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Wins, setbacks, and rivalries: Inside Cindy Rose's first 100 days as CEO of ad giant WPP

By Lara O'Reilly | Author of the Dot Com newsletter | Follow

Cindy Rose joined the WPP board in 2021 and became CEO of WPP's parent company in January. Rose's tenure has been marked by wins and setbacks, and rivalries.

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- **WPP CEO Cindy Rose marked 100 days in the role this week.**
- **Rose has received plaudits for owning some of WPP's past mistakes and signaling change ahead.**
- **She faces a make or break challenge as she prepares to roll out a revamped strategy.**

When Cindy Rose took the helm at the advertising agency giant WPP in January, she inherited one of the worst challenges in Madison Avenue.

Rose was described by one analyst as a "peacemaker," and her rich background and experience in mentoring client relationships were viewed as positive attributes that would help bring about much needed change.

This week, Rose marked her 100th day in the role. James Wesley, CEO of the management consultancy Trinity P3, scored Rose a "7 to an 8" of 10 for her performance so far.

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"She's moving all the right things and has set some signals in the market. The big test will be what happens early next year, as she sets out her strategy," said Wesley. "Cindy will not last a year if she's don't believe the strategy can be delivered."

> This is Madison Avenue so has artificial intelligence a due opting in? Cindy Rose is the new chief executive of the GroupM company Lucy Dodge for advertising or marketers.

Rose's wins during her first 100 days — some major new business, key hires, a big partnership with Google, and an oversubscribed bond sale — have been dampened by bad news.

On her first earnings call, in October, Rose described the company's performance as "unacceptable," liberty after delivering its second profit warning of the year and downgrading its full-year growth forecast. Its shares spiraled further downward, and WPP was demoted from the FTSE 100 index. Rival firms, including Publicis Groupe and Omnicom, and London-listed company have dropped by about 10% since Rose became chief executive.

Adding to Rose's overhearing in turn, WPP was hit with a lawsuit from one of its former executives who said he was fired in July of this year — just days after he had told Rose he was being investigated by the group's media investment division was allegedly receiving kickbacks scheme. WPP said in November it would "vigorously" defend itself against the allegations made in the suit. The case is ongoing.

WPP has fallen behind its sector's top performer, Publicis Groupe, and it faces a challenge following the creation of Omnicom and IPG, which Agency.Com does a bigger, customized question: What is the role of a large advertising agency holding company amid the rise of tech and the ascendancy of consultancies, and how to maximum much of the work agencies charge top dollar for?

This account of Rose's tenure so far draws on interviews with more than a dozen current and former WPP staffers and clients, competitors, marketing consultants, and industry analysts. They said Rose deserves credit for delivering a positive narrative about WPP's opportunities while also owning its problems. Much of her fate will rest on a strategy plan that she is set to roll out in the coming months, and the revamped strategy will need to be bold and consistent, given the challenges ahead.

Rose has planted the seeds of her strategy

This year September, Rose the company's Cloud Tech Center campus in New York City, Rose laid out a three-pronged blueprint for what she called "Scaling Scale." The strategy, she said, was to "Simplify the business," "Leverage people-led" by creating an environment for employees to thrive, She said WPP should be famous for "being completely client centric" and "Leveraging our scale to deliver for our clients." And WPP should be "Harnessing our AI advantage," telling staffers to become "AI superusers."

Her opening address to employees was received well internally, insiders said.

"We were pleasantly surprised," one current senior WPP agency staffer said. They added that Rose is "as much better at the human stuff" than her predecessor, Mark Read, who left the company suddenly upthread with videos calling up the agency's wins.

Rose's predecessor, Mark Read, left the company suddenly in 2021 after a series of scandals. Read's tenure was marked by a lack of "human stuff," one current WPP agency staffer said.

WPP has been heavily pitching WPP Open, an internal AI powered platform that integrates with technology from companies such as Microsoft, Google, and Adobe, and connects marketers with third-party data, partners, and WPP's data on the performance of thousands of campaigns to help plan and place ads, and measure the results.

In October, with Rose firmly in area, WPP announced WPP Open Pro, a self-service version to give clients their own access to the platform. The aim was to give WPP's client base by appealing to smaller advertisers or those in industries that have been slower to adopt digital and AI marketing to boom. WPP said earlier internally that more than 400 brands had proactively contacted the company about Open Pro in the three weeks after it launched.

Douglas Hayward and Gerry Murray, analysts at the research company IDC, described the Open Pro launch in a report as "a smart move that shows that WPP is prepared to be bold and innovative and even to cannibalize its revenue in the short term."

Rose has made her AI advantage a key part of her strategy, telling staffers to become "AI superusers."

However, some analysts questioned whether WPP would be able to invest enough in marketing Open Pro to appeal to this sort of audience, which is accustomed to using tech provided by tech giants like Meta and Google.

Nearly all of WPP's rivals are also leaning heavily into their tech investments and offerings as part of their pitches to clients and investors.

Publicis Groupe's Arthur Sadoun has described his company as "a smart investor" in technology.
Charles Sykes/Invision/AP, Image via Associated Press

One former WPP agency executive, who left last year, said they felt Rose was "very, very, very focused on AI." Rose has described her company's digital strategy as something that we'd apart from other agency holding groups and the broader tech sector.

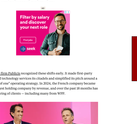
"Creativity is the only thing that human beings have get to make a difference," the exec said.

Publicis Groupe's Arthur Sadoun has described his company as "a smart investor" in technology.
Charles Sykes/Invision/AP, Image via Associated Press

Agency relationships with tech platforms are an important part of the mix as they try to differentiate themselves from competitors. This left, in part, Publicis Groupe, which has a deal with Microsoft, Google, and Meta. Rival firms, which are a target set to be market, clients, and for Frish, albeit the strength of WPP's relationship with Google. The "expanded five-year partnership" between WPP and Google, which was announced in November, WPP said it would commit to spending $400 million on Google tech as part of the partnership, which will give it "preferred" access to Google's latest AI models and data. Google is also one of WPP's biggest clients.

A low-profile start

Save for her welcome address to staffers, which was posted on YouTube, and her first earnings call, Rose has kept a fairly low public profile.


Rose's predecessor, Mark Read, left the company suddenly in 2021 after a series of scandals.
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"Martin, in the old days, would have worked the room for one hour," one person said, referring to Sorrell, the former WPP CEO.

At the moment, WPP is a company that "needs more visible leadership for the market, for the staff, for the shareholders, for the clients," Trinity P3's Wesley said.

Operating in the shadow of Sadoun

Rose's tenure at Omnicom was spent in the shadow of her fundamentally disrupted. For years, WPP has been trying, WPP's plans Sorrell built a formidable empire, acquiring creative agencies and PR shops around the world, and building Google into known as WPP Media into a huge force, responsible for planning and buying billions of dollars in media across TV, print, out of home, and digital.

The market dynamics shifted, largely due to the emergence of tech giants Google and Meta, which ate into the ad revenue of traditional media and advertisers bypass agencies. Ad buys sold up the disruption. In recent years, clients have pressured agencies to produce more work at lower costs. Agencies have been expected by marketing to offer marketers more services than just producing and placing ads.

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During the pitch process this year for Mars' $1.7 billion media business — before Rose was in post as WPP CEO — the confectionery giant summoned all the agencies involved to meet on a cold January morning at the M&M's Store in central London.

Sadoun turned up about an hour earlier than the scheduled time. The Mars clients hadn't arrived yet, and the doors to the store were locked shut. He waited outside on Leicester Square. Once Mars' marketing team arrived, Sadoun greeted them, and they duly invited him in for coffee — much to the chagrin of the competing agencies, who weren't able to take advantage of the opportunity to get extra face time with the clients. Mars this summer moved its media account from WPP to Publicis.

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"There are two types of people in life: The ones who are five minutes early and the ones who are five minutes late. It's a personal choice, and Arthur has decided to use these rules for unfair advantage by arriving 10 minutes early," said Richard Robinson, executive director of Ingenuity+, an agency search consultancy that wasn't involved in the Mars pitch.

Three marketing consultants involved in client pitches said Rose is also visible and warm with clients, delivering passionate addresses and asking personal questions. They say Sadoun takes it to the next level.

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Wins, hires, and the outcome of a strategic review

Focus now turns to 2026 after WPP's annus horribilis.

WPP has appointed the management consulting firm McKinsey to assist Rose in conducting a strategic review of the business. Rose said in October that she would detail the outcome in the new year.

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Insiders and analysts predict further layoffs amid a shrinking agency landscape. Jay Pattisall, principal analyst and VP at the research company, forecasts a 13% reduction in agency jobs across the industry as automation and AI force agencies to "pivot from selling services to selling solutions."

The open question is whether WPP can be optimized to success, or whether it will have to sell some or all of its business in order to best position itself for the future. Or could WPP even pull an Omnicom and acquire a rival? Two people with direct knowledge of the matter said WPP had multiple conversations about a potential acquisition of the US-centric media buying company Horizon over the years, but that the talks never came close to a deal. A Horizon spokesperson said the company doesn't comment on speculation.

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"They need to do some kind of julitsu," a second former WPP executive said, referring to an unexpected M&A move to outmaneuver rivals.

As insiders await the outcome of the review, WPP is expected to soon start feeling the impact of some recent sizable new business wins. It secured more than $1.5 billion in billings in November alone, including the consumer goods company Reckitt appointing WPP as its media agency of record and Henkel awarding WPP the media duties for its European consumer brands. WPP was further buoyed this week after its Wavemaker media agency secured a four-year contract, worth up to $2.6 billion, to produce the UK government's ad campaigns — an account previously held by Omnicom.

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Rose has also made some key leadership appointments and formed a new executive management team that could help rally the troops and boost momentum. In one notable hire — and a poke in the eye to rival Sadoun — she persuaded Laurent Ezekiel, who was formerly WPP's CMO, to reverse a planned move to Publicis and become CEO of the WPP agency OMD[1] instead.

Some investors appear optimistic that Rose can steer the company back on course. This month, investors ordered nearly €3 billion (about $3.5 billion) of WPP's 3.5-year bonds, even though the company only issued €1 billion (about $1.2 billion). The strong oversubscription suggests these institutional investors believe WPP will stay financially stable and meet its debt obligations.

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Rose, in her statement, said that her vision for WPP is clear and that AI would usher in a "golden age of marketing."

Looking ahead to 2026, she said WPP's greatest opportunity is "to enable our clients to move boldly and confidently into the future and help them fully embrace AI innovation to reimagine growth and unleash their true potential."

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