

The creative process in advertising design

New ways to think in the digital age: A new methodology for creative problem solving for advertising designers



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Resumen

Ante los rápidos cambios tecnológicos y la globalización, la capacidad para pensar creativa, eficaz y rápidamente son cruciales. El entorno digital ha cambiado de forma drástica los presupuestos del diseño gráfico y publicitario. Ahora empresarios y clientes exigen de los diseñadores gráficos y directores publicitarios que desarrollen grandes ideas para el público de los diferentes entornos digitales.

Por otra parte, a los diseñadores publicitarios se les viene exigiendo que creen contenidos relevantes para las marcas (tanto para aportarle valor añadido como entretenimiento y educación), lo que supone estar presentes en el entorno online y en las

redes sociales. Ante estos retos el creativo debería formarse y desarrollar habilidades que le permitieran resolver el problema; en este sentido debería valerse de procesos de resolución de problemas que supongan un proceso de creación constante hasta que surja la idea o el camino necesario para que se dé con el problema/solución creativo. Este es un cambio de paradigma.

Palabras clave

Diseño publicitario - Creatividad – Resolución de problemas – Descubrimiento de problemas – Proceso creativo – Lluvia de ideas - Diseño gráfico – Branded content – Pensamiento creativo

Abstract

With rapid technological changes and globalization, the ability to think creatively, strategically and quickly is crucial. Digital media dramatically changed the graphic and advertising design disciplines. Now, employers and clients call upon graphic designers and advertising art directors to conceive and execute big ideas that engage people across media platforms.

Additionally, advertising designers are required to create relevant content for brands and causes (to provide added value such as entertainment or education) to market online and in social media. To take on these challenges, one must train and enrich one's thinking skills beyond being able to problem solve; one must employ problem finding, which entails creating until a discovery or a direction emerges then employing the advertising designer's skills to crystalize the birth of a creative problem/solution. This is a paradigm shift.

Key Words

Advertising design - Creativity - Problem solving - Problem finding - Creative process -
Brainstorming - Graphic design - Branded content - Creative thinking

Introduction

Employers and clients are not only demanding many new technical digital skills (web, mobile, motion, and new methods for print) from advertising designers but now they are demanding new thinking skills as well. They want to know if one's advertising idea has many tendrils and encompasses many possibilities. Is the idea flexible? Is it entertaining? Informational? Will it positively impact society? Does it have value? Does the idea inspire unique content that people will share? And very importantly, how will the idea manifest and function across media platforms?

Creative advertising solutions trends

What employers want, for example, are designers who can generate big trans-media ideas such as the one behind the **Nike+ proprietary platform**, which allows runners to track multiple activities and compare their results over time, find better routes, train smarter, challenge friends, describe their day, improve their performances, and post their success.

[\(http://nikeplus.nike.com/plus/\)](http://nikeplus.nike.com/plus/)

Another example of the kind of creative advertising solutions that are sought after is the **“That’s Not Cool” digital platform**, created for Futures Without Violence, “to help teens get informed, cope with digital harassment, and draw their own digital line separating acceptable from inappropriate”; additionally to help teens draw their own digital line, the advertising design team created the “That’s Not Cool” mobile site. According to R/GA, the creative agency behind this campaign, “Teens are inseparable from their devices, so with the mobile site, they’re never more than a click away from help. We developed call out cards with quirky yet firm messages that teens could send to peers, right from the mobile site, to let them know they’re crossing the line. They could also learn about digital abuse, share experiences, and get professional help.” (<http://www.thatsnotcool.com/>)

“The Beauty Inside” social film series for Toshiba and Intel by ad agency Pereira & O’Dell is another example of imaginative thinking for unique branded content and interactive video media channels. This film series tells the story of Alex whose physical appearance changes each day but who is always the same person on the inside. Auditions to play the role of Alex were held on Facebook, which was the hub of this campaign. Each episode was announced on Facebook and viewers could interact with Alex there through posts, comments and photos. On Facebook, it gained nearly 98,000 friends. The series attracted nearly 70 million global views. It garnered 97% approval on YouTube. The campaign contributed to a 360% lift in sales of the Toshiba Protégé Ultrabook. About this campaign, Elizabeth Pizzinato, Senior Vice President, Marketing and Communications, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, commented (As of May 10, 2014, the IAB.net listed on its website, http://www.iab.net/mixxawardsinsights/case_studies/view/12):

“The Beauty Inside was an impressive campaign because it leveraged the core element of what makes social media tick: the ability for users to not only

share stories, but also to actively participate in an emotional storyline that develops over time. One particularly strong aspect was the campaign's multilingual capability, the way it intelligently reflected the native language of the participants. This element made for an even more powerful campaign with true global appeal."

From problem solving to formulating the problem

In order to create solutions as the ones cited, which address the client demand for unique branded content, tools, apps and services, one must employ richer alternatives to conventional problem-solving techniques. To prepare one's mind to be an on-demand nimble thinker and produce creative and effective solutions, advertising designers can employ *problem finding*.

In the graphic and advertising design professions, a problem is given and you have to solve it. However, to solve a given problem well, a designer or advertising creative professional must learn to think like a scientist rather than a detective. This premise goes back to Einstein and Infeld in 1938:

"For the detective the crime is given, the problem formulated: Who killed Cock Robin? The scientist must, at least in part, commit his own crime as well as carry out the investigation."

They continue,

"The formulation of a problem is often more essential than its solution, which may be merely a matter of mathematical or experimental skill. To raise new

questions, new possibilities, to regard old questions from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advance in science.”

This holds true in design, as well. To learn to think like scientists, one should engage in problem finding, which is the discovery or formulation of a problem or situation. As J. W. Getzels points out in “The Problem of the Problem” (1982):

“The difference between the imaginative scholar and the pendant is not the one is better informed than the other—quite often, the contrary is the case...

Rather, it seems that the one (the pendant, the technician, the copyist) is content or able only to apply his knowledge, skill, or talent to situations where the problems have already been formulated, while the other (the scholar, the scientist, the artist) is impelled and able to apply his knowledge, skill, or talent to situations in which he himself must find and formulate the problem.” (Getzels, 1982: 37-49).

Posing a question and stridently examining what it raises or imagining a situation, often in conjunction with an assigned creative directive or prompt, can lead one to a place where an idea crystallizes. This more unconventional preparatory methodology fosters the kind of nimble critical and creative thinking skills the industry is now demanding. In 2010, in “Capitalizing on Complexity: Insights from the Global Chief Officer Study” an IBM survey of 1,500 chief executives in 33 industries, their report stated: “Facing a world becoming

dramatically more complex, it is interesting that CEOs selected creativity as the most important leadership attribute.” (IBM, 2010: 12).

The conventional creative design process relies on problem-solving techniques. Let us examine some. Brainstorming is the most commonly used and understood technique. In *Your Creative Power*, Alex F. Osborn, a partner at BBDO in New York, presented a technique he had been using for years while at BBDO: *brainstorming*. The objective of Osborn’s technique was to generate possible solutions to advertising problems; behind his technique was the idea that an uninhibited atmosphere would cultivate the flow of creative thinking. Traditional brainstorming is conducted by a group of people, so that one contributor’s thought builds on or triggers another’s, although it may work even better when modified for individual use, since then there is no holding back, no social inhibition.

This essentially is how to facilitate a group brainstorming session.

- Define the problem clearly and succinctly.
- Determine criteria.
- Appoint two people: (1) a good note taker and (2) an effective facilitator who will be responsible for running the session. (Useful tools include oversized notepads and a marker board or an interactive whiteboard screen. Or the session might be recorded in its entirety.) Notes should be evaluated at the conclusion of the session. Include participants with different expertise. Encourage all participants to contribute freely.
- Stay focused on the problem under discussion.

- Do not judge any contributed ideas during the session. Creativity should not be stifled, no matter how harebrained an idea might seem in the moment.
- Schedule a second round of brainstorming that will build on ideas suggested in the first.
- At the conclusion of the session, ideas are evaluated.

(Average Time: 30–45 minutes per session.)

According to creativity expert Edward de Bono, ideas should be evaluated for usefulness, for whether they merit further exploration, and for originality. Although as an idea-generating tool, brainstorming potentially could encourage creative thinking, generate ideas, and provide an opportunity for collaboration, its usefulness or effaciousness recently has been called into question mainly because the methodology discourages debate (or criticism) and is conducted in a rigid business atmosphere. Also, it takes much greater periods of time to develop successful collaborations than a few brainstorming sessions.

Morphological method

Another tool, **a more logic-based one**, may be more useful and can be utilized by an individual as well as a group. The morphological method is based on analysis and synthesis. You analyze a problem by defining all its important factors, as well as the immediately apparent options for solutions. Then you synthesize, that is, combine the factors and options to produce a matrix containing possible solutions. In *Engineering of Creativity*, Semyon D. Savransky (Swiss astronomer and physicist Fritz Zwicky pioneered

morphological analysis [MA].) writes of the morphological method: “It is a safeguard against overlooking novel solutions.” (Savransky, 2000:9)

In short, this is the morphological method:

- Concisely state the advertising problem.
- List all the important factors or parameters.
- Using a morphological structure, which is a grid box, write or sketch all potential solutions.
- Scrutinize all the solutions in the box for efficacy in solving the problem.
- Select optimal and suitable solutions; combine them for potential solutions.

Frame construction

Constructing a *frame* can help problem-solve in advertising, prompting an idea. According to Erving Goffman, in his seminal work *Frame Analysis* (1974), a frame—that is, a scheme of interpretation in “which the particulars of the events and activities to which we attend are organized and made sensible” (Goffman, 1974: 10)— helps us answer the questions, “What is it that is going on here?” and “Under what circumstances do we think things are real?”

Frames can be thought of as conceptual structures that determine meaning—the meaning of an argument or the meaning of a situation. Take a school, for example. The frame elements of a school would include: teachers, dry erase boards, erasers, books, a

library, desks and chairs, and so on. Going further, a scenario in a school would tell us what happens in a frame, which might include a teacher reading from a book in front of a class of children or a child writing at her desk. If a child were to instruct the teachers seated in student chairs, that scenario would break the frame—it would not fit the frame common to us. Frames offer meaning in context; they help us understand our world and quickly assess what is going on in it.

We can use a frame to examine a brand or group, looking for insights on which to base an advertising idea. Here is how to frame a scenario:

1. Determine the scenario: What happens in this frame?
2. What is the setting? What are the conditions?
3. Who are the people or groups?
4. What is their point of view around this specific experience?
5. What are their goals?
6. What are their assumptions? What are their perceptions?
7. Are there conflicts? Is there cooperation?
8. What are the outcomes?

Frames are based on common expectations derived from shared experience. Once you identify a frame, a *change of frame* can be very useful. Changing a frame allows you to explore possibilities, to imagine what a brand or organization could be beyond its current personality or how it is commonly perceived. Here you set aside preconceived notions and explore alternatives.

George Kelly, American psychologist and author of *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (1955), argued that there are an infinite number of ways to construe the world, to interpret an event. Hans Vaihinger, German philosopher, in *The Philosophy of “As If”* (1924) stresses people’s reliance on “pragmatic fictions” to navigate an irrational world. Since reality is not definitively given, we construct ways to understand the world, ignoring contradictions, proceeding “as if” our constructs are real. For example, scientists conduct experiments based on theories, which are not certainties.

If you were to entertain a different construction of an event, you could behave “as if” that construction were real, thus exploring possibilities within that frame. If you were to approach a problem with an as-if frame, if you were to construe the world differently, you might gain a fresh perspective or a transformative perspective; for example, you might behave *as if* you had a wizard’s powers or act *as if* you had no access to water.

Meaning depends on context; by changing the context, you can imagine a different meaning. Basically, entertaining the as-if experiment allows for novel situations or scenarios. Seeing a situation, brand, organization, product, service, or behavior from a different perspective (for example, reversal) can help stimulate ideas. You can use reversal to reframe a problem with the purpose of stimulating ideas or to see it from a different viewpoint; or, reversal may help you to see different ways to consider the problem.

Problem-seeking methodology in the creative process

Employing problem-finding frameworks can lead to innovation (Kelly, 2013).

Problem finding, also called *problem seeking*, teaches us to think like scientists—to discover our own problems and turn what we find into content, services and tools. There

are many problem-finding techniques. In all, one stays open to discovery, to noticing possibilities, and, importantly, to discovering subject matter for generating unique content for brands or groups. The following methodological approaches use a discovery-led paradigm, which draws upon a fine art creative process (and a Bauhaus preparatory course methodology) resulting in a novel process for designers or any creative visual artist.

Spontaneous Art Improvisation: One of the premises of spontaneous art is that it allows access to your subconscious and liberates you from inhibitions—you create images without concerns regarding conventions, aesthetics, composition, intention, content; you are not governed by the constraints of a design assignment.

Enjoy the process without concern about an end product or finishing anything. The act of creating art—painting, drawing, sculpture, ceramics, collage, photography, any traditional or nontraditional art—activates several parts of the brain, sharpens thinking, provokes the mind's associative network, and increases focus to a point where creative thinking can occur. When creating art for a solid period of time, you enter into a meditative zone of active experimentation. Creating fine art frees the subconscious mind from the design problem and may lead to ideas. Choose any preferred art medium—traditional or nontraditional, nonrepresentational or representational, or abstract.

- Start making art.
- Keep working.
- Move from surface to surface or medium to medium, as you like.

If you are not sure which subject matter or techniques to explore, choose from one of the following:

- Everyday experiences
- Environments: cities, landscapes, oceanscapes
- Emotions
- Nonrepresentational patterns, textures, etc.
- Rubbings (creating an image by rubbing, as with a soft pencil, over a textured surface placed underneath the paper)
- Collage
- Photomontage

Storytelling: Stories are a way for people to communicate and relate. In the course of a day, each of us tells stories to connect with others, to work things out, as a way of explaining what happened or what we are thinking and feeling. Some of us may even read or tell a bedtime story, a traditional tale or legend, or a literary tale.

1. Choose from among conventional conflicts: person against person, person against society, person against himself or herself, person against machine, etc. Once you determine the conflict, determine the message, characters, and plot. An excellent example, and an easy one to understand, is the conflict and plot in the classic American western film *High Noon* (1952), directed by Fred Zinnemann. Classic fairy tales also offer easy to understand conflicts and plots and are wonderful sources for learning how to tell stories; for example, examine different tale types as well as the

classic tales: “Beauty and the Beast,” “Cinderella,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Snow White,” “Bluebeard,” and “Hansel and Gretel.”

2. Consider telling a story where the brand or group plays a pivotal role in the story or at least a role where the characters are involved with or use the brand or group.
3. How does this story unfold over time? Make sure it is coherent.
4. Consider which brand or group your story would suit. Is your story on- or off-brand for that branded product, service or entity?
5. *Alternate route*: Find an existing story and see how your brand or group fits into it, for example, use the story of “Jack and the Beanstalk.”

Asking Enduring Questions: To pursue a more examined life, wisdom and virtue, the philosopher Socrates advocated discourse in a free community asking enduring (open-ended) questions. To foster intellectual curiosity and critical thinking, ask questions to wrestle with fundamental issues of human life.

Enduring questions are questions that cross disciplines and have more than one reasonable and interesting answer. The enduring question exercise is open ended. Perhaps it will prompt an idea for a tangible tool or unique advertising content. At the very least, it will endow one’s thinking with greater depth and breadth. The U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities states (as of May 10, 2014, on its website, <http://www.neh.gov/grants/education/enduring-questions>), “Enduring questions can be tackled by reflective individuals regardless of their chosen vocations, areas of expertise, or personal backgrounds” and cites the following list, which “is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive but serves to illustrate:

- What is good government?
- Can war be just?
- What is friendship?
- What is evil?
- Are there universals in human nature?"

Storytelling Fluency Exercise: To foster fluency in storytelling, use words and images or only images. Record an encounter (conversation, gestures, physical interactions) with someone on the surface of a blank coffee cup in a real time variant, where the exact time of the conversation is pretty much equal to the time it takes to view and decipher its depiction on the coffee cup. Or dispense with recording in real time; only represent the encounter on the cup.

How Might...Questions: In his book, *Creative Behavior Guidebook*, Sidney J. Parnes posed the question, "How Might We" (1967). Since then, many have posted "How might..." questions for design challenge framing, for example, "How might you...". The [d.school: Institute of Design at Stanford](#) states that, "How might we" questions "launch brainstorms" to go beyond the obvious solutions. What can you consider from the user's or audience's point of view?

Additionally, asking simple questions such as "What if..." and "If only..." and "If this Goes On...", among others, prepares one's imagination for producing creative advertising design solutions in our hyper-connected world.

Conclusions

Problem solving is the prevailing paradigm across design disciplines.

Designers don't behave like fine artists creating until a discovery or a direction emerges then employing the artist's skills to crystalize the birth of a creative problem (Getzels, 1979).

Scientist Louis Pasteur said, "Chance favors only the prepared mind."

To be prepared for designing or creating in a wired world, we need to add to our preparatory practice in order to free ourselves from pedestrian conventions and find the means to create freshly. We need to be prepared to create content and design that promotes, informs, serves, entertains, or engages. To endow our work with artistry and think imaginatively, rather than mimic what has been done or create pedestrian solutions, we need to prepare our minds. According to the AIGA Designer of 2015 Trends (As of May 10, 2014, the AIGA listed on, <http://www.aiga.org/designer-of-2015-trends/>), "Designers must address scale and complexity at the systems level, even when designing individual components, and meet the growing need for anticipation of problem and solution rather than solving known problems."

Johannes Itten understood the critical nature of preparing in a free way. In *Mein Vorkurs am Bauhaus. Gestaltung und Formenlehre*, Itten explains one of the goals of his Bauhaus Preparatory course: "To free the creative forces and thus the artistic talents of the students. Individual experience and insights were to lead to real work. The students were to free themselves step by step from all dead conventions and pluck up the courage to do their work."

On-demand nimble thinking is a requirement for creative professionals. Whether to serve commerce and brands or to serve human rights and the social good, *preparatory* creative and critical thinking training is essential and should be robust.

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