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LEADERSHIP & TALENT

The Mad Men Era Is Over, and Junior Talent Expect Credit

Agencies can benefit from giving young creatives visibility, too



Mad Men's Don Draper notoriously refused to give copywriter Peggy Olson credit – but times have changed. Adweek; AMC+



By Emmy Liederman

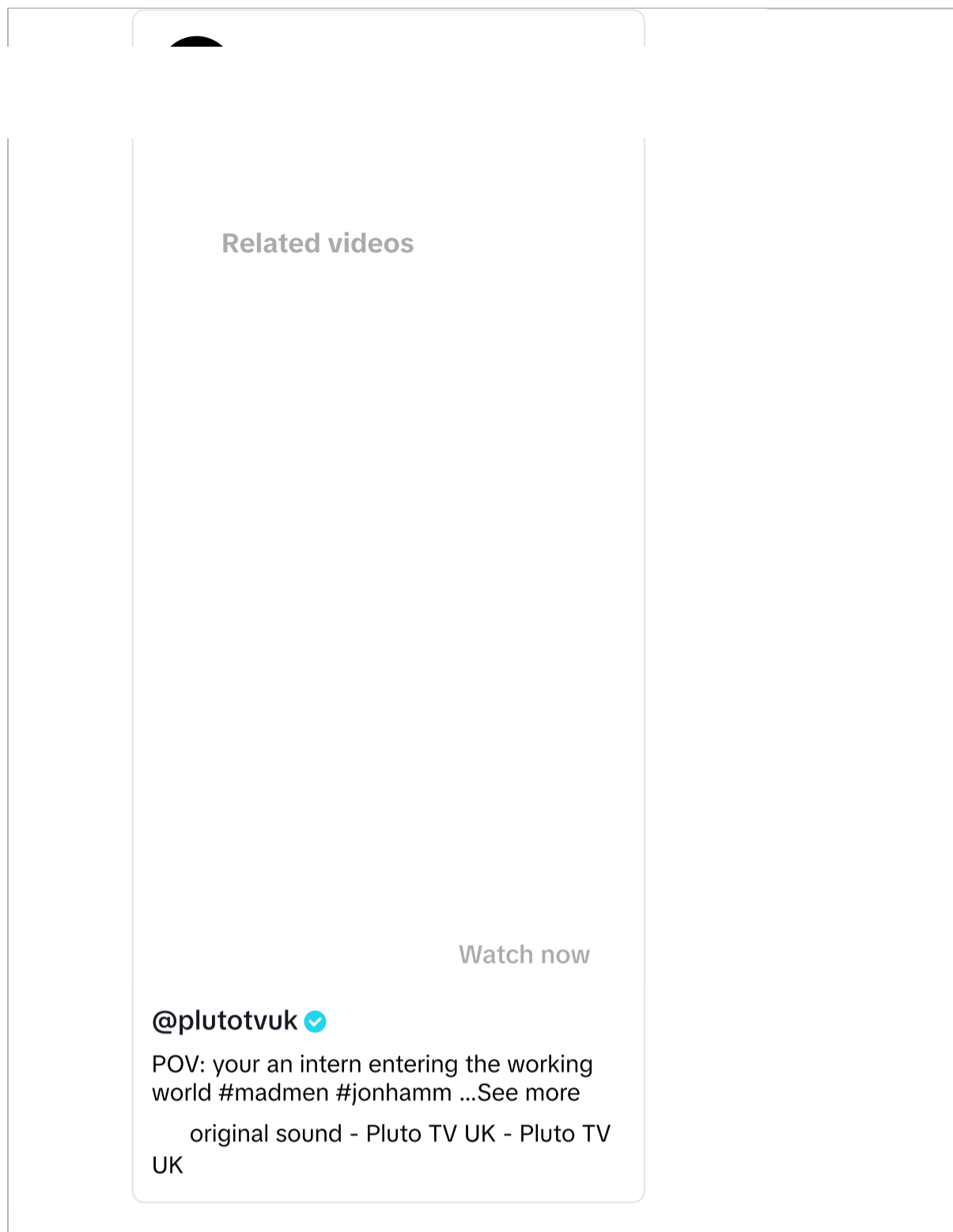
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When Mad Men character Peggy Olson steps into Don Draper's office to contest her inadequate recognition as a copywriter at their agency, he asserts that receiving credit for ideas isn't essential in advertising—unless you're the creative director accepting a Clio award that he represents.

Limited by her boss' defensiveness, Olson softens to a more modest, "You never say thank you." In a blunt response to a junior copywriter's request for recognition, he says: "That's what the money's for."



The advertising industry may have largely moved away from the world of 1960s Madison Avenue depicted in *Mad Men*, but stances still differ on giving credit to creative talent. At many agencies today, a tension is rising among a younger generation who are increasingly swapping a nameless creativity for public careers in content creation. While some agencies fear that recognizing the efforts of junior talent on a campaign—whether in a client meeting or LinkedIn post—could position them to be poached by competitors, many argue that giving them such opportunities will only foster more loyalty.



Previous generations may have readily accepted that you gain recognition only through experience, but Gen Z can be brash in its rejection of corporate structures. In an industry defined by both collaboration and competitiveness, agencies can increase talent retention by heightening their visibility and giving them permission to craft a public image.



“There are a lot of people at the top who feel like they’ve earned their right to talk directly with clients or speak on panels,” said Lamar Phillips, a senior copywriter who has worked at agencies including McCann and Ogilvy, “but the best leaders are always recognizing opportunities to bring in younger creatives.”



Pursuing personal branding



Talent that has been boxed out of the industry—or have left on their own accord for other pursuits—represent a missed opportunity for agencies to both utilize their skills and tag along with them in chasing heightened recognition.

“I was always transparent about how my successes could be beneficial for the agency, but I guess that became uncomfortable for them.”

—Brittany Bright, content creator and former agency employee

Before Brittany Bright started her role at a global agency, she said she was clear about her intention to continue her creative pursuits outside of work. As a then budding content creator, who has since founded an educational platform for creators of color, maintaining a personal brand was a priority when accepting a full-time job. While the agency signed off

on her endeavors, she claimed her employer's discomfort increased as her platform gained more visibility. After asking for approval for a major

Bright pointed to the industry's proclaimed commitment to uplift diverse talent—but only within their four walls.



WHY MARKETERS OF COLOR ARE QUITTING THEIR JOBS

Another creative—a mid-level graphic designer who wished to remain anonymous—also reflected on his previous employer's disapproval of his external work. He said that leadership's anxiety about employees leaving can hurt the agency by stifling talent's ability to branch out and diversify their portfolios.

"The HR team told me I would thrive on my own and felt that my personal brand was more important than working there," said Bright, who worked on social media strategy and influencer marketing at the agency. "I was always transparent about how my successes could be beneficial for the agency, but I guess that became uncomfortable for them."

Humanizing the work

Daniella Zalcmán, a photojournalist and the founder and executive director of nonprofit Women Photograph, has been vocal in advocating for creative credit across industries. She emphasized the importance of giving creatives the option for credit—though some may decline if they do not feel mission-aligned with a client—as both an ethical obligation and an opportunity for corporate humanization. In short, she said, "I think everyone wins." Similar to the journalism industry, she stressed that giving out credit can help an advertiser gain trust with audiences, as the rise of Generative AI has created greater scrutiny around the origin of content.

"Being able to say, 'This is a really good group of creative people that came together to work on this,' both honors the labor and is good for the brand and the industry," she said.

While some agencies argue that the moving parts behind a project blur the lines of credit, a mid-level social media and digital marketing manager, who also wished to remain anonymous, said that is exactly why the industry needs them. Crediting talent can help foster more personalized client relationships and also boost employee morale, they added.

"Senior level executives need to understand the importance of mentorship within the agency as well as helping junior level team members build their brands outside of the agency," said Bright. "I guarantee that the more you instill in them, the longer they're going to stay there."

Debating relevant recognition

While the mid-level graphic designer understands the decision to not disclose any credit at all, he emphasized his frustration when a few people at the top claim an entire campaign as their own.

Agencies, including Mother and Uncommon Creative Studio, the latter of which declined Adweek's request for comment, are prominent shops with a policy of not including specific agency credits in their work. Marianne Stefanowicz, Mother's chief community and communications officer, said this strategy is based on the notion that assigning credits to individual employees would misrepresent the complexity of collaboration.



TO SELL GREAT WORK TO A CLIENT, EVERY BIG IDEA NEEDS A CHAMPION

"Putting a few names on a credits list is simply not representative of our values, unless we list the entire company and clients," she explained, adding that employees are not forbidden from "talking about the work they do here" on portfolios, social media and through speaking engagements. "This impacts their personal development and careers in far greater ways."

“... ..”

Phillips, who said an agency's culture is reflected in how

unless we list the entire company and clients. ”

—Marianne Stefanowicz, chief community and communications officer, Mother

“How involved will I be in client presentations?”

“If they tell me the client likes to keep it small, then that’s a red flag,” she said, adding that leaders should make space for creatives to present and advocate for their work.

Chris May, chief creative officer of Elephant, said offering

junior and senior talent equal visibility through press opportunities, jury participation and social media is the best way to boost recognition among clients.

Approaching talent visibility

Omid Farhang is the founder of Majority, a creative agency that Shaquille O’Neal co-founded that currently has 30 employees. In a small shop where everyone has a hand in the work, he said it’s not his job to divvy out credit and decide who deserves to add it to their portfolio. When it comes to supporting an employee’s career development, he asserted that press mentions should be reserved for executives.

“I’m nervous talking to you right now, and I’ve done this 1,000 fucking times,” he said, arguing that meaningful credit instead comes from “filling portfolios with famous work that elevates (employees’) value.” Farhang said the agency encourages juniors to include a variety of work in their portfolios, even if they played a secondary role in its creation, as portfolios are key to career development. “You’re not really setting them up for success by just handing them a microphone without preparation. I don’t think that’s credit that ultimately serves the goals of the entire agency.”

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—Daniella Zalcmán, photojournalist and founder and executive director of Women Photograph

When Bright was a junior employee, she found that press mentions were what upset her employer the most but were also most helpful in building her personal brand. And Phillips, who knows that agency execs often receive media training, emphasized the opportunity to include junior creatives on those calls.

“Especially when you’re early in your career, you’re looking for any opportunity where you can to say, ‘I’m good at my job and I can do this,’” added Zalcmán. “It can really make or break whether people notice you and give you opportunities.”



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