



Northern Ireland Government Advertising Review

**AndersonSprattGroup comments on the Draft
Report for Consultation / Government Advertising
Framework Protocol of the Office of the
First Minister and Deputy First Minister/ Executive
Information Service**

October 2005

Part 1 Introduction

AndersonSprattGroup welcomes the opportunity to make comment and observation on the current Government Advertising Review with specific regard to the Draft Report for Consultation / Government Advertising Framework Protocol.

We have throughout this process sought to embrace the spirit and detail of the Review, for it fundamentally addresses issues of efficiency and effectiveness in terms of Government's advertising and communications behaviour.

This short commentary offers some informal observations for consideration within Part 1, in addition to some more specific comments on draft proposals, within Part 2. We trust that they will reciprocally be met in a spirit of constructive dialogue, for this is the spirit in which they are forwarded. Most of all, these comments originate from a company committed to professional best practice and a desire to work collaboratively with the Public Estate.

Importance of the Public Pound

AndersonSprattGroup welcomes OFM DFM's recognition of the importance of the Public Sector Pound in the Advertising Sector in Northern Ireland. Expenditure from Government sources constitutes significantly important revenues for many businesses within the industry. We welcome the position in relation to centralized media buying identified within Chapter 5 (5.17) and Chapter 6 (6.3.6) within the Draft Report For Consultation.

Emerging Role of the Internet

AndersonSprattGroup welcomes Government's recognition of the emerging role of the Internet in advertising behaviour and media strategy. We further welcome the acknowledgment of this as a transitional process and the Draft Report's reference to the 'important supplementary role' of the Internet and digital TV as detailed in Chapter 5 (5.5).

Equality of Access

This point is particularly welcomed (Chapter 4, 4.3) as the Advertising Sector has sought to achieve equality of access with media owners over many years. The harnessing of Government muscle to the debate may now result in more positive outcomes.

Commission Erosion

Somewhat less welcome within the Framework Protocol is the proposed reduction in allowable media commissions to agency parties responsible for Government Advertising.

The industry has sought to increase qualitative standards of professional service delivery in the face of margin erosion from sundry sources over many years. This Government position presents further challenges to the sustainability of professional standards from an already decidedly competitive and price sensitive sector. We nonetheless recognise the discretion of Government in adopting this position as it seeks to reduce overall expenditure.

For Further Consideration... the Pan-Irish Perspective

Interestingly, the media market place has seen some radical transformation over the past 10 - 20 years on the island of Ireland. Independent News & Media, owners of the Belfast Telegraph, now command a formidable presence North and South, as they do nationally and internationally. Ulster Television PLC similarly present an overtly pan-Irish profile as compared with only a decade ago. And there are other comparable developments...

This changing market place is worthy of Government consideration going forward as it increasingly presents opportunities for media buying leverage and cross-border engagement.

Acceptable Risk Strategy

Increasingly, AndersonSprattGroup is conscious of a momentum within Government toward a managed risk strategy which is not just defensible, but acceptable. Such demeanour can potentially deliver high yield outcomes and will be warmly welcomed by the Private Sector.

The Secretary of State's recent seminal speech on the way forward for Northern Ireland (the content of which AndersonSprattGroup was invited to comment on in an extensive BBC interview) spoke of the need for Northern Ireland to become a world class society with world class competitiveness. Such outcome is only possible through much closer collaboration as between all estates in Northern Ireland - Public, Private and Voluntary. Such achievement will additionally require the adoption of acceptable risk strategies, where appropriate.

Such a strategy might wish to consider the following: -

Part 2 Observations on Draft Protocol

Evaluation Criteria

Creative Effectiveness

One of the most challenging areas, we believe, will be in the evaluation of materials submitted in support of any particular tender whether as a case study or as newly volunteered creative work (when appropriate). Creative output is, by its very nature, a quite subjective topic where interpretation can differ depending on the individuals who are “examining” the work. Even when one has an indication of the context of the work and the objectives attaching thereto it can be challenging (even for the very experienced communications professional) to fully grasp what is being attempted through the creative work.

Perhaps it might be appropriate (particularly for case study examples) to create some form of template so that competing bidders’ work can be assessed with some form of common framework guiding the assessment.

Issue on Tender Documentation

Face to Face Meetings

Lack of access to individuals responsible for communications projects can inhibit the creative process as it is often through intimate dialogue (not necessarily lengthy dialogue) that exciting insights can emerge. Indeed, often the nucleus of the “eureka” moment in advertising activity can happen at such moments.

If only a maximum of 3 parties (at certain stages of the process) are being invited forward then perhaps that might permit the time required for one to one briefings! Three ‘one hour’ briefings is a small investment of time when one considers the very important value of the work being explored through Government Advertising Tenders, financial and consequential.

We note the offer of open forum briefings but in all honesty these are rarely successful. Yes, they will permit an open forum re-stating of objectives et al attaching to the brief. But 3 or 4 competing agencies in the one room at a brief rarely (perhaps never) provides a fertile ground for really incisive discovery. Indeed, bearing in mind that 10% of marks are awarded for “new insights” it would be unlikely that in open forum discussion, an exciting new thought attaching to the brief work might be volunteered: As we all work in a competitively creative environment we tend to keep such insights close to our individual chests. But a one to one briefing would either add further fuel to a unique insight or (because of client knowledge and observation) would file it as “not appropriate now!”

Debriefing

In the past debriefs have been verbal and very brief. The learning process would be much aided by fully sharing (without breaching any confidentiality agreements) and in writing. Will this be available to agencies?

Intellectual Property

This was touched upon at the clarification update on the 17th of October and the explanation given sits happily with our own understanding. That is, if any new work is created in direct response to a brief then the new work becomes Crown Copyright. However, if the work includes elements that are secured under licence such as photography, or a particular licence situation, then, of course, that cannot pass either to the originating agency or to the client, unless assigned through purchase. Some overt recognition of this clause in the protocol would be welcomed.

Contract Management/Payment

It was explained that “payment withhold” would be as a last resort and would rarely (if ever) happen and, indeed, we accept that. However, it would give certain comfort if the wording could be amended to reflect that sometimes it is only a small element of one overall invoice that causes difficulty and this (bearing in mind that it may be a small percentage of the overall bill) should not prevent the remainder of the invoice being settled.

It is also noted that at some point in the future it would be EIS intention to explore “performance related enhancements.” Recognising that there is an immediate build in of penalties for failure to perform, this agency would welcome a very early exploration of the opportunity to achieve more on behalf of government clients and to, potentially, earn more as a consequence, particularly as certain other sources of margin, such as media commissions, are being eroded.

Additionally, in respect of payment mechanism, no reference is made to the penalty on contracting authorities who do not meet the 30 day guideline for payments. Perhaps this could also be dealt with as a specific item in the protocol.

Environmental Responsibility/Waste Management

AndersonSprattGroup is also endeavouring to embrace its environmental responsibilities as, indeed, all of Northern Ireland increasingly is. We are trying to cut down on the amount of paper we create and waste and one of the ways that we are doing this is by reducing the amount of voucher copies we need from newspapers. We vouch all papers to ensure that advertisements appear where and when they are supposed to. It is a responsibility that we take very seriously and we are ISO 9001 audited to ensure that (among many others) this is a procedure that we adhere to. It is possible to electronically store the proof that an advert has appeared and we would respectfully request that the need for physical vouchers to be appended to your invoices be ceased.

Sponsorship

Can some clarity be brought to the areas of sponsorship in terms of what is and what isn't appropriate in terms of private sector partnering? Also, can an outline of potential fees for sponsorship delivery be given at this stage?