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HOW TO GET THE BEST FROM YOUR
ADVERTISING AGENCY

by

Subroto Sen Gupta

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HOW TO GET THE BEST FROM YOUR ADVERTISING AGENCY

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Subroto Sen Gupta

Some time ago an extremely important client put his agency into a state of nerves. The immediate cause for the Marketing Manager's restiveness was stock accumulation and the rapid decline in the growth rate of his product (Exhibit A). And, of course, the queries from upstairs. It was thought that the quality of the advertising campaign was at fault.

The agency mounted an intensive exercise to analyse sales and offtake trends; it held renewed conversations with consumers; it recommended a repositioning of the product to appeal to certain specific segments instead of across the board as hitherto; it reemphasised the need for certain product improvements.

Product changes were brought about and new advertising was created to match this new positioning of the brand. Within a year, the sales targets were considerably exceeded. The field staff were clamouring for stocks. Consumer offtake looked altogether healthy (Exhibit B). The Marketing Manager wrote a congratulatory letter to his agency.

Look at the number of issues that we have raised in this brief 3-paragraph case history of client-agency relations.

*Can a little fear help a client to get the best out of his agency?

- *Should the client involve his agency in marketing counselling?
- *Can a client get the best out of his agency without good product planning?
- *At what point should the client concede to the agency's judgement?
- *Should the client attempt to strike a balance between the brickbat and the bouquet?

It would be repetitive to list for readers the entire catalogue of Do's and Dont's in getting the best out of a client-agency relationship. Most of them are aware of this list - whether or not they observe the rules in practice.

The President of Ogilvy and Mather offered 40 (that's right, only 40) suggestions for "getting more creativity out of the Agency" in a symposium organised by the National Industrial Conference Board, USA.⁽¹⁾ The Symposium was titled "If I were the Client..." Other references at the end of this article will help the reader to refresh his memory on tried and tested principles of productive client-agency relations. In fact, one book from the UK⁽²⁾ is so entertaining (and so close to real life) that I have elsewhere quoted a lengthy extract (Appendix I).

For the purpose of this article - which is written from the agency standpoint- I am going to assume that a mature, experienced client is dealing with a mature, professionally trained and creatively talented agency. I will try to talk about the most critical elements in this "Critical Partnership".⁽³⁾ Addressing clients, I would say:

I. Wish Prosperity for Your Agency as You Would for Yourself.

If you convince your agency through actions and gestures that you appreciate the economics of the agency business in India, that you want your agency to be financially stable and that you wish to see it grow in turnover and profits, you will be able to get unbiased advice. This advice will do good to your company, maybe at the expense of temporary sacrifices on the part of your agency. The agency will give you such advice if it thinks of you as a fair client in matters of agency compensation. Most of my comments in this article are based on the premise that your agency will identify itself with your business interest. It cannot do so if you are seen as out to clip the agency's earnings whenever you can.

I recollect an example. The agency had brought about a major reversal in favour of a big but sluggish brand of its client through very emotive advertising. The brand's sales showed remarkable growth. So did agency billings. The client did not seek direct relations with printers, film producers and film distributors. Nor did he quibble over a few rupees on art charges. Years later, when the brand was again becoming a little tried, the agency suggested a face lift through some shape and size improvements and, above all, through a foil wrapper. (This was in pre-inflation days).

The client retorted that this could only be done by cutting down its ad expenditure. The agency did some more homework and reaffirmed its proposal for a foil wrapper with an accompanying cut in ad spending.

What can a client do to get this kind of objective consultancy? Make the agency believe that it will share in your prosperity. In the words of Dan Seymour, President of J. Walter Thompson: "If I were the client, I would want my agency to make money on my account because that is what they are in business for and so am I".⁽¹⁾

II. Decide on the Selling Load that Advertising Can Carry

You cannot get the best out of your agency until you have devised a marketing mix strategy that is right for the situation. You may be asking Advertising to do too much or too little.

Many years ago a company had a very good entry in the 1 - p field. (I dare not give any more clues!). For several years it backed the brand with consistent image building advertising and limited below-the-line activity. The brand held a steady No.2 position and showed reasonable growth in the fight against an entrenched market leader. When competition became stronger and the top management made noises, the marketing management of the company fluctuated wildly between consumer incentives to get here-and-now sales and advertising to hold the brand's franchise.

After a few years of this see-saw, the brand quietly slipped into oblivion. Throughout the declining phase of this brand, the Company was unable to get the best from its agency because it did not know what to ask of the latter.

In another case, the client made its agency develop scores of campaigns for a brand facing difficulties. Finally it selected one of several good campaigns that were presented and ran it. The brand, however, was quickly outstripped by a ~~newcomer~~ with inadequate and indifferent advertising. Having latched on to Advertising as the White Knight, the real situation was not tackled until much later. The picture that emerged was that the pricing strategy for the brand was its weakness. (Exhibit C)

III. Give your Agency a Product with a Difference

An indolent client usually takes the line that in these days of standard technology and brand proliferation, it is the advertising difference that counts: not what you say to the consumer, but how you say it. Some Indian marketing and advertising professionals swear by Bernbach (of Volkswagen fame), the great guru of advertising creativity to uphold this view. They forget that it was Bernbach who decried this lazy attitude towards making better products (Appendix II). It does not require technological skill to crack the whip at one's agency and ask for 'more creative advertising'.

At the risk of serious disagreements with many colleagues in the profession, I must express the view that a client cannot get the best out of his agency with good-quality products that are 'me-too' in all respects.

When 'Tej' detergent powder was launched it broke a 10-year status-quo in market shares. It had a genuine product difference which was of interest to the consumer.

If you have designed a product to satisfy a consumer need a little more imaginatively, you can get the best out of your agency in terms of imaginative, attention getting, persuasive advertising. A client should not make the agency the scapegoat for his own technical dullness. Study the ORG consumer offtake figures for recent years. The significant changes are usually associated with brands that offer different satisfactions. The toothpaste field is just one example.

Since a similar statement in the Harvard Business Review will naturally carry more weight, I hasten to quote it:

"The acceptance of a 70% failure rate (for new brands) as par for the course shows a discouraging level of complacency among marketers ... the vast majority of new-brand failures are copies, pimplly little "me toos" and "me threes" that bring nothing new to the consumer".⁽⁴⁾

IV. Do your Product Planning in League with Your Agency

The noted US consultants, Booz, Allen and Hamilton, were retained by the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) to conduct a study of the Advertiser-Agency relationship.⁽⁵⁾ This exceptionally valuable study (1965) showed prevailing patterns of client-agency working relations as:

- a) Limited to Advertising
- b) Advertising Plus Selected Services
- c) Marketing Counsel
- d) Marketing Partnership
- e) Marketing Leadership

In India today one can see the advertiser-agency relationship ranging across this whole spectrum. For example, sick enterprises could benefit from a "marketing leadership" role of a competent advertising agency. In the context of a mature marketing company in India today I would suggest that the most marketing company in India today I would suggest that the most productive relation with its agency should be either, as listed above, of (c) Marketing Counsel or (d) Marketing Partnership.

c) Marketing Counsel

In this relationship pattern, the agency is not held responsible for performance of marketing functions other than advertising, but its counsel is sought (or preferred) on a continuing basis in all aspects of marketing effort. Agency counsel in marketing planning is expected to be active, well-informed and highly qualified.⁽⁵⁾

d) Marketing Partnership

Advertisers in this pattern take the lead in developing marketing strategy and plans, but they do so in close partnership with the agency and hence, "share responsibility" with the agency for total marketing result. In addition, the agency is asked to perform marketing support functions, often on a continuing basis.⁽⁵⁾

However sophisticated the marketing company, I suggest that to get the best from its agency it should not establish either the (a) or (b) type relationship described below:

a) Limited to Advertising

In this relationship pattern, the agency is looked to solely for the advertising - it plays a minimal role in all other marketing functions of the client's business. (5)

b) Advertising Plus Selected Services

These companies use agency services, other than advertising on a selective "make or buy" basis. These "make or buy" decisions are often on a project, rather than on a continuing basis, with the agency viewed as any other supplier in an arm's length relationship. However, the advertiser does not use the agency for marketing planning, and draws only as needed for projects in other marketing support services, no matter what his own organisation. (5)

Invariably such relationships will bring about a greater divorce of advertising creativity from the needs and opportunities of the product. Sooner or later it will put advertising creativity out on a limb performing verbal, visual or audio antics because the creators of such advertising have ceased to live with their products with an intimacy which is almost as close as that of the product manager.

Right at this moment our agency is involved with a client in planning the entry of a new product which, inevitably, will affect the fortunes of an older product marketed by the same company in the same category. It is an exercise in 'market stretching' the life cycle of the older, mature product while steering the new, innovative product into competitive strongholds.

The intensity of the debate over every issue - research interpretation, brand name, product features, pack design, price, positioning - in which our creative people are deeply involved, is giving the agency an intimacy with the marketing strategy decisions that would be impossible otherwise. The 'arm's-length' agency relationship would lead to confused, ambivalent or cannibalistic advertising.

Let me quote an example of how far such a client-agency partnership can go. Victor G. Bloede, President, Benton & Bowles, says:

"We have set up a small group of creative and research people who operate as a creative adjunct to the client's own R & D operation. For a fee, and let me stress that, our idea people work directly with their R & D people in exploring new product ideas and new packaging ideas. What our people bring to this service is not only a fresh point of view, and objectivity, but a point of view colored by the relative advertising opportunities of the products under experimentation ... I don't/^{know}whether this concept will work or not ... but it is an exciting way to use the creative talents of an agency to help in the new product arena". (1)

V. Start from an Agreed Creative Strategy

Our management culture is such that an executive would usually expend much search and effort before he puts his signature to a marketing document. The same culture allows for much woolliness and 'open-endedness' in what are merely verbal briefs. I am a believer in a written document on creative strategy, agreed between client and agency as the starting point of creative work.

This, however, calls for homework. Take the question of defining the target consumer. If you think this is trite, make a check among any 25 important advertisers to find out when they last carried out a reasonably extensive survey to determine profiles of their buyers and prospects. A famous food manufacturer believed for years that his product was really consumed by kids. His advertising reflected this. When he recently conducted a market survey he found that older members of the family were also substantial users. He changed his advertising to address all his prospects instead of only half.

Many years ago an agency suggested to an advertiser of consumer durables that he should get his dealers to enter on a carbon of the cash memo the following facts about buyers:

Age/occupation/education

The place of residence and name (indicating sex) were already being noted. This carbon would then come to the EDP department of the company and, over the years, would give a wealth of information about buyer profiles and their changing tastes at a negligible cost to the company. Nothing has come of this idea.

I don't need to dwell on other aspects of the creative strategy that should be thought out and spelt out. We are now really coming to the crunch - the creative expression or advertising creativity, if you will.

1. Develop in Your Company the Skill to Judge Creativity

David Ogilvy tells this story of how and why he acquired the Hathaway shirt account which was to make him famous. Ellerton Jette, who was then President of Hathaway, contacted Ogilvy.

"You don't know me", he said, "but I would like you to handle our advertising. We cannot spend much money (\$ 30,000 was the first year's budget), but I will promise you one thing: so long as you handle the account, I will not change one word of your advertisements".

"I blanched at the amount", says Ogilvy, "but how can you say no to an offer like that? You can bloody well believe I worked hard on that account".⁽⁶⁾

From my very limited experience I would say there are clients in India who, after giving much thought to their choice of agency, almost behave like the President of Hathaway! The campaign for Farex which was launched in 1969 is an example. The client weighted and scrutinised every word and visual. He changed very few. He then went so far as to put the visuals of his advertising campaign on to his pack. Not only did the consumer offtake of the brand show unusually high growth; what will have pleased top management most was that the cost of advertising each unit of the product steadily declined.

In this case, the client got the best out of his agency because he knew how to stimulate advertising creativity of a high order and he could also recognise a good thing when he saw it.

These must be treated as near-idyllic situations. Most of the time there will be considerable debate, disagreement and change in the creative recommendations made by the agency. This is reasonable. The point really is that the decision makers at the client's end must acquire the skill to evaluate advertising creativity.

Subhas Ghosal has made some very thoughtful observations on problems of creative judgement in an article in 'Solus'. He emphasises capability to judge persuasion:

"Any judge of advertising whether he is creator or buyer must never forget, must never allow the fact to be obscured that it is not creativity per se that he is passing judgement on. He is assessing the level of persuasion attained...

Advertising is largely an art. But because of the need for measurability and accountability it is being subjected to some of the disciplines of science. At best advertising will make an imperfect science and words like creative and creativity confuse the issue...

We are users of advertising, not purveyors of aesthetics. Mind you, persuasion and aesthetics are not mutually exclusive; sometimes they may even coincide and on the rare occasion the purely aesthetic may be wholly persuasive. But as the true yardstick, persuasion is number one". (7)

The Booz, Allen & Hamilton study referred to earlier went into great depth on the question of evaluating advertising creativity. Its conclusion:

"If marketing and management people are not adequately qualified to make constructive judgements on the creative elements in advertising, adjustments in the approval procedure should be made. This may even mean self-removal by a top corporate officer from creative review".

"Agencies perform best on creativity when judged by someone whom they know has the knowhow. This places responsibility on management to assess personal track records in order to be assured that the very best available judgement will be applied to advertising creativity".⁽⁵⁾

I teach a course on Advertising at the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad in which 'Creativity and Creative Judgement' forms an important part.⁽⁸⁾ I sometimes wonder if the quantitative and analytical orientation of modern marketing management education in India is being adequately compensated by training in the skill of evaluating persuasion.

Of one thing I am certain. The client cannot get the best out of his agency unless the decision makers at the seniormost marketing level make a conscious effort to develop this skill - part intuitive, part analytical - of evaluating the persuasive power of a given piece of advertising.

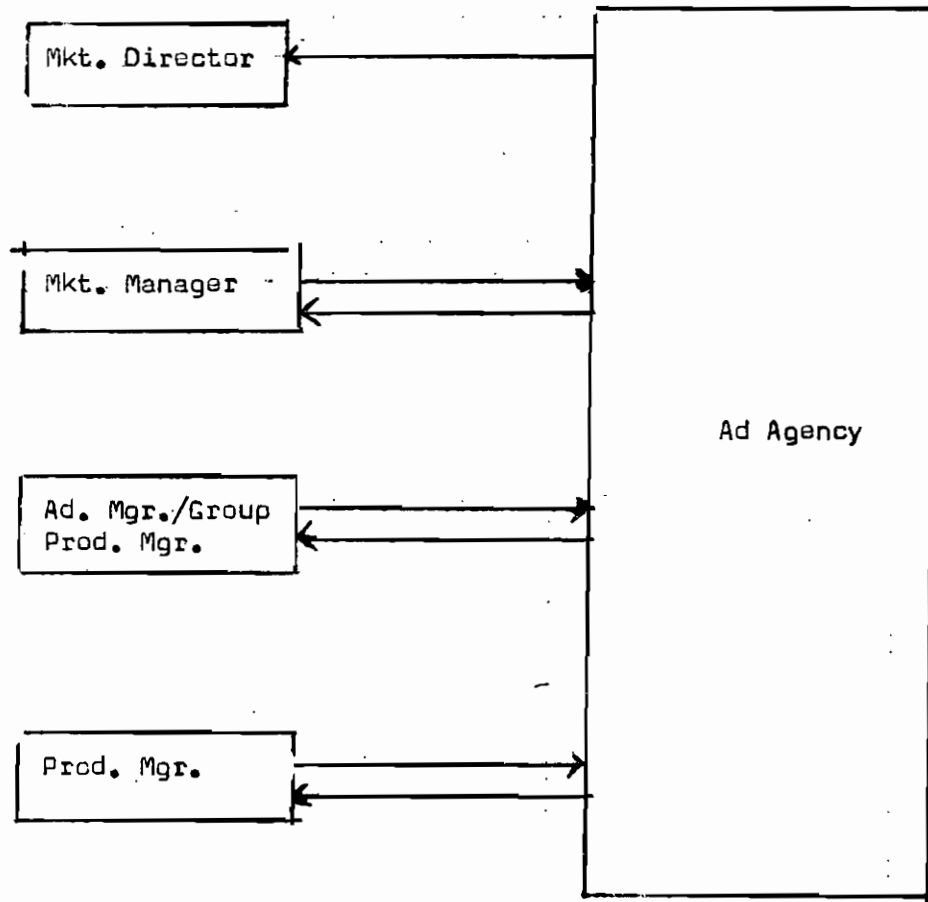
Consider the fact, for example, that none of the Management Education Programmes at senior levels devote time and faculty resources to the development of this skill.

VII: Reduce the levels of Creative Approval

"I have seen highly competent agency men reduced to jibbering frustration by junior trainees in the client's marketing department who - in lordly inglorance - rejected Agency campaigns which had been constructed with much care, skill and expense. It is better for everyone if the power of approval or veto is in the hands of very few members of the client company - and those who are best qualified to exercise it. That may or may not include the boss".⁽⁹⁾ (Eric A G Morgan, Mg. Director, British Cosmetics Ltd.)

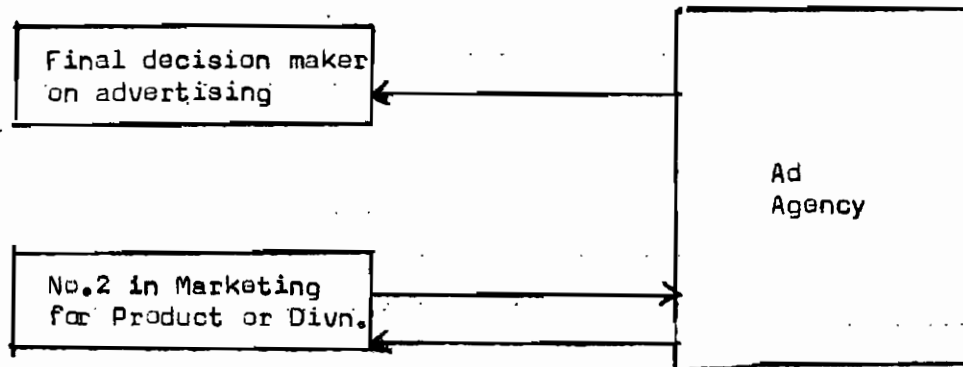
That is a description of the crisis in creative reviews which takes place even in the UK at the present time - if that is any consolation to the Agency men in India. "If I were the client", I would absolutely ban younger, comparatively inexperienced marketing executives from exercising authority in creative approval. I would make them sit in as trainees, learning to comment, appraise and evaluate. But I would not give them the power of creative review.

Looking at the organisation of large marketing companies in India it would seem that the levels of creative approval are approximately as follows:

Exhibit D: Creative Approval ProcedureClient Company

The designations may differ but there are usually four levels of 'approval' to overcome before the agency's creative work is given the final okay.

In a firm where advertising carries a large part of the selling load and accounts for a large proportion of the marketing expenditure, I would suggest that to get the best out of the agency, the client should adopt a two-level approval procedure.

Exhibit E

At this second level, the 'deputy' to the final decision maker should be associated with other levels of managers, e.g., Product Manager or Advertising Manager or Sales Manager. But, for purposes of creative evaluation and judgement, such other ranks should not act as another level of decision making; they should play the role of advising the No.2; together they should form the first level of approval.

Thus, when the agency's creative work comes to the Marketing Director (we shall assume he has the last word), it has already been screened at an appropriate level of competence and authority.

A great deal of waste, misdirection, mutilation and frustration is inevitable if the client insists on introducing a third or fourth level of advertising approval as shown in Exhibit D.

The sure way not to get the best creativity from your ad agency is to insist on these additional levels in the name of 'delegation'.

Robert M. Prentice, Director, Marketing Information and Services at Lever Brothers, quoting a study of the Association of National Advertisers (USA) called "The Creative Approval Process", has said:

"In every client category, our respondents have told us that the greatest obstacles to the development of effective copy were caused by client people and practices rather than by agency people and practices - and these are clients talking". (2)

* * * *

While this article has focussed on what the client should do to get the best from his agency, the other side of the ~~coin is~~ that the agency should be professional enough to contribute to the various kinds of interaction mentioned here. Above all, I make the assumption (a risky one) that the agency has the creative skills to deserve that its work is reviewed only at the highest levels.

April, 1977

Appendix IHow to get the best out of your advertising agency

To sum up so far:

Ideally, one single client executive, as high in the hierarchy as possible, should shoulder the entire responsibility for advertising decisions.

A major obstacle to good advertising is fear.

The agency's solvency and the client's service depend on the efficient use of the agency's main brains.

With these in mind, let's see how some unwise client's can go wrong.

Client Clangers

Announce that your competitors' advertising is much better than yours. Your agency may be too tactful or too frightened to point out that you turned down a similar scheme two years ago.

Say sadly that you never get any good ideas out of your advertising agency. To many people, an idea doesn't look like an idea until it's been around some time. Your competitor's slogan seems much more apt after he's invested half-a-million pounds to remind you of it. How would your agency's suggestions look to your competitors after you had invested a similar sum on them?

Tell your agency you've just received a very good mailing shot from a rival-but you can't let them see it because you've passed it on to your chairman. That will really stir them up.

Or mention casually that at Rumble, Crumble & Bodystocking they have a new scheme of creative sitting-rooms. This may start your agency's creative team cantering off to Crumble's with theirspecimens. They'd just love to sit and be creative.

Refer to your warm friendship with a director of a rival agency. That'll set ~~the coffee cups~~ ringing like castanets in their trembling hands.

If you really want to set your agency agog, sit through their latest presentation and when it ends ask expectantly, 'Haven't you anything else? I was just getting interested'. Of course, you could jump on their layouts in muddy boots but it takes a colourful personality to carry this off with suitable panache.

Insist on getting more than your money's worth from the agency. Soon they'll be so worried about staying in business that they'll cease to worry about your advertising.

Demand daily contact with the agency. The people who are willing to dance attendance in this way are usually only suitable for the last waltz.

Call for more contact men to be-available. This often means getting several minions to do one man's job - multiplying the messengers doesn't necessarily improve the messages.

Ask for the service department heads to call and discuss matters with you. You'll soon be firm friends with all of them and nobody will be getting any service.

When mentioning to the agency's chairman that you tried all yesterday to contact someone in the agency who knew about your business and could only get the account group's temporary typist, add that Carper & Sharper handle twice the billing with half the people and you can always get the head men immediately.

You've only to get into the spirit of these suggestions and your present doubts about your agency will be fully justified by its future performance.

(Extract from "Advertising for the Advertiser"

Eric Webster)

DO THIS OR DIE.

Is this ad some kind of trick?

No. But it could have been.

And at exactly that point rests a do or die decision for American business.

We in advertising, together with our clients, have all the power and skill to trick people. Or so we think.

But we're wrong. We can't fool any of the people any of the time.

There is indeed a twelve-year-old mentality in this country. Every six-year-old has one.

We are a nation of smart people.

And most smart people ignore most advertising because most advertising ignores smart people.

Instead we talk to each other.

We debate endlessly about the medium and the message. Nonsense. In advertising, the message itself is the message.

A blank page and a blank television screen are one and the same.

And above all, the messages we put on these pages and on these television screens must be the truth. For if we play tricks with the truth, we die.

Now. The other side of the coin.

Telling the truth about a product demands a product that's worth telling the truth about.

Sadly, so many products aren't.

So many products don't do anything better. Or anything different. So many don't work quite right. Or don't last. Or simply don't matter.

If we also play this trick, we also die. Because advertising only helps a bad product fail faster.

No donkey chases the carrot forever. He catches on. And quits.

That's the lesson to remember.

Unless we do, we die.

Unless we change, the tidal wave of consumer indifference will wallop into the mountain of advertising and manufacturing drivel.

That day we die.

We'll die in our marketplace. On our shelves. In our gleaming packages of empty promises.

Not with a bang. Not with a whimper.

But by our own skilled hands.

DOYLE DANE BERNBACH INC.

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Post script

Interested readers may refer to a study on the Client-Agency Relationship in India which has appeared after this article was written: "The Image of the Advertising Profession" in Business Environment, May 28, 1977.

EXHIBIT-A

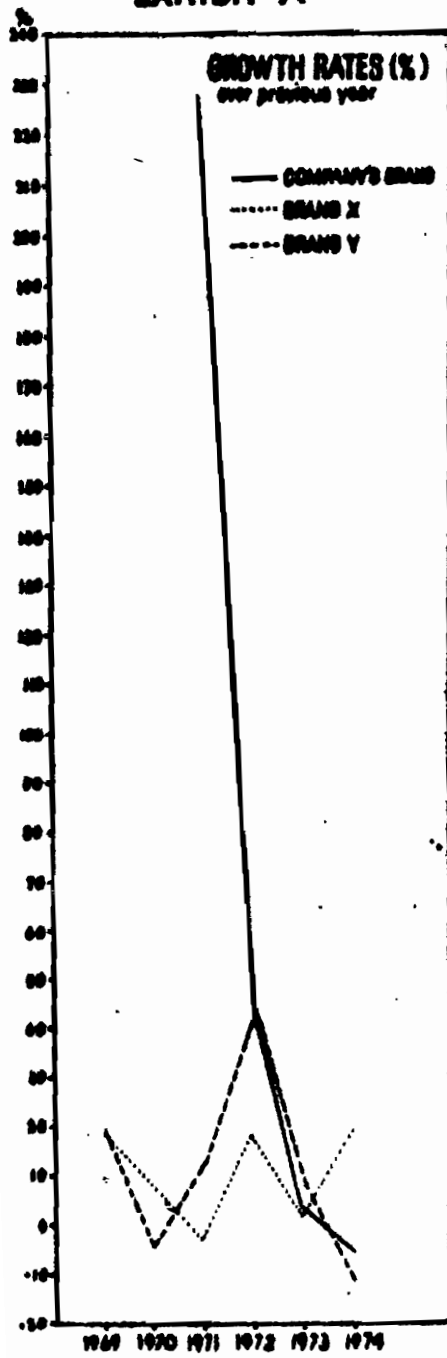


EXHIBIT - B

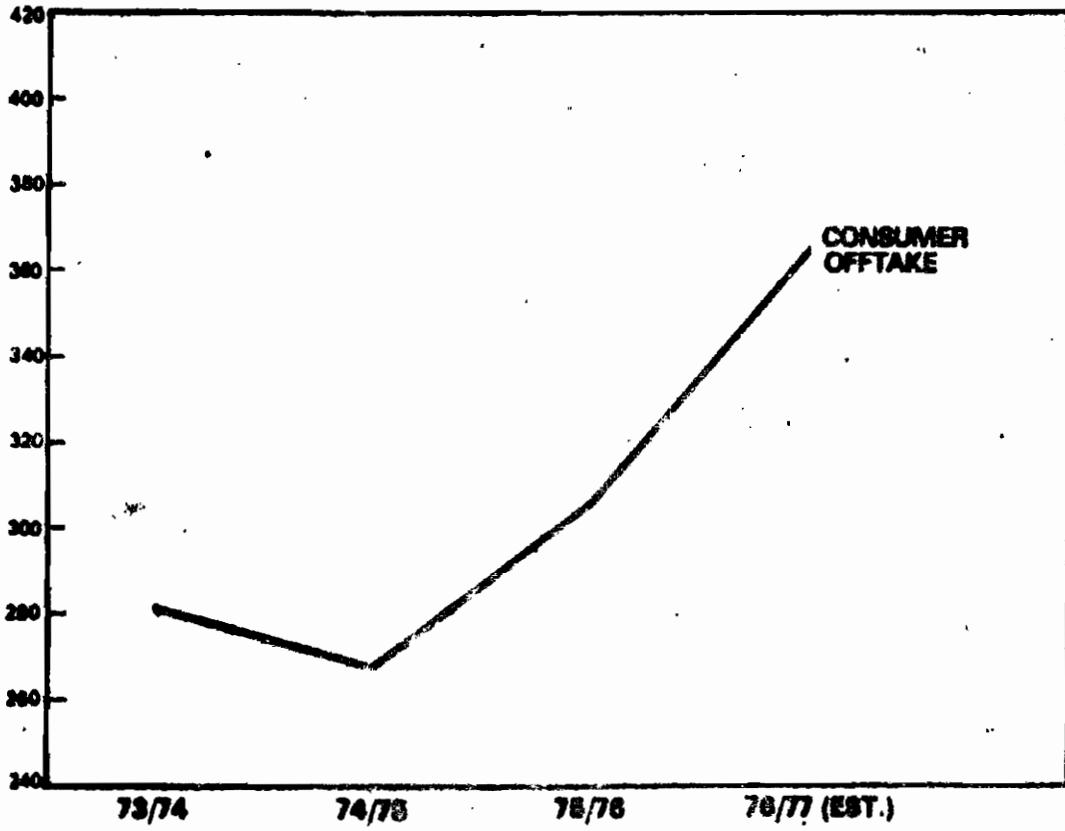


EXHIBIT - C

Price Per Tonne - Index Nos.

