

Research to Fuel the Creative Process

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Design as a Commodity

In the past, design professions were somewhat protected by a limited availability of people with the skills to get their ideas on paper or into production. Technical skills were required and most colleges concentrated on training "artsy types" in typography, production, drawing, model-making, print-making and layout. Jobs for graduates were apprenticeships to hone commercially usable skills and, once a passable level of technical skill was achieved, designers could differentiate themselves by excelling in a certain "look" or technique. If they had a client (or patron) willing to pay and able to leverage the uniqueness of a design style as a profitable differentiator for their own business or product, the designer could make a living based on creative capabilities only.

Over the last 20 years, computers have revolutionized the design industry by lowering the need for the technical, production and drawing skills formerly used to differentiate designers. As the barriers to entry into the field have dropped, clients can find almost unlimited resources to provide excellent visual materials for their communications needs and the economics of design are rapidly moving toward commodity pricing.

The economics of design could be modeled like this:

$$\text{SUCCESS} = \frac{\text{CONTRIBUTION TO PROFIT} \times \text{CLIENTS ABILITY TO PAY}}{\text{AVAILABILITY OF RESOURCES}}$$

Contribution to Profit is the measure of a design to successfully impact the profit of an enterprise. Cases where this is true abound: Diet Coke saw a \$200 million increase in sales the first year following the introduction of new global packaging; Williams-Sonoma saw 400% sales increases when they redesigned their private label pasta packaging; and average checks at Denny's increased 15% when they changed their outdated signs.

Client's Ability to Pay defines the potential in a design program. The impact of design is limited by factors like distribution, audience, profit margins and financial resources. Design, while a powerful tool, has finite limits and programs with untapped design capacity are most likely to benefit from great work. Programs with other inherent problems, including under-funding, poor manage-

ment or insufficient confidence that design success would deliver adequate profits to fund the project are likely doomed to failure.

Availability of Capable Resources is the divisor in the design success formula. As the availability of good resources grows, fees for creative services drop. Design compensation and project budgets fall. Competitive design pressures force designers to look at their ability to affect the economics of the industry and conclude that they must enlarge the "contribution to profit" factor if they desire future success. This means understanding the business implications of creativity—knowing how to motivate sales, influence brand loyalty, support commercial goals, and appeal to specific audiences.

This recognition is already in evidence as traditional identity/packaging/brand design firms are becoming more "consultancies" than "studios" and traditional management consultancies like McKinsey, Bain, and Arthur Anderson are developing creative communications practices employing creatives within their exclusive MBA brotherhoods. The line between the "suits" and the "creatives" is being blurred as truly successful creative experts are as much analytic in their thinking as they are inventive.

Taking all these factors into consideration, research is an enormously *important tool to inform the creative process*. As a designer, I've always been personally intrigued by the power of research to help me understand people who don't share my outlook on life. I want to understand what values are communicated visually or verbally, but more important, I want to understand the priority customers put on those values and which buttons need to be pushed to stimulate their actions. I'm not so interested in their opinion of a design or layout—I assume the aesthetic responsibility is mine (and I am passionate about doing things that are visually pleasing)—but I must understand how their behavior is influenced by what I do if I'm going to affect the "contribution to profit" factor in the formula.

Enlightened researchers understand that this type of research differs from mere opinion-gathering. Louis Cheskin was a pioneer in it. He kept his head above the tactical opinion gathering and focused on the behavior assessment with indirect research methodologies for evaluating creative work. "Sensation Transference," the crown jewel in Cheskin's practice, is a fundamental concept for evaluation. I firmly resist having creative work "analyzed" with techniques like focus groups with people discussing opinions of creative work as a group. The dynamics of groups usually uncovers opinion (i.e., "Television's greatest problem is that there's too much sex and violence") but rarely measure behavior (it's the sex and violence that is being watched). Instead, I push for monadic studies (one person sees one exhibit) with multiple participants (quantitative samples) independently responding to the same questions and the only variable being a change in the creative stimuli—studies where specific behavioral characteristics of designs can be compared and informed decisions can drive creative executions.

Hallmarks of Creativity

Creativity is an instinctive urge; a powerful drive that fights logic; an activity that gives creators an unusual euphoria and generates an unmatched sense of satisfaction. Creativity is the core of new ideas. It's the source for new products, new designs, and vision to see the world in a renewed way.

Creativity is also enormously misunderstood. It is thought to be a gift randomly bestowed at birth, an unpredictable trait and a mystical talent. Parents with underachieving children frequently make the excuse, "this is the creative one in the family." The stereotypical "artsy" type is drawn to drama, music or art classes, dresses strangely, is a loner and does poorly in academic courses. Professional "creatives" are considered unconventional, unruly and unpredictable. They work in a "bullpen" or "the back" and are separated from the "suits." Client contact with creatives is carefully monitored and expectations for businesslike behaviors are low. "All-nighters" are thought to be standard and unusual hours are casually tolerated.

Most people do not consider themselves "creative." If asked, they shrink back with hands up and claim they can't draw a straight line or have a single new idea. In reality, everyone has extraordinary creative resources unique to themselves. Tapping those resources is a process that can be learned with practice and beefed-up resistance to the lifelong programming that discourages use of those abilities.

The apparent logic and precision of the research process seems at odds with creativity. Designers are leery of research where their experience has been observing focus groups from behind the glass and listening mutely as some schmuck without taste shreds their creations. Discouraged, some designers limit their creative exploration on the assumption that good ideas will be rejected by research. Understanding the creative process and structuring research to encourage new thinking is key to achieving breakthrough ideas.

Creative people share 3 common traits: 1. the ability to make new associations from unrelated elements, 2. willingness to pursue an idea they know they will ultimately reject, and 3. tolerance for ambiguity over time. How research can support these traits is the purpose of this chapter.

Making New Associations from Unrelated Elements

No one ever "creates" anything; they reorganize existing elements—heresy to the creatives, but true. Creating means seeing a relationship between new information and a previous experience and developing a fresh combination. Creativity is an attitude, not a mysterious gift. Individuals successful at making new associations from unrelated elements tend to have unusual access to their subconscious memories and conscious access to the potential in new input.

Creativity is available to everyone in an equal dose because everyone has a completely unique set of past experiences to draw from. The menu of ingredients to make new relationships with is proprietary for each individual. The ability

to access those ingredients is what characterizes those thought to be creative. This part of creativity can be learned. However, readily accessing our subconscious to gain new insights while on a deadline is difficult.

Without a detailed treatment of brain function including descriptions of "right brain" and "left brain" differences, suffice it to say that our minds are complex structures. Authorities agree that the human brain has enormous storage capacity and uses only a portion of its processing ability to manage physical actions in the body. The remaining capacity is used for "higher" processes including imagination, self-awareness and abstract imagery.

In my experience, conscious access to these processes appear to be blocked occasionally and predictable use of my higher capacities is the exception. Often, "bolts of insight" seem to strike my conscious mind when I am not deliberately thinking about a problem. This makes creativity on demand a challenge. The spontaneous creativity of fine artists frequently allows them to "wait for inspiration" or "get in the mood." For example, accessing the catalog of personal experience with diapers because an assignment to promote them is due right away is not easy. Turning on the spigot of new ideas from the subconscious can be done with drugs (as occasionally it is), but the quality of insights drops off quickly. Hypnosis does bypass nature's blockage, but that puts a second person in control of the outcome and is generally ineffective.

Experience confirms that anxiety is a consistent and effective chemical to stimulate creativity on demand. The greater the anxiety ("you'll be fired if the presentation isn't ready by tomorrow morning"), the more effective it is at bringing out creative energy (thus, common "all-nighters" by creative staffs everywhere). However, frequent abuse of anxiety can result in paranoia, fear and discouragement. My best clients and coworkers are those I respect enough that I fear disappointing them, but trust enough to take creative risks with them.

Breakthrough creativity happens when the quality of elements for seeing new relationships is relevant to the opportunity at hand, but not so restrictive that meandering thoughts cannot be explored.

How to Structure Research so New Associations Can Be Made

Because my own creativity is based on creating visual relationships, I learn more by seeing than hearing. A picture is indeed worth a thousand words. A written report of how people feel about a product pales compared to seeing a competitor's products, advertising and collateral materials. Completely new products may not have obvious direct competitors; but all products—real or imagined—carry expectations for where they'll be used, when they'll be needed and the characteristics of people who might use them. Photos of prospective audiences, shopping aisles, living rooms, and other products possibly used when or where the new product is planned are helpful tools for discovering new associations and feeding the creative process.

In every project, preliminary assumptions about outcomes must be made. Comparisons, analogies, objectives, scenarios and business plans are the vocabulary to describe a project while the outcome evolves through the creative process. Involving creative thinkers early provides a resource for developing the comparisons and analogies. Seeking input on what might compete for share of mind with an upcoming product or what brands might be analogous to the desired outcome before launching a formal research study is invaluable in finding the "unrelated" elements that make up the basic menu for identifying new relationships.

Experiencing a shopping event or using the software or driving the car are high-speed programming tools for the mind. Fact and figures, while useful at the intellectual level, are poor substitutes for intuitive input into the creative process. Researchers who add visual communications to their findings get significantly higher value from their insights. Project leaders desiring breakthrough thinking should partner with their creative colleagues to collect background information from visual, factual and emotional data points to supplement qualitative and quantitative insights.

The resources from which to draw the unrelated elements are the subconscious (with the proper environment, group "brainstorming" can be a harvesting of this resource), past experience (industry expertise is valuable here), new input (relevant original data collection and sharing), and conscious goals (specific objectives for the outcome of the assignment). Since everyone has a unique subconscious resource from which to draw, everyone can (and should) contribute to the "databank" of ideas. All too frequently, the perceived distance between the creatives and everyone else prevents fully leveraging that uniqueness. Establishing a non-judgmental environment for freely sharing thoughts from all sources is essential. Organizations who have mastered that skill (such as the Disney "Imagineer" culture) have made giant leaps in generating ideas with broad appeal.

Willingness to Pursue an Idea You Know You'll Ultimately Reject

The goal of creativity is not to find the right answer, but to explore the range of possibilities. The broader the range of ideas that are explored, the more likely it is that one can discover breakthrough concepts.

Most of the best ideas start with the phrase like, "This is a dumb idea, but..." A conscious recognition that the idea about to be presented won't work opens the door to creative exploration. Editing ideas before they have a chance to be expressed stifles breakthroughs because when only "safe" concepts are considered, new ideas have little chance to happen. Creative outcomes require exploring the range of possible answers to a problem, not finding the "right" one.

Throughout life we are taught to find right answers. "What does the cow say?" "What does c-a-t spell?" "What is 2 plus 2?" "Who was the 12th President?" "What country is immediately East of Belgium?" We are programmed from early age to learn facts and to report them accurately. Coming up with correct answers

is rewarded. Wrong answers are discouraged. Early schooling provides little incentive for exploration out of the box. Children who would rather daydream than listen or prefer to draw rather than study are disciplined, counseled, held back or isolated. It should be no surprise that creative geniuses like Edison and Ford lacked formal education or painters like Monet and Van Gogh left school early to pursue their creative talents.

The creative process is more like play than like study. It requires speculation, humor, tangents and dead-ends. For breakthrough ideas, creative exploration needs to generate as broad a range of possibilities as possible before editing or selecting final candidates. Supporting "failures" with the same enthusiasm as successes is where creative cultures begin.

How Research Can Support Ideas that Will Ultimately Be Rejected

Researchers who enjoy the mathematical exactness of quantitative research can have a hard time balancing the efforts of creative teams to pursue concepts that seem to fly in the face of their work. When they understand the necessity of sustaining unpredictable ideas through the incubation process, their ability to contribute grows. Rigid parameters cause premature editing of ideas and will cut off productive creativity. Establishing "creative targets" rather than "project mandates" encourages broad exploration. Enthusiastically adding insights and accepting the apparent inefficiency of speculation contribute to an environment that will be more likely to discover new ideas from established facts.

The ability to pursue an idea you know you'll ultimately reject is counter-intuitive to efficiency, but it's essential to breakthrough ideas. Organizations who support "playing" with an idea that doesn't appear to have merit are rare. 3M and Sony do it as a regular part of their business. The auto industry has canonized the practice by showcasing "concept cars" at auto shows. Experimental theater, themed art exhibits and independent films occasionally deliver exceptional ideas, but usually not with profit goals in mind. A differentiator of the creative types is their willingness to start a comment with the phrase, "This is a dumb idea, but..." Suits don't get many organizational points for doing that. Creatives are condescendingly tolerated when they do. Using research to define avenues to pursue as creative targets can recast the traditional efficiency measures by widening the breath of exploration possibilities without the premature limitations of practicalities.

Tolerance for Ambiguity over Time

A characteristic of creativity that can be frustrating to others is the need to let fragile ideas distill before finalizing them. Time gives the subconscious space to process insights and work on problems that have moved from the conscious mind. A noted designer once told me that when he was in college he would tape his design concepts on the back of his dorm room door so when he came in and closed the door the idea would surprise him. That split second of unexpected observation

was one of the few ways he could see his own ideas with fresh eyes. Then he made refinements.

Getting completely away from a project before it is finished delivers improvements and inspiration for breakthrough ideas. In the quest for competitive ideas, time is always at a premium. Project plans identify tangible deliverables at specific times. There seems to be little room for breaks while answers are unresolved. However, project environments where creative developers are not encouraged to present ideas with unanswered questions inevitably fail to produce breakthrough ideas because ambiguities need to linger in order to be resolved. Trusting in the mental resources of team members to find successful new thoughts while not appearing to be working on the project requires great patience and confidence. But it is essential to a successful creative culture.

Research shares a similar need. The practice of providing a top-line brief of a field study before presenting a full report is an excellent way to let findings distill. Getting away and coming back to information is critical to understanding it in a broad context. Even then, re-interpretation should be encouraged as unexpected insights along the creative path reveal different ways to see the data or require additional examination of findings that were previously thought to be irrelevant.

Having the right answer is a false goal when seeking breakthrough creative ideas. Having the right *range* of ideas is a better way to seek innovative solutions. Enlightened companies evaluate multiple prototypes before landing on final executions. Efficiency seems to cry out against letting unresolved ideas remain in limbo for any length of time, but it's that very ambiguity that stimulates energetic solutions. Research on the impact of the range of ideas can be very helpful, but it must be done with care to identify symptoms, not solutions.

Creative professionals wishing to affect the business goals of their clients and stand out above the competitive mass of "artsy" practitioners see the necessity of research to encourage companies to invest in new ideas. However, many fear the crippling effect of poorly conceived studies that threaten the energy and "freshness" of their work. By understanding the creative process and sharing methods at each step to make research a dynamic tool to support invention, more effective, satisfying and impactful solutions will result.

And just maybe, the traditional adversarial relationship between the "suits" and the "creatives" might become a partnership of respect and fun.