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Does creativity exist outside art?

In the world of art and culture creativity is apparently first nature but, argues regular columnist Gail Brown, organisations in every field need that spark of originality if they want to succeed.

Ostensibly it seems self-evident that every gallery, museum, pottery workshop or dance studio is pulsing with people making work, being creative and contributing to what makes the UK a civilised society. In the boiler house or back room of any artistic endeavour is the idea, sometimes the reality, that 'the work' is being supported by a business team made up of people who can equally show creative flair. And for many organisations this is absolutely the case. However, when it comes to the overtly successful cultural giants such as The Royal Opera House, New York's Moma or Quebec's Cirque De Soliel, if you look a little deeper you find that these success stories are led by, yes, someone with a creative business sense but more likely by someone with an artistic empathy that enables them to channel the rare gems so that an understanding of creativity is coupled with an absolute clarity of what good business means.

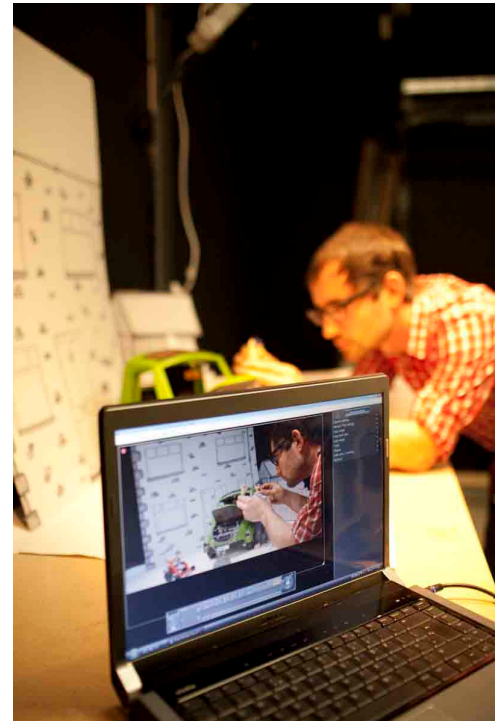
In the world of advertising, marketing and product placement, creativity has been used for decades. Sometimes people have been a little too creative. It seems somewhat strange, for example, to discover that the cereal-based Coco Pop monkey character and his chums are no longer allowed to have dialogue as the good people at Advertising Standards felt this was too influential for children and too effective in the seller's market. It cannot have escaped too many people's notice that a child of any age is able to convince themselves and the world around them that all manner of toys, dolls and play apparatus has a personality and a voice.

The success of the recent Toy Story 3D film is at the top of the mantle for using such a successful medium and when it comes to looking at creativity in the workplace the Pixar team are a particularly interesting group. Their offices, work stations and spaces are specifically personalised by whomever is working at them, enabling individual input and comfort. Much of this is to do with long working hours, a family-orientated commitment to getting the job done and the knowledge that if the space in which an individual works is representative of that individual then the company is likely to get more out of them. For some Pixar workers this means making their corner of the office look like its under the sea, while for others the zen-like peace of a clean, clear, uncluttered work space is imperative.

An extraordinary case in point when it comes to using popular media of mass creativity to sell products is provided by the communication giants T Mobile and Orange (other contractors are available). The T Mobile advertisement based in London's Liverpool Street station, in which a dance flash mob takes over a venue held to be the ultimate in communication, has been picked up across the globe as a model of excellent advertising. Earlier last year the makers of the new St Trinians film delivered a similar sequence and if you search YouTube for "Central Station, Antwerp" you can find one of the best versions to date of a flash mob as a teaser for a Belgium TV company's search for the next Maria.

Along with what seems to be a recognition that playfulness means success in business, we must remember the tried and tested innovations that were coined in the mid-80s. The public watched as high street retailers, holiday providers, travel experts and banks grew in their ability to provide what the public already knew they might need as well as things they had never even considered. It would seem that the innovation departments recognised that to do well in their world they had to be creative. If you ask what sort of creative they were, it starts to get a little trickier. There is a misconception that to be creative you have to be an artist.

In September this year the first New Media Festival was delivered to over 600 delegates based in the Round House in Camden. New media innovators came to make their pitch but in a world growing ever smaller, presentations were no longer to be delivered on Powerpoint (thank you someone) but instead presented via YouTube and Google Analytics. Presenters did not need to be in the room; they could (and did) Skype in from New York and Europe. The 3D printer is alive and well, and you can literally design whatever



Making things "different, unexpected and surprising"

"There is a misconception that to be creative you have to be an artist... There is creativity everywhere and it shouldn't be defined in one dimension"

product you want – be it accessories, Warcraft figurines or some new crockery – press print and watch it come to life. This raises many questions, not least for all those artists and designers who believe they are the only people who can create a particular piece of work; Damien Hirst's diamond skull is a mere print button away.

During one presentation on "the new gatekeepers" a designer commented that he felt guilty that he didn't come from an arts background; he hadn't gone to art school and at some point he felt that this would catch up with him. He worried that one day he might be at an event and would feel the hand of the creative police heavy on his shoulder. "Now then," the fictional creative police would say. "You've been a very naughty boy, where is your degree in the history of art and the choreographic practice of the 20th century and, for good measure, do you know the reason theatre is at its most popular today?" Highly unlikely because the reality is quite the opposite. The conversation between the cultural sector, creative industries and every other sector is much more likely to be based on the reality of working together, pushing boundaries, creating new media and more; and this all comes from knowing what you are naturally good at and how to make the most of it.

Recruits into both the private and public sectors increasingly undergo suitability testing. This can focus on something like the Myers Briggs' type indicator, which is designed to tell you what sort of personality you have (always good to know), or Belbin's team role indicator, designed to show your best role within a team. Both of these constructs work best when there is a leader who understands people and that as humans we are inherently and instinctively creative. Defining creativity is not as hard as it looks; if you spring out of bed in the morning and head to the office, the laptop, or your personalised Pixar station, where you happily put in a day's worth of joyful activity with no mid-afternoon slump and then you look forwards to the next day knowing that you will use your imagination and do what you are naturally good at, this is creativity. If on the other hand you are being stretched, or as some managers or leaders call it "challenged", to the point of exhaustion, you feel dissatisfaction with your contribution and feel a sense that there must be something more to life than this, with the only possible option being to head home and weep under the duvet, then this is the exact opposite of being creative.

There is creativity everywhere and it shouldn't be defined in one dimension. In business and in life "bigger, better, more" is not always enough. But making things "different, unexpected and surprising" can be. Creativity in business can and should be defined as many different things and every person is creative in their own individual way. The real key to success in business and in life is making sure that this creativity is used. The next time you feel that something needs a little something to make it just right, add your very own splash of creativity and see what happens.

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For previous columns by Gail Brown visit the comment page

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