

Advertising Age®

Can Nancy Hill Make the 4A's Matter Again?

Long-Running Search for Drake's Successor Is Over -- Now It Gets Tough

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Published: January 28, 2008

"The AAAA is not a club," reads the website of the agency business' largest trade group. "It is a management-oriented association that offers its members the broadest possible services, expertise and information regarding the advertising-agency business."



This week, the 4A's board likely will approve the appointment of Nancy Hill as president-CEO. Photo Credit: Ric Kallaher

That statement would be news to many of the biggest members of American Association of Advertising Agencies, who routinely carp that the organization's been left behind in a digital age and that the, uh, clubbiness of the ad agency's 20th-century heyday is still too pronounced for a profoundly changed media world. As such, all hopes for preventing the 91-year-old group from sinking to irrelevance have been pinned to a long-running effort to find a replacement for O. Burtch Drake, who's retiring as president-CEO this year after a 14-year reign. That search is now at an end. This week, the association's board likely will approve the appointment of Nancy Hill, a well-liked, well-traveled agency executive who's being recommended by a search committee comprising Mr. Drake, board chairman Tony Hopp and a handful of other board members. This news was [reported first on AdAge.com](#) Jan 24. (Ms. Hill and the 4A's declined to comment.)

If appointed -- and insiders say that's all but assured -- Ms. Hill, 48, would be first woman to hold the top job. However, those familiar with the search process insist the choice wasn't driven by gender but by Ms. Hill's charisma, energy and a résumé, which includes stints at agencies large and small and on both coasts, giving her a broad perspective on the industry. The 4A's membership ranks are a diverse group of companies that range from sprawling networks with global concerns to tiny shops with comfortable existences crafting ads for local businesses.

Making a mark

Ms. Hill's last post was the unenviable role of running Lowe Worldwide's wheezing North American operation. Her tenure there, which didn't yield the turnaround the agency was looking for, ended last September after just over a year in the job, but she wasn't the first top-level executive to get spit out of a place that's had a long, disastrous run it only now seems to be coming out of. While Ms. Hill didn't have much success in bringing in new business, she did pull off some coups that played well with the committee, such as a deal to bring Miami Ad School students into Lowe's offices.

"It seems to me the ideal job for Nancy," said former partner Mark Wnek, chief creative officer for Lowe U.S. "No one has a better take on the new world we're living in, and no one would be more articulate in dealing with its different constituencies."

Before Lowe, Ms. Hill ran the Visa account, which was then at BBDO's New York office. Prior to that there were stints at Hill Holliday, Citron Haligman Bedecarre (now part of Euro RSCG) and TBWA/Chiat/Day.

Executives close to the search say Ms. Hill materialized as a favorite last month. By all accounts, the search has been tough; some of the most desirable candidates are entrenched in high-profile, well-paying agency positions they're not prepared to leave for a trade-association gig. The committee talked to many agency executives and marketers.

'Invested in the future'

Ms. Hill won points for having a familiarity with new media -- "she's invested in the future of the industry," said one executive -- and for a personality that won't turn the job into a self-promotional platform. "She doesn't have a big ego," said another executive. "She'll engage the leadership and collaborate and help to transform things."

A top priority will be to make over the 4A's annual management conference, often criticized for being out of touch, with agencies talking to each other rather than engaging in dialogue with marketers or media companies. Many key 4A's members readily say they're more interested in attending events such as the Consumer Electronics Show, Web 2.0 or any number of digitally-focused events that speak more directly to where the future of consumer behavior is going.

Other challenges will include improving the industry's record on minority hiring, something that's caused a black eye for Madison Avenue in recent years.

One other thing those insiders called attention to is Ms. Hill's charitable work, important at a time when just about every company and organization is trying to figure out whether and how social responsibility matches up with profitability. Ms. Hill is involved in a humanitarian project that benefits an Ecuadorian mountain town called Azama.

"There is a public-service element to the job," said one member of the committee, failing to note that this bit of service comes well-compensated. The pay package, after all, has been worth about \$760,000, according to Advertising Age's salary survey, though it was unclear whether that figure will change for a less-experienced association executive.

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