

# That Human Capital (Creative) Thing



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My career could be summarized as a comfortable, or at times, uncomfortable pairing of art and commerce. I tried relentlessly to empower myself and arm any creative professional working on my team with information about the customer.

I was at lunch recently with an old friend and former client, discussing what may be my next career move after managing Iridium for 20 years. (#Agency recruiters: I am available.) I suggested that it might be wise for me to take a step even further away from creative toward business development, management of media and [marketing](#) technologies – or even leading an internal brand strategy team. To that, he earnestly replied, “Would you even be able to direct a creative team anymore?”

Now I spent 25+ years building a reputation for imaginative, award-winning design, much of it managing exceptional creative teams that were responsible for a high aesthetic and artful brand-building ideas, so it was an unexpected punch to the veritable gut – perhaps deserved and delivered by someone well known to champion the value of human creativity.

And yet, maybe my distraction is forgivable. All we seem to

hear and read about these days involves the magical, almost hypnotic application of technology and data on some level: Mobile platforms. Ad-blocking software and click fraud. Live-streaming. Impressions and metrics.

Technology and its data-driven offspring of products like “programmatic advertising” have always been quick to the stage of stardom. We ogle the curious, newfangled software, B2B wizardry, and gee-whiz consumer hardware and gadgets and, in the age of unthinkable amounts of data, we recognize that the most important thing might be the management of that data – the knowledge to apply the information wisely and with the smartest value proposition. In short, we see that there’s a lot of confusion, so maybe wise to invest in sorting it all out. As competitive professionals, we’ll do anything to stay in the know of business technology and new innovations.

*Most Definitely NOT in Kansas Anymore.*

From an advertising standpoint, human research and media-buying seem almost archaic when compared to the current high speed trading and ad-viewing climate: Thousands of media outlets and social venues available to any one advertiser; a dazzling number of digital frequencies for viewer impression and presentations for ad display and video formats – and ultimately, the mind-numbing and exponentially complex set of options offered by the whole menu mix. It’s no wonder that artificial intelligence as applied to ad-placement and tracking technologies is the celebrated and favored child of the moment.

Ad tech companies like The Trade Desk, a California-based platform provider that just announced its impending IPO, are the darlings of advertising and marketing. They help manage the confusing plethora of opportunities and decision landmines, and boldly profess the ability to increase brand performance, simplify, and help us make sense of it all.

Yet, in all of the grand hoopla of data-informed media placement, have we inadvertently swept to the side one of the most important components of any successful brand? What about the content, the actual inspiration, and the human factor – those against-the-grain, indefatigable creative art directors, designers, and copywriters that create the memorable and often iconic expressions that excite us in the first place?

Call me a purist, but isn't it fair to assume that some of the greatest advertising campaigns of the modern age were deemed so because of that small flicker of human genius that was stoked in a creative department, fanned to a flame, and encouraged to produce commercials like Wendy's "Where's the beef?" or Alka Seltzer's "Spicy Meatball" – or Coca-Cola's "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing," or Partnership for a Drug-Free America's "Fried Egg"? How do we explain and measure the line of copy that hits just the right chord, or the image that captivates us, or the music that inspires a call to act? Has the content now become so ubiquitous and so banal as to take a back seat to the mechanism for delivery of that message?

AdAge columnist Jeff Rosenbloom [writes](#), "The individuals who can develop incredible ideas – and the organizations that can leverage the small percentage of people who are genetically gifted with creative skills – are those that will thrive. They will create the world's passion brands. Creative is the true competitive advantage." (And, for agencies competing in a commoditized world, I might argue that creativity is a great opportunity for differentiation.)

There is sometimes a bifurcation between the art and the science, or commercial applications of our industry, but as Rosenbloom states, "Because we are competing in the most dynamic business environment ever, creative and data can no longer live in silos and thrive. The best marketing initiatives will be developed by those who are gifted creatively and have a willingness to leverage disparate

audience data.”

Having managed an agency, I saw firsthand when and how the two disciplines worked well together and also, when (and how) they did not. The development of some of our most successful work entailed a lead developer or technologist and creative director or senior designer working inextricably together, almost literally immersed in a dance throughout the course of a work day – asking questions, identifying challenges, pointing, wondering, posing solutions or “what if” scenarios – all with the intention of delivering the most powerful, appropriate experience to the defined audience, in a way that was unforgettable.

Technology and data deliver critically important tools to any creative team. Agency managers can cultivate an environment where both scientist and artist are provided a winning stage to excel and create value. The artistic inspiration for brand – that unpredictable, erratic, seemingly fleeting and nebulous talent or commodity – needs to be honored, nurtured, and given room to flourish, but also guided by information on audience and usability habits. The benefits that technology and data provide to creative teams and individuals are increasing every day:

Concepts can be custom-tailored through the available technology in order to resonate more effectively across narrow verticals of slightly different demographic segmentations.

Campaign creative can be vetted in agile pilot programs – deployed, measured, analyzed and tweaked over time to perform at its best for any given set of users and ad impressions.

Emerging technologies like augmented reality present a potential revolution for creative directors and designers, a toolbox from which they can imagine and construct even more brilliant storytelling and branded expressions. Virtual reality is one example, but we are just beginning to see

cutting edge developments that introduce new opportunities and offer an unprecedented level of creative range, the kind of possibilities creative directors have never had before. Snapchats's branded filters are a fantastic blend of technology, commerce, and design inspiration, but there are also practical technical advances like Flixel's "living photo" or Cinemagraph that can make a still photo animate.

As he is prone, my provocateur friend kindly nudged me and managed to remind me of the thing that matters most, all while allowing me to connect the dots for myself. I love technology and I revel in the fact that we are living in the most advanced, rapidly changing and inventive era in world history. I love the challenge of keeping up, learning and applying, and staying relevant – but it's in the intangible, sometimes mystical and surprising depths of the human mind and imagination where the most indelible ideas are spawned.

Call it the successful blend of art and commerce.

***About the Author:** With 25+ years of experience in marketing and communications, Dwayne has managed successful branding and marketing initiatives for a wide range of commercial and nonprofit clients while leading the company he founded, IridiumGroup. This work includes the development of enterprise brands, design of flagship proof-of-concept assets, and the deployment of systematic messaging and creative solutions across digital and integrated channels.*