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# THE ONLINE EDITION INDEPENDENT

## Kate Stanners: on women in advertising post Neil French

Ciar Byrne meets the woman behind the iconic Flake 'Girl in the bath' and Holstein Pils campaign



Advertising guru Neil French's pithy analysis of why there are so few senior female creatives - "They're crap" - was greeted with outrage by many in the industry.

But Kate Stanners, one of a tiny handful of women in the top echelons of UK advertising, laughs heartily at the remarks French, a senior executive with the global giant WPP, nicknamed the Godfather, allegedly made at a \$125-a-head dinner in Toronto. These include the charming assertion that women will inevitably "wimp out and go suckle something".

Stanners, who recently joined Saatchi & Saatchi UK as executive creative director, says: "It's just laughable. It seems a rather ridiculous statement to make. I did some quite good ads while I was suckling.

"He's probably a product of a previous generation in the business. My generation are a product of the recession. We did our school of hard knocks training and grafting in the Eighties. Prior to that it was the big fat-cat lunch culture. I think it has become a different industry."

The mother of a two-year-old son, Stanners has enjoyed an apparently charmed progress up the advertising ladder. She is the perfect riposte to French. (The Singapore-based executive was forced to tender a letter of resignation over the affair, although he denied making the remarks.)

As a student at Liverpool Arts College, Stanners originally planned to become a graphic designer, but after a summer on work placement at BBH, she decided advertising was more fun. She cut her teeth at GGT under David Trott, and there started a 12-year creative partnership with the copywriter Tim Hearn, with whom she created the Cadbury's Flake "Girl in the bath" commercial and a series of Holsten Pils adverts starring Jeff Goldblum. Other clients have included Grolsch, Clark Shoes, Sky, Boots, BT, Ikea, Channel 4 and HSBC.

After a spell as group head at Bates Dorland, she joined the fledgling St Lukes agency, where she became vice-chairman.

When the St Lukes founder Andy Law left to set up a new agency, BoymeetsGirl, Stanners and her husband David Pemsel joined him. Within months, they had sold their shares in the company and left. The split was reported to be acrimonious, but Stanners says she and Pemsel simply did not want to go ahead with a management buy-out from backers Interpublic. Soon Lee Daley, chairman and CEO at Saatchi & Saatchi UK, recruited her. She now heads up a creative team of 20.

Her career progress appears near-seamless, but Stanners is a rarity. According to the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising, at the highest levels of seniority in advertising agencies, women account for just 15 per cent of the workforce. Among creatives, only 17 per cent of copywriters are women, and only 14 per cent of art directors.

Why should this be so? "The creative department is fairly juvenile, selfish and competitive and those are probably male traits. I've probably got all those traits," Stanners says. "The traits are also endless curiosity, the desire to know and to be inquisitive. You are always being required to make a fool of yourself, which is quite male. I don't think women put up with it. You spend most of your time being rejected by people, and most women think that's ridiculous.

"I spend a lot of time in colleges trying to encourage more girls into the creative department. They often feel it to be intimidating that the advertising that was most talked about was beer advertising that was funny. Many women felt they weren't able to be funny and put themselves in the spotlight."

Now, the industry is increasingly embracing new forms of creativity better suited to female strengths. Stanners says: "Britain is still brilliant at advertising. It's much more emotional and intelligent than it used to be. There's a lot more room for different types of creativity. If you're running a creative department, what you look for is light and dark, different skill sets."

A shift away from the traditional advertising agency structure, in which the planning and account-handling departments are kept separate from the creatives, is also benefiting women. "Our industry used to be very segmented. We're becoming much less linear. Our processes are much more collaborative, which means that even if there aren't enough women in the creative department, there's a much greater flow of ideas. We are seeing the opening up of the industry and looking to other sorts of creativity, from graphic designers and interactive designers."

Nancy Vonk, co-chief creative officer at WPP's Ogilvy & Mather in Toronto, a former colleague and admirer of French, said the most worrying thing about the episode was "that in his honest opinion he was voicing the inner thoughts of legions of men in the senior ranks of our business".

Stanners insists she has never felt that her male colleagues thought less of her because she was a woman. She praises her colleagues at Saatchi for making it possible for her to fit in her work around her young son Otto.

"I spend a lot of time worrying that I don't see him enough and that I don't do my job well enough, but it disciplines you. I'm incredibly efficient at work. I never go out to lunch and I give 100 per cent - and I give 100 per cent in my time with my son as well. Everyone's very supportive of the fact that I've got a child. When I got my job, I made it clear that I had a child and what that meant. Everyone there weighed up the benefits of it being me."

There are limitations imposed by motherhood, however. "If you're going off on a shoot, you could be away for three weeks and that's very difficult to do with children. It's not easy, but it's not impossible," Stanners says.

As a parent, she believes it is easier to create advertising targeted at families. "When you have a child, you are suddenly aware of this other world."

To young women thinking of following in her footsteps, she has these words of advice. "You have to be absolutely determined. You have to be resilient. You have to listen to people. You have to have strong ideas and most of all you have to really enjoy it. If it's not fun, it's not worth doing."

Move over French, the Godmother has arrived.