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A NEW OUTLOOK: NEWLY MINTED WPP MEDIA BOSSES REFLECT ON GROUPM REBRAND

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— L-R Pippa Berlocher, Peter Vogel, Aimee Buchanan, Maria Grivas.

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Earlier this week, the mooted rebrand of GroupM to WPP Media was made official.

It's a story that convulsed large parts of the industry, with stories pouring out of US- and UK-based trade media titles about up to 45 per cent of staff in America impacted and others "**getting disappeared**".

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In 80-something markets around the world, GroupM's agencies, EssenceMediacom, Mindshare and Wavemaker, have been brought together to serve as dedicated teams rather than distinct businesses. They'll also operate under one profit-and-loss sheet. It will also see a greater use of WPP Open, the holdco's AI-enabled marketing system. This centralisation and quest for efficiency, unsurprisingly, will have knock on effects on staff.

But in Australia, the situation is markedly different, the newly minted WPP Media execs told *B&T* in an exclusive interview.

"When I talk to our global CEO about it, he says 'You started this journey three-and-a-half years ago'. We're at a different place. There's a real recognition of the work that the people in this room have done to transform us into where we are today," said Aimee Buchanan, GroupM WPP Media's Australia and New Zealand CEO.

The Australian WPP Media business, for instance, has been working to a single P&L for nearly two years Buchanan said though the separate agency heads, Maria Grivas and Mindshare, Pippa Berlocher at EssenceMediacom and Peter Vogel at Wavemaker, still have commercial targets to hit (as one would expect). But GroupM has been pooling research costs, for example, to give its execs less to worry about.



"We're all commercially accountable to hitting a single number but within that, everyone has a target so nothing really has changed," added Buchanan.

"We work as a very cohesive ExCo, there's a lot of healthy debate, sometimes a bit too much healthy debate," she said, laughing.

"But that propels us forward, that's another principle of the blueprint. I don't feel like culturally or structurally it's an enormous change because of the work we've done... This is the next chapter of our build. [this global rebrand] gives us the acceleration, the momentum, the infrastructure and the investment to do it better and faster than we could as a market and we'll be better equipped to do better work for our clients in a future state."

Locally, the WPP Media business streamlined its HR, marketing, finance and other non-client facing functions 18 months ago, Buchanan said, adding that the business felt it allowed the separate agencies to "collaborate" in ways that made sense.

Managing Conflicts

One of the major concerns raised by industry faces from outside WPP when the rumours started to swirl about the change in direction was client conflicts.

"I really don't see how it's going to be an advantage for their clients," **TrinityP3 founder and global CEO Darren Woolley told B&T at the start of the month.** "First of all, it's going to create a whole lot of conflicts that they're going to have to manage. That's one of the reasons that they created GroupM in the first place, to manage conflicts."

But Vogel believes that, again, WPP Media's existing structure locally negates the problem to a certain extent. That may not be the same case in all markets around the world.

"Clients buy people and capabilities. Pippa, Maria and myself are different and we attract different people and that's important for the clients we engage. For certain big global clients, we have a structure more like WPP OpenDoor or OpenMind. But certainly locally, we've got offices dotted all around the country operating with a lot of local businesses and that's what they buy into," he said.

"The agency brands will still be there to engage with the clients, to service their business, the teams that work on their business will sit in integrated parts focused on those clients, not working on other clients. That's what clients want and none of that will change.

"You know, I have driven a Mitsubishi for 16 years and I will continue to drive a Mitsubishi for 16 years! I breathe my clients' brands as much as they enjoy working with Wavemaker! It's important for clients that the people who work on their businesses are still anchored in a brand whether it's EssenceMediacom, Mindshare or Wavemaker. Particularly in Australia, which is quite state-based, sometimes a bit parochial, that's what they want and that's what we'll give them!

"There's a little competitive sibling rivalry and when it comes to B&T Agency of the Year, you'll still be getting an EssenceMediacom, Mindshare and Wavemaker entry!" he concluded.

Buchanan added that all of the current client teams will remain in place. EssenceMediacom and Wavemaker were B&T's Media Agencies of the Year in 2024 and 2023, respectively.

For all of Vogel's gusto, it's important to note exactly how WPP Media plans to keep its client teams spilling over into one another in the new, more unified structure and with the centralised WPP Open that will support all of its media planning, strategy and buying operations. Global WPP Media CEO Brian Lesser said the platform would help its clients "stay ahead of rapidly changing consumer behaviour and unlock the limitless opportunities for growth".

WPP CEO Mark Read said that while GroupM "GroupM was built for a time when media scale mattered most, WPP Media reflects the power of AI".

"This is the most exciting part of the transformation plan and the biggest enabler for us locally from the global transformation," said Grivas. "We are in incredible momentum, and that is the perfect time to transform, right. And we want to make sure we're transforming when we're on top of our game.

"I think we are so well positioned to make the biggest success of this

because of the momentum that we have and the strength that we have right now. And I guess that's why we all feel so passionately excited about this transformation.

"All of us are equally excited for the innovations we're able to bring to our clients through this. It's a recognition that AI is impacting on how media is traded and planned and all of our tooling is designed for us to harness that opportunity," she continued.

"The Open platform, think about it as one digital environment from which our people can access all of the tools they need to utilise in the practice of planning and activating media... The brilliance of it is that the AI function enables the connectivity of data through each of the tools and stages that we would go through to deliver a media plan and activation for our clients. In the old world, our people would be going in and out of tools separately. Now they can access that in one environment."

Despite the talk of unified systems, Grivas and Buchanan maintained that sensitive client information will still be protected.

"It's more secure than it has ever been because it's so transparent in who has access and all the same protocols and system that existed prior are still there," said Buchanan.

"It's actually really simple because the permissions are all set up on a user level," added Grivas.

"Depending on the clients that you work on, that is how your permissions get set up and that already exists within the agency teams."

You might think those are thin, IT supported-managed walls. You might be right, but the market will decide for sure. Then again, is it that different from the other holding companies?

What Does The AI *Actually* Change?

The benefits of the new integrated, omnipresent AI in the workflows of WPP Media's staff are, in the company's eyes, manifold. But for clients, aside from being able to do things faster in the backend, are there any tangible benefits to the new structure?

When it comes to the media rates that GroupM's agencies receive, no.

"Won't change anything. The reality is that we do our deals at a client level. If a client's spend is not going up, then we can't really extract more value if the market conditions aren't changing. We have a group position that is already there so we're already working client-first and backed by the group. It won't change anything," said Buchanan.

But smarter planning is on the table, including according to the bosses, a true reconciling of the value of earned, owned and paid media.

"I was in a client meeting this morning where we had built a learning agent in Open and had uploaded the last three years of their media plans, their post-campaign report and the econometrics we do for them. We were able to, in real time, showcase for them our best cost-per-lead over the last three years, what media mix drove that and what the recommended

media mix was,” explained Berlocher.

“Obviously we need to overlay a bunch more data sources and science to actually put together the plans moving forward but just to have the access to that data at our strategist and planners’ fingertips is pretty exciting for clients.”

That said, Buchanan and the rest of the team were at pains to make clear that AI is enhancing the teams, not replacing them.

“I want to be really blunt about [this]. The tools are amazing but our clients are still buying the people who use the tools... the rubber hits the road with our teams. We’ve never been more focused on investing in our people and that’s demonstrated in so many ways,” said Buchanan.

Next week, for instance, 1,000 WPP Media staff are heading to the Gold Coast from around the country to create a plan for the next three years and get a good read on what the future holds for the group.

The changes at WPP are significant globally, no doubt. But locally, it’s largely more of the same—though it certainly isn’t an *Emperor’s New Clothes* situation over in WPP’s swish Barangaroo office.

That’s thanks to the work that has been done by Buchanan and the leadership team in the three-and-a-bit years since she left OMD. At the end of the day, clients want consistency (and better rates) and that’s largely what they’re getting in Australia and New Zealand. Certainly Vogel won’t be handing back his car keys any time soon, it seems.

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