to kind of like serve ourselves in a way making sure that, you know, what we're doing is the best for them, but also the best for us and represent us in the best light."

Despite the fact that she put clients before the company, the ultimate goal here was still the best interests and the development of the company. No matter what their choices were, the goal stays the same. This might also be one of the reasons why the billing issues we discussed earlier would occur.

In other cases, account managers who valued their team or company the most were more likely to comment negatively on clients and might be less tolerant towards clients. For example, the account executive working in Dallas stated in interview #3,

"They are people that I work with every day, they are people that I care about. I'm at the agency because of them and the work that we do. And if I feel like at any moment that the work that we're doing and my people are being harmed to the process of it, then that's when I take issue with it. Currently, my client really... I

hate my client. Yeah, right now, like literal nightmare. Nightmare. Everyone at the company goes insane. I'm pissed off."

What most account managers eventually want are interests of themselves, not that of their clients. This directly leads to participants' teleology-based decision-making process. They believe that as long as they avoid touching the base line, it is okay to "lie" to a client because eventually the client would be harmed getting what he/she deserves, and it saved the agency several rounds of negotiations and explanations.

When asked about whether or not the participant would exaggerate the speech to make the client accept their campaign ideas, some account managers responded without hesitation that it was normal for them to do so. However, they do this carefully, according to interview #5,

"For creative definitely. I think that it's kind of part of the business which just like getting them (clients) excited about something. I think there is definitely a line between just like kind of exaggerating something and lying about something. I think there is that fine line. So you always have to be careful not to exaggerate too much."

The account executive based in Florida also said that she would make up an excuse to buy her creative team more time if they couldn't meet the deadline. She mentioned that,

"There have definitely been times when we're not going to meet a deadline. Maybe we exaggerate an excuse, and that was a little bit questionable. But for the most part I don't think of it as an ethical issue because in those cases I'm trying to do what's right for my team. So I'm making sure that they're taking care of time wise and they have enough time to get their work done."

Based on the interview data, what account managers value the most is not necessarily related to their industry experience, but their personal values do have an impact on their decision-making process. Valuing their team or their company the most seems to lead them to say things that were partly true to clients.

Organizational Impact

RQ3: Does organizational climate have an impact on an individual's ethical decisions?

According to OECD data, I defined the size of participants' advertising agencies, and immediately saw interesting results.

Interview #	Company Size	Code of Ethics?	Necessary to have a code of ethics?
1	Large	√	√
2	Medium	Not Sure	√
3	Micro	×	×
4	Small	×	×
5	Small	×	√
6	Medium	√	√
7	Large	√	√
8	Medium	√	√
9	Large	√	√
10	Medium	√	√

Figure 3. Interview information

Micro/small advertising agencies are less likely to obtain code of ethics compared to medium/large organizations. Besides, those who think it is unnecessary to have code of ethics are usually employees of micro/small advertising agencies. Therefore, account managers working at agencies that have a code of ethics tend to realize the importance of it.

Meanwhile, based on the interview data, participants from micro/small agencies encountered way more ethical issues. Their companies did not have a code of ethics so most of them failed to see what kind of guidance they could possibly gain from it. Among the three participants whose agencies didn't have a code of ethics, only one person expressed her preference for the code. She said in interview #5,

"I would prefer to be in an agency that did have a code of ethics. It's kind of more of like a new things that come about because ethics are important to me in my work. It would be ideal to work for a company that also has ethics."

Medium/large advertising companies not only have a code of ethics, they also provide their employees more support from all aspects and are dedicated to building a better environment for people to express themselves freely. The account coordinator in Kansas City said that the organization leader can contribute to the free environment by communicating with employees himself. She pointed out,

"I had my first review with the CEO of the agency a couple weeks ago. After 60 days, or maybe it's after 90 days at the agency, he does an internal review with you and ask what the company is doing well at and what they could do better. And he asked that we'd be very honest and very open. You know, he makes it clear that he's listening. "

An account supervisor based in St. Louis also works at a large advertising organization. He said his company just finished their first mental health week. He kept expressing his

satisfaction about his company, as well as the employer, and he stayed optimistic about ethics in the industry in general,

> "I actually think that as an industry, we have done a really good job of acknowledging those, making sure that we are doing the right thing a lot of the time. So, you know, it used to be a little bit shady or in terms of good practices, but I think that things are changing quite a bit."

On the other hand, things look different at small agencies. Account managers from such companies tend to obtain negative thoughts about the industry environment. In interview #5, the participant said,

> "I think it (the ethical issue) is ignored or just kind of like hush-hush, don't talk about it. If it becomes more of a problem, then you talk about it."

Despite all the differences, we still found things in common among all advertising agencies, that they would not hold meetings to discuss ethical issues unless problems come up. One participant even said discussing ethics was meaningless for advertisers. She said,

> "Like at my agency, for that kind of thing, I mean, I can have conversations about ethics, but ultimately, it is a business, and a business, isn't it to make money?"

In addition, even though medium/large advertising agencies tend to have a code of ethics and employees also think it is necessary to have that, during the interview, almost no one could recall some of the principles.

Conclusion

This study's findings point out valuable insights from account managers working at different advertising agencies.

Using long-form interviews, the results demonstrate the ethical issues facing account managers internally and externally. They most feel themselves sandwiched between the creative team and the client, having to deal with pressure from both sides. It is clearly presented that account managers today face external ethical issues including doing unwilling product promotions, handling clients who cross the line and processing inappropriate campaign elements. The external issues are already well-known facts. However, the study also provides both researchers and advertising practitioners a new angle looking at internal ethical issues facing account managers. The billing issue and the disconnect between the account team and the creative team seem more troublesome. It is time to pay more attention to internal conflicts.

Secondly, the study pointed out that account managers' personal values have an impact on their decision-making process while solving such ethical issues. Those who value their team more than clients tend to behave less ethically when working with their clients.

Lastly, speaking on an organizational level, a larger size company can provide better ethical education and resources for its employees so account managers can

understand the importance of ethics better. Besides, they will feel more comfortable to discuss ethical issues if the organizational culture is friendly and open. In addition, account managers working in larger agencies have more optimistic view of ethics in advertising industry while those who are from smaller agencies do not. The connection between advertising agencies and their employees is very close, and organizational leaders have to build a healthy company culture in order to better serve the clients.

In general, ethics never cross most account managers' minds unless the problem comes up. Both advertising practitioners and their employers still have a long way to go when it comes to ethics.

Limitations and Future Research

The main limitation in this study was the diversity wasn't ensured when it comes to participants' gender and geographic locatioemonstrate the ethical issues facing account managersns. Only two of the 10 participants were male and more than half of them were based in the Midwest. Therefore, it was difficult to rule out the possible influence of these two factors on the result of the study. Future studies should attempt to get an even ratio of men and women participants, and make sure the locations vary enough.

Another limitation of this study was due to the topic itself. Ethics is a relatively sensitive theme to discuss and sometimes it can get personal. Even though I promised not to reveal participants' information in my report, it was hard to guarantee that they did not

hide certain parts of the story in the interviews, especially when it comes to the billing

issue. Therefore, it would also be beneficial if future studies figure out a better method to

ensure the authenticity of interviews.