

## **ACCOUNT PLANNING IN JAPAN: FROM GENESIS TO THE PRESENT**

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### ABSTRACT

What is the genesis of account planning in Japan? What happens to account planning after digital emergence? This study explores the origin of account planning, its evolution, and its current status in Japan. We conducted semi-structured interviews with top Japanese account planners to clarify the progression of account planning in Japan. Our findings elucidate the impact of digital emergence on the advertising development process, shifts in the utilization of creative briefs and insights, and the distinctions between traditional and digital account planning roles.

Keywords: account planning, digital emergence, creative brief, insight

### INTRODUCTION

#### *Purpose of the Study*

This study aims to shed light on the history of account planning in Japan, a concept pioneered in 1968 by Stephen King (J. Walter Thompson) and Stanley Pollitt (Boasse Massimi and Pollitt) in the United Kingdom (King 1989, Pollitt 1979). Originating from the idea of emphasizing consumer insight through research and crafting creative briefs to foster innovative ideas, account planning has been extensively discussed and documented in the contexts of the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States. However, the discourse on Japan's account planning history is notably absent within academic circles and even in Japan, with some exceptions.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to fill this gap by elucidating the trajectory of account planning in Japan from its inception. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with the top five Japanese planners, the study also investigates the contemporary shifts in account planning

spurred by the digital revolution. The analysis focuses on the following four perspectives: 1) the genesis of account planning in Japan, 2) the effect of digital emergence on account planning practices, 3) current changes in creative briefs and insights, and 4) the distinction between traditional and digital account planners. Furthermore, the study offers insights into the comparative analysis of account planning practices between the United Kingdom/United States and Japan.

### *Preceding Studies*

Prior studies have extensively explored the evolution of account planning from a wide range of perspectives. Baskin and Pickton (2003) provided an overview of account planning, tracing its origins and development up to its current status, and highlighting the emergence of independent strategy consultancies. Feldwick (2007) classified the history of account planning, from its conceptualization by King and Pollitt to its introduction in the United States by J. Chiat in 1982 and its examination in “Truth, Lie and Advertising” by Steel in 1998. Lannon and Baskin (2008) summarized the role, structure, craft skills, and research in account planning, spanning from its inception to contemporary changes. However, these discussions primarily focused on the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States, neglecting mentions of Japan or Asia.

Account planning was introduced to Japan through Dr. Yasuhiko Kobayashi's seminal work “Theory of Account Planner” (Kobayashi 1992), which elucidated the concepts of consumer insight and creative briefs as pioneered by Pollitt and King in the United Kingdom and J. Chiat in the United States and explained the consumer insight and creative brief. This was the first time that the word “account planning” was used in the Japanese advertising academy and advertising industry. Kobayashi's (1998) subsequently published “Structure and Development of Advertising Business: Innovation through Account Planning,” further detailed the

principles of account planning. Additionally, the translation of “Truth, Lie and Advertising” (Steel 1998) into Japanese in 2000 (the Japanese title of this book is “Account Planning Will Change the Advertising”) further popularized the concept.

In the early 2000s, account planning gained traction in Japan, as evidenced by Kobayashi et al.’s (2004) publication, “Thought of Account Planning,” featuring eight papers by leading planners from top advertising agencies in Japan (e.g., Dentsu, Hakuhodo, and Daiko). From 2000 to 2004, account planning became popular among the Japanese academy and advertising industry. Kobayashi et al. (2008) published “Reality of Account Planning in Japan Through Research,” in which they conducted a mail survey of 44 advertising agencies in Japan, revealing that a significant portion of Japanese advertising agencies did not have dedicated account planning departments and the use of creative briefs was limited, suggesting a reliance on account management for planning tasks.

Following the emergence of digital media, the literature on account planning became sparse. Murao’s series of papers (2016, 2018, 2021) explored various aspects of account planning, including its origins, the historical evolution of creative briefs, and comparative studies between the US and Japan. Murao and Sato (2016) conducted comparative research on creative briefs and strategic planning practices between the United States and Japan.

However, these studies are somewhat dated, with interview research of planners conducted in 2012 and 2014, predating the rapid growth of digital media in Japan over the past decade, as evidenced by data from Dentsu (2023)—in 2012, TV accounted for 30.1% and digital media 14.7% of the total advertising expenditure of Japan. In 2022, these shares changed to 25.4% and 43.5%, respectively, indicating a significant shift in advertising expenditure toward digital platforms.

(Table 1: Major Papers and Books on Account Planning in Japan)

## **METHOD**

### ***Personal Interviews with Top Planners***

For this research project, we conducted expert interviews (semi-structured interviews based on the case study method) between November 2023 and January 2024 to understand the changes in account planning brought about by digital emergence. We selected five top planners affiliated with major advertising agencies in Japan using theoretical sampling. The criteria for the selection of planners were that respondents held managerial or senior managerial positions at major advertising agencies and had over 10 years of experience. Specifically, the respondents included a planning director from a major multinational agency in Japan, three planning directors and managers from Japan's top two advertising agencies, and one creative director from a major Japanese agency.

### ***Questionnaires and Summary***

The interviews comprised the following series of eight questions addressing changes in account planning:

- 1) Do you know account planning? What is the meaning of account planning?
- 2) What are the most critical changes to the advertising business after digital emergence?
- 3) What are the changes in the advertising development process after digital emergence?
- 4) Does your company have a creative brief format? Have there been any changes post-digital emergence?
- 5) What do you think about consumer insights? Do you focus on it?
- 6) Have there been any changes in team composition concerning the advertising development process?
- 7) What are the key considerations regarding advertising?
- 8) What are your impressions of recent noteworthy advertising campaigns?

Additionally, respondents were asked about their career trajectory, including their start date after school, university major, number of companies worked for, and job type.

Interviews were conducted at the advertising agency offices of the respondents, nearby coffee shops. Each interview session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. With the respondents' consent, all interviews were recorded and transcribed post-session. The research results were then summarized and integrated with existing data and text research for a comprehensive analysis.

## **RESULTS**

### ***What is Account Planning***

The concept of account planning in Japan may not necessarily be the same as that in Europe and the United States. The inception of account planning in Japan occurred in the 1990s, with its primary focus being on determining consumer insights and preparing creative briefs, according to Mr. K from a major Japanese agency. Ms. O from a multinational agency described account planning as the development of key strategies based on insights, essentially equating it with strategic planning. However, only two out of the five respondents shared this perspective. Mr. N, also from a major Japanese agency, emphasized that account planning entails planning with a focus on client profitability. Another respondent, Mr. U from a Japanese major agency, viewed account planning as a means for account management to address client issues through the formulation of creative briefs. Similarly, Mr. F, also from a Japanese major agency, described account planning as account management taking the lead in developing strategies to solve client issues.

As noted by Dr. Kobayashi et al. (2008), account planning in Japan has historically been conducted primarily by account management, resembling planning or strategic planning functions. Many respondents indicated that they have not encountered the term “account planning” in recent years.

### ***Effect of Digital Emergence on Account Planning***

The transition of account planning from the mass media era to the digital age has been remarkable, bringing about significant changes. In the past, account planning involved gathering static information to conceptualize ideas for creators and disseminating a uniform message through mass media, as noted by Mr. K. Additionally, Mr. F highlighted the structured workflow of account planning, where strategies were initially devised for TVCM, followed by print media and promotional activities. During the mass media era, the focus was on understanding consumer emotions in advertising development, as mentioned by Ms. O.

However, the landscape has evolved dramatically with the rise of digital technologies. About a decade ago, the emergence of data scientists capable of handling big data enabled the analysis of consumer behavior patterns through social networking service (SNS) and digital platforms, leading to the development of artificial intelligence-generated strategies, media plans, creatives, and result assessments, as described by Mr. K. The shift from mass media to SNS/digital platforms has transformed the way consumers interact with media, with digital media offering measurability and automation, as highlighted by Mr. N. Mr. U provided insights into the changing advertising budget allocations, with a traditional client (manufacturing company or food company) reducing TV spending by approximately 10% while an emerging company (cosmetics or haircare company) allocating a significant portion (30%) to digital media, particularly YouTube, search engine optimization, Facebook, and Instagram.

This transformation in advertising planning has altered the flow of budgets, with TV no longer occupying the predominant position it once did, as observed by Mr. F. Moreover, Mr. U noted the importance of using TV alongside digital media to address saturation problems and expand reach to target audiences. Consumer behavior has undergone significant changes, necessitating a broader range of options for message delivery, shifting from mere communication to fostering

sympathy, and encouraging participation, as emphasized by Mr. F. However, amid these changes, the essence of advertising remains unchanged—the ability to evoke emotions and communicate effectively, as highlighted by Mr. N. Overall, respondents highlighted the substantial shift from traditional account planning to digital advertising planning, reflecting the evolving nature of the industry in response to technological advancements and changing consumer behaviors.

### ***Changes in Creative Briefs and Insights***

Four out of the five respondents revealed that their advertising agencies did not utilize a creative brief format, citing various reasons for its absence. Mr. K noted that attempts to implement a creative brief format in the 1990s were unsuccessful. Mr. N and Mr. U mentioned that creative briefs are only used when multinational clients provide their own formats, as Japanese clients typically do not use them. Mr. F highlighted the diversification of media and consumers, making it challenging to fit information into a traditional creative brief format. However, Ms. O provided a contrasting perspective, stating that her multinational advertising agency does utilize a creative brief format. She emphasized the need for clarity in addressing client issues. She asserted that traditional creative briefs, which contain client issues, brand propositions, target consumers, the role of advertising, concepts, media, and promotions/PRs, have become inadequate because of the emergence of digital platforms, and proposed a structured approach called the 5C—catch, connect, consider, close, and continue— model, which incorporates the consumer journey along with attitude change guideline for each 5C stage. Creative briefs are particularly useful for multinational clients, according to Ms. O, as they facilitate alignment across regions and ensure consistent messaging. She emphasized the importance of adapting to the changing media landscape, shifting from a focus on a single most important message in the mass media era to considering multiple important messages for various touchpoints such as

SNS.

All five respondents emphasized the importance of consumer insight, although with nuanced differences in perspective. Mr. N emphasized the significance of understanding fundamental consumer desires, while Mr. U described a process of developing and testing creative ideas based on consumer insights for digital advertising. Mr. F highlighted the importance of consumer insights, although consumer behavior had changed significantly in the past decade, particularly driven by SNS, where people focus on approval desires through Instagram (look beautiful) and Facebook (getting yes). Ms. O underscored the timeless importance of insight in branding, citing examples of successful brand propositions that resonate with real consumer insights, such as Starbucks' "third place" concept (suggesting "I want to relax,") and Apple's "think different" campaign (indicating "I want to change the fixed notion.") Mr. K reflected on the difficulties of finding insights during the mass media era, often relying on in-depth interviews or group discussions to inform strategic creative development. Mr. U added a nuanced perspective, suggesting that insight can be subjective and even poetic in nature, reflecting the individual planner's interpretation.

(Table 2: Differences in Account Planning Practices and Business Customs between EU/US and Japan)

### ***Differences Between Traditional and Digital Account Planning Roles***

Since the inception of account planning, advertising agencies have primarily generated revenue through media commissions. Traditional account planners predominantly operated during the mass media era (1960s~2000s). Their key characteristics included a focus on target consumers, attention to creative briefs, and a deep regard for consumer insight. These planners centered their strategies around understanding the essence of human behavior, crafting concepts to inspire creative ideation, and ultimately solving client issues through the activation of these

ideas.

By contrast, digital planners, (2010s~) exhibit distinct characteristics. They are less fixated on target consumers, tend to forgo traditional creative briefs and prioritize data and figures in their planning process. Digital planners derive consumer insights from data, viewing human behavior through the lens of data and figures. Conceptualization based on consumer insight may not be their primary focus, as their main objective is to address client issues through data-driven strategies. Mr. U and Ms. O highlighted a growing conflict and confusion between traditional planners and digital planners has emerged recently, and finding a planner who can understand both traditional and digital approaches has become increasingly rare.

(Table 3.Traditional Planners and Digital Planners)

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study clarified the inception of account planning in Japan and the changes in account planning brought about by digital emergence through analysis and interview approaches. The findings are summarized below:

- (1) Account planning in Japan began in 1992 with Dr. Kobayashi's paper, leading to the establishment of planning departments in many advertising agencies. Development continued through Dr. Kobayashi's (2000, 2004) and Steel's (2000) publications.
- (2) Digital emergence in Japan gained momentum in the 2010s and accelerated after digital media advertising expenditures surpassed those of TV in 2019. By 2022, digital media accounted for 43.1% of advertising expenditure in Japan, with TV/NP/Mag/Radio sharing 35%.
- (3) In the mass media era, account planners analyzed static information to craft creative concepts and communicated a single key message primarily through TV. In the digital era, interactive communication through smartphones reshaped media interactions, leading to a shift in planning focus from emotional persuasion to data-driven strategies.

(4) Creative briefs are not widely used in major advertising agencies in Japan, except for multinational clients, who provide their own formats. Multinational advertising agencies utilize traditional creative briefs and newer formats such as the 5C (catch, connect, consider, close, and continue) consumer journey to adapt to the digital era. Creative briefs are not used because consumer behavior becomes complex and completing within one creative brief format is difficult.

(5) While planners still value consumer insights, their methods vary. Many planners think consumer insight is important because it is fundamental to finding people's desires. One planner developed two creative ideas based on insights and conducted an AB test to select digital advertising strategies.

(6) Account planners were categorized into specialized planners, including creative planners, PR planners, and SNS planners in the 2000s; however, recently the conflict and confusion between traditional account planners and digital planners have become apparent. They exhibit conflicting views on target audiences, creative briefs, insights, and planning and result evaluation methods. Traditional account planners emphasize human nature, whereas digital planners prioritize data and figures.

The legacy of account planning, centered around strategy development through creative briefs and consumer-centric insights, with planners as core members of advertising development, remains in Japan. However, the rapid changes brought by digital emergence necessitate adaptation in traditional account planning practices. While this study has initiated the examination of current changes in account planning, further research on digital planning is required to provide a more detailed analysis of current changes in account planning.

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Mr. H. N., Integration Director, Leader Hakuhodo Institute of Activation Design.

Ms. K. O., former Senior Director, Head of Planning, J. Walter Thompson Japan.

Mr. T. U., Tokyo Advanced Institute of Industrial Technology, Manager, CX Planning Center, Dentsu.

**Table 1. Major Papers and Books on Account Planning in Japan**

Year	Author	Title	Paper/Book
1992	Yasuhiko Kobayashi	Theory of Account Planner	Paper
1998	Yasuhiko Kobayashi	Structure and Development of Advertising Business: Innovation Through Account Planning	Book
2000	John Steel	Truth Lie and Advertising (Account Planning will Change the Advertising)	Book
2004	Kobayashi et. Al	Thought of Account Planning	Book
2008	Kobayashi et. Al	Reality of Account Planning in Japan through Research	Paper
2016	Shunichi Murao	Searching the Origin of Account Planning	Paper
2016	S.Murao T.Sato	Comparative Study of Creative Brief on Strategic Planning between US and Japan	Paper
2018	Shunichi Murao	Historical Overview of Creative Brief	Paper
2018	Shunichi Murao	The United States and Japan: Comparative research on Creativity and the Effect of Account Planning	Paper
2021	Shunichi Murao	Creativity and Strategy of Marketing Communication: Creativity and Account Planning	Book

**Table 2. Differences in Account Planning Practices and Business Customs between EU/US and Japan**

	EU/US Ad. Agencies	Japanes Ad. Agencies
<b>Business Custom Competitor</b>	<b>One Company One Client</b>	<b>One Company Many Clients</b>
<b>Planning Department</b>	<b>Independent Department</b>	<b>Within Account Management</b>
<b>Creative Brief</b>	<b>Have Creative Brief</b>	<b>Do not Have Creative Brief Format</b>
<b>Idea</b>	<b>Idea is Fundamental</b>	<b>Low Focus on Idea High Focus on Expression</b>
<b>Thinking</b>	<b>Rationalism</b>	<b>Intuition + Rationalism</b>

**Table 3. Traditional Planners and Digital Planners**

	<b>Traditional Planner</b>	<b>Digital Planner</b>
<b>Target</b>	<b>Focused</b>	<b>Relatively Broad</b>
<b>Creative Brief</b>	<b>High Importance</b>	<b>Low Importance</b>
<b>Insight</b>	<b>Emphasized On</b>	<b>Make from Data</b>
<b>Essense of Planning</b>	<b>Human Essence</b>	<b>Data and Figure</b>
<b>Creative Idea</b>	<b>High Importance</b>	<b>Make from Data</b>
<b>Result Evaluation</b>	<b>Moving Human Mind</b>	<b>Key Performance Indicator (Data&amp;Figure)</b>