An IPG/Ad Age survey finds that the typical agency workforce includes an even mix of men and women. But delve deeper.

By Julie Liesse

Statistics show that a typical ad agency workforce is likely to include a healthy mix of men and women.

But look more closely. How many women are in the creative department? How many women are on the senior management team? And when the agency and its clients get together, how many women at the table represent the C-suite of those clients?

Gender diversity, and particularly the relative paucity of women in creative and top executive positions, remains a problem in the advertising industry, according to a first-of-its-kind survey commissioned by Interpublic in conjunction with Advertising Age.

The IPG/Ad Age survey found that three-quarters of female staffers in the U.S. marketing industry said gender diversity is a problem for the ad industry—and of that group, two of every five respondents termed it not just a problem, but “a major problem.”

“Half of the workforce in our industry is women. So we see women in advertising,” says Heide Gardner, senior VP-chief diversity & inclusion officer for IPG. “But the issue is the gender balance at the top. That is obscured by the level of participation of women overall.”

IPG and Ad Age unveiled the survey results at a Diversity & Inclusion Summit at June’s Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity. For IPG, the interest in gender diversity “is not merely altruistic: A company with a diverse workforce performs better,” says Michael Roth, IPG chairman and CEO. “Our emphasis on diversity helps in our recruiting, with our investors and with our clients.”

But in addition, he says, “Look at the marketplace we serve: Some 80% of purchase decisions are made by females. In the marketing and communications business, your message has to resonate with a diverse market; and to do that best, women need to be represented in your company at all levels. From a business point of view, it’s critical that we hear what women want.”

Critical Qualities

Research shows women possess many of the qualities viewed as critical for 21st century businesses: focusing on collaboration and teamwork, building relationships and displaying high integrity. In a 2012 study by leadership consultancy Zenger Folkman, for instance, female leaders scored higher than males in overall leadership effectiveness and in 12 of 16 individual competency areas.

“Strategy, operations and creative decision-making are more robust when you have women involved,” Ms. Gardner says.

The IPG/Ad Age survey drew almost 1,000 respondents from across the industry; 70% said they work for agencies, 30% for marketers. Some 53% were men, and 45% were women. On average, respondents have 15 years of work experience in the advertising and marketing industry.

Some 45% of the survey respondents were from outside the U.S. Significantly fewer men and women in those non-U.S. markets said that gender diversity is a problem in the industry, with only 19% of women outside the U.S. calling it a major problem.

“In the U.S., there is a gender gap among respondents. In contrast to the concerns of 75% of U.S. women, less than half—47%—of U.S. men said gender diversity is a problem, with only 13% judging it a major problem for the industry. I am not surprised that men don’t see this as a problem. Unlike racial or ethnic diversity, they see plenty of women in marketing and, when they do, they aren’t thinking about the level or titles of the women,” Ms. Gardner says. “They think the system is a pure meritocracy and it works as it should.”

Joyce King Thomas, who serves as president-chief creative officer for IPG unit McCann XBC, attributes the problem to the “legacy of male leadership in the business.” Says Ms. King Thomas, “I don’t think it’s about what women are doing wrong. But it’s taking a while to make a change in that legacy.”

Survey respondents were asked about the balance of men and women in senior-level positions in their companies. The answers: Top posts in executive management, creative departments, digital marketing, strategy and overall sales and mar-
marketing tend to be held by men, while media departments and account management are more often led by women.

One respondent to the IPG/Ad Age survey commented: “Senior leadership is still dominated by men. Creative positions are still dominated by men. When I attended Cannes last year, I was surprised to see that only a few women were up at the stage getting the awards.”

Mr. Roth says IPG’s programming at Cannes “began by focusing on women’s roles in the creative side of the business—because there is no question when you look at the heads of creative departments, there is a huge disparity.

“We have been looking for an answer about why this is, and it’s not very clear. One thing that we found is that males tend to have more sponsors than females,” Mr. Roth says, referring to a person who takes on a formal advocacy role for a more junior-level colleague.

One-third of the IPG/Ad Age survey respondents said they have a sponsor at work—of those, 64% said their sponsors are “very important” to career advancement and success.

But the survey found that men in creative departments were nearly three times more likely than female creatives to have a sponsor within their companies. Ms. Gardner says the tendency of men to sponsor other men “is a human dynamic—we tend to select people who are most like ourselves.”

Val DiFebo, CEO of IPG unit Deutsch NY, says part of the issue for women in creative departments is the nature of the job. “If you are in most creative fields, you produce your work but it doesn’t have to be advocated for and sold. Painters are not standing in front of the room trying to sell a piece,” she says. “In advertising, creative is often as much about selling the idea as it is about the idea itself. And selling is not typically in a woman’s comfort zone.”

She laughs and says, “If you get a woman and man to talk about the same proposal, the man will make it seem like the best thing ever, but the woman will talk about it in a much more balanced way.”

The IPG/Ad Age survey also looked at what gets in the way of women moving into leadership positions. When asked to name the biggest barrier to the advancement of women into senior roles, 49% of all respondents said “interruptions to career because of family responsibilities”—the No. 1 answer.

When asked to name what types of initiatives and programs they support to improve gender diversity, 68% of respondents said they supported corporate policies that allow greater flexibility in balancing work and home life—again, the No. 1 answer.

Ms. King Thomas says for many women the issue is more practical. “I think the issue for many women is that companies don’t make it worth their while to stay. When you have a child, you look at your job, make sure you are making enough money, assess your chances for advancement. If the trade-off isn’t good enough, you leave.

“So my message to the industry is: If you think a woman is great, make it worth her while to stay or to come back.”

Ms. King Thomas and Ms. DiFebo are two of the women IPG has put in charge of its agencies. Most recently the company promoted Karen Kaplan to president and CEO at Hill Holliday. In addition, Mr. Roth points out, 40% of IPG board members are women, making it one of only nine companies in the Fortune 500 with this level of women directors.

“We take this seriously. We hold managers accountable for diversity. Each year, when we list the high-priority objectives for our managers, each one has diversity and inclusion as part of their measurable targets,” Ms. Gardner says.

Ms. Gardner says that in addition to formal objectives for agency CEOs, IPG also supports diversity by conducting a yearly survey to see how employees perceive the work environment. IPG executives have a mandate to identify high-potential staff who are women and people of color. The company has also focused on mentoring and sponsorship of women throughout the organization. IPG’s Women’s Leadership Network promotes awareness of women’s issues and possible solutions to gender inequality while offering professional development opportunities.

**Real-World Change**

Ms. King Thomas says, “There are lots of people taking steps to remedy this issue.” When she started McCann XBC she committed to a staff that was 50% female and has surpassed that goal. Similarly, she points to the New York-based Art Directors Club, which in May launched its own initiative calling for an equal level of participation for both genders across award show juries, boards of directors, and event and speaker lineups. “If you set goals, you will be making a change,” she says.

Although IPG executives agree that the situation for women has improved and that younger staffers—members of Generation Y—are growing up more diverse and inclusive, they say it’s not enough. Adds Ms. DiFebo, “I am surprised at the number of young people who look at Deutsch and say, ‘Wow—a female CEO, a female North American CEO, a female head of communications’. The fact that ‘wow’ is before that indicates there is still a bias out there.”

Overall, Ms. King Thomas says, “Things are getting better. … I am seeing more and more really ambitious women who won’t be denied, and I love that. I say to them, ‘You could be running things around here in a few years.’”

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**SPECIAL ADVERTISING SECTION OF ADVERTISING AGE**

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**BALANCE OF MEN AND WOMEN IN AD JOBS**

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**BIGGEST BARRIERS TO ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN**

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<td>57%</td>
<td>BIASES (INCLUDING UNCONSCIOUS BIOS) AMONG CURRENT SENIOR LEADERS</td>
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<td>55%</td>
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<td>45%</td>
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<td>38%</td>
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<td>33%</td>
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Source: IPG/Ad Age survey 2013

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Michael Roth, chairman and CEO, IPG

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