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Creatively putting the Customer into the strategy

Isn't business all about serious stuff like supply chain management and triple entry book keeping? Why then the recent surge in workshops and training courses for creative executives? Are they all so bored that anything that might involve coloured pencils is worth a try… or is there something in the airy-fairy stuff after all?

And if your client businesses are running out of creativity and looking to you for it – can you help?

Do you want to?

Now I'm going to have to come clean here. I reckon that for many of your clients, quantitative market research is **boring**. It's similar to the way that if you're not an engineer or a car freak, car engines are boring. But leaping into your soft top on a day like today and racing off to the beach is great. So a lot of the scope for creativity isn't around what's under the bonnet, it's about where you can go with it.

Let me just walk you through how it feels to be a marketing manager and do some quantitative research.

1. Why are you doing it?

Probably because someone doesn't believe you about your brand or your customers or your competitors or your budget. So it's a defensive act. Not the most exciting reason in the world.

2. Who's going to do the work?

When I was a global market research manager I'd typically send out a proposal to 3 big international agencies, wait a while, then rip open the proposals when they came back.

Usually 2 of them would have padded out their proposal reiterating the brief and telling me how they'd check out their answers and manage the process. Like I would be contacting them if I thought they couldn't do that.

Maybe 1 or 2 would have contacted me to ask further questions. Maybe 1 would give me the feeling they'd thought about the problem I faced and came up with something. Guess who got the job.

3. Getting it done

Quantitative studies can be boring for the client to set up. All that detail. All those decisions about which order the questions go in - and the answers. Reading those questionnaire forms that give no feel for what's happening, just lots of words and codes. Nothing intuitive.

Then the agency goes away, and apart from a few boring messages about the interviewers in Manchester getting caught in the rain so the results won't be ready when they were supposed to be, you don't hear anything for a few weeks.

Then you fix a date for the results. Hurrah.

4. The exciting bit

I've sat through dozens of quantitative study presentations. I can remember two that were interesting. Two where I actually got the feeling that the AGENCY was interested. Where they delivered customer insight not customer statistics, where they taught me something I didn't know, where I left motivated and enthused, not slightly embarrassed at having nodded off during the 84th chart.

It could be however that your agency is choosing a different approach, it's decided to be CREATIVE. What does that actually mean for you and your clients? Starting with the word itself.

Who or what is creativity?

Creativity has been put into a small box in the business world. An ad agency will have a "creative" department – they're the ones who are usually kept away from the client and appear in meetings looking really uncomfortable in a jacket and tie. Clients love them because they're interesting and smart and have ideas – unlike many account managers!

People in large businesses may also get labelled as "creative" - usually to the detriment of their career prospects. They're pulled into brainstorming sessions or asked to review proposals or help out in new product development. They don't usually make CEO – unless they create their own business – because they're not "safe".

It's not so much that these are the only creative people around, it's just that despite the traditional rules of business, they have decided to RISK being creative. Why aren't there more of them?

Barriers to creativity

What/who gets in the way of creativity in business?

A lot of it is fear. Fear of being different, sticking your neck out, rocking the boat, putting your head above the parapet. After all, what's the point in taking a chance like that when you can just snuggle up in your comfort zone and leave it to somebody else to jeopardise their future?

And it's easy to blame someone else: "The customers aren't ready for it", "My boss won't like it", "It'll make life too difficult for Operations"

So thanks to ambition and self interest, mediocrity rules. Business has its nice safe, numbers-driven world in place. Organisational charts established, process management buttoned down and project plans well managed.

And then what happens? These companies, having trained all their staff to be well behaved and predictable, find themselves losing market share to more innovative marketers and niche operators. Something must be done! Why is there no creativity in this organisation? We must change!

Changing corporate culture is, as we all know, a huge task – filled with risk. So they're not going to crack that one in the short term. But they still need more creativity. So they might work through some options.

OPTION 1: buy a creative company

This seems like an easy option – except it doesn't usually work. The kind of people who have chosen to be in a small creative company probably don't want to be part of a large stable one. Some of the best talent will leave as soon as their contractual obligations are up. Some of the ones who don't will struggle to be equally creative in a different kind of environment. The parent company may find itself at the end of the day with some useful IPR (intellectual property) and a bunch of misfits.

OPTION 2: create the weirdo department

Other companies choose to set up new departments with all the "odd" people to generate wild ideas. These *odd* people have a lovely time for a while. They get to expand their minds and spend money on travelling around to test them. They build prototypes.

They hope against hope that they'll achieve global recognition as the man or woman who brought the 21st century equivalent of the fax machine to market.

They don't mind that they don't fit in because they never did anyway.

So what happens to them?

Well in my experience, one of three things.

1. They're amazingly successful. Rare but beautiful.
2. They destroy themselves by not having any ideas that can ever be profitably implemented, or
3. They start to be successful and have to be destroyed by the rest of the organisation as a potential threat.

If you have clients who are in the "odd" department, then you can help them package what they are doing to fend off the cynics and increase the chances of survival for them and their ideas.

OPTION 3: Outsource

The other option is to outsource creativity.

Now the business needs its agencies and suppliers to be more creative. They may not be entirely sure what they mean by this, and they still want to recognise you as fellow business people. So you'll have to be creative about how you're creative:

- Spot the opportunities for creativity in the client's problem

- Pitch the creativity volume right – building trust not fear
- Offer innovative ways to approach the work (not just churning out off the shelf solutions)
- Interpret the results creatively and in the context of the client's challenges

Encouraging creativity in your agency / organisation

In order to be more creative for your suppliers, your own culture is going to need some change. You'll need to face some of those barriers to creativity discussed above, and get used to them.

This is a different way of operating.

In traditional, non-creative business, you can really get your act sorted out. You can know what you're going to do, have all the answers to all of the questions, patter along without turning a hair. If you want to be creative, you can't be that comfortable. You don't have to be the tormented artist starving to death and resorting to drugs and alcohol. But most of us are more creative if we step out of our comfort zone, and venture where there is no predictability and no predestined solutions.

Here are some ways to get that started:

Silence can be very helpful. Noise gets in the way of creativity. As does busyness. Yet we spend most of our lives in noisy environments being – or trying to look – busy. Make a space and dare to say nothing.

Chaos is a huge help. Often if you can stick with that turbulence for a little while, you'll arrive at a more meaningful place. Again a designated space can help, where you can drop all the chatter and really feel your way forward?

Notice I said feel. This stuff can't be done with just your head. I've seen complete novices in sculpture workshops explain how they know when they've got the right combination by pointing to their stomachs. It's not about measurements or expectations. It's a gut feeling, recognising truth, recognising integrity, recognising worth. All the multiple-regressions programs in the world won't tell you where that is.

Good or bad? Do you know children – especially pre-school children who are NOT creative? Unlikely, unless they have been damaged in some way. We have all been creative in our lives, and probably still are outside of the workplace. It's not the same as being artistic (though I could argue that we are all that too). Many of us were taught at school, then later at work, to "behave" and the creativity got boxed away.

And the same thing happens in business.

- Words, systems, numbers, processes and busyness are all good.
- Feelings, colour, space, time, intuition, reflection, chaos are bad.

But we can choose to change that view in our organisations.

Accept the power shift: Another interesting thing about the creative process that is tough for businesses if the power set-up changes. Often younger people, or more diverse people, or less

typically successful people can contribute at least as well – if not better. Make sure they are given the space to contribute, and that senior members of the team can cope.

Turn the jargon around:

- We ought not to be "outlandish" in business. But how can you think outside the box without being outlandish? Out of the land and out of the box.
- We must mitigate risks. But how can we dream up new ideas if we're focused on risk? The risk is to do nothing.
- We must not upset the client. How can you help the client to grow if you daren't challenge their thinking? Maybe the client is yearning for you to be more creative? You can always go back to the other stuff.
- We are trained to view ideas through the filter of censure, judgment and criticism. That must change if we are to reach the brilliant ideas on the other side of the muddle.

Becoming a creative agency / organisation

You don't need a manual on how to do this. We are all born creative and curious. We can choose to be those things again, and we can identify the blocks in our own organisations and set about dismantling them.

We can work creatively together to find ways to support clients' need for creativity without threatening our professional reputation. We can be successful at what we already do, plus be creative about how we apply that to solve the clients' problems – and probably get more job satisfaction into the bargain.

We may need to drop some other things, or change some expectations to make space and silence for creative thinking to take place.

Enjoy!

(based on a creativity workshop for top 100 NOP employees)

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