

# Finding the creative edge – research as flow

**Chuck Young**, Ameritest, shows how the concept of ‘flow’ is reflected in good creative research

**W**HEN I WAS FIRST getting started in this business, a savvy creative director who was very successful at selling his advertising ideas explained to me the creative rule-of-three. ‘Whenever I’m pitching a new ad campaign I always bring three storyboards with me,’ he said. ‘The first is the safe, predictable idea that the client asked for. The second one is a wild creative idea that’s way outside the box, which I know the client will feel is much too risky. And the third is the one in the middle. By comparison, it’s just the right combination of the old and the new. That’s the one I know I’m really going to sell.’

## Boring and predictable?

Lately I have spent a lot of time thinking about the proper role of research in the creative development process. Having tested a lot of ads over the years I am well aware of the belief of many creatives that research leads only to ideas of the first kind – the safe, predictable, boring ones. Fortunately for me, not all ad people think this way.

Near the end of his life the great ad man David Ogilvy commented, ‘Most creative people detest research, and I’ve never understood why... In my day, I used research very often to give me the courage to run campaigns that were risky.’

If you think about the way advertising is supposed to build brands, it seems obvious to me that safe, predictable ideas cannot build a business. There is simply no such thing as a risk-free return-on-investment in a real marketplace of ideas. But just as obviously, ideas that are too far removed from a brand’s roots simply become clever entertainment and do not sell anything either. In a deeper sense, the creative rule-of-three seems true because that is the way things grow.

## Optimal experience

A few years ago a famous psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, wrote an interesting book called *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. The book is a wonderful explanation of how we grow as human beings. His work was based on over a decade of experimental work done

at the University of Chicago, where he and his graduate students studied ordinary people from all walks of life engaged in their day-to-day lives. His research subjects carried around electronic pagers for several weeks. When they were paged randomly, a few times a day, they filled out a diary describing what they were doing and how they were feeling at that particular moment. Csikszentmihalyi’s research objective was to come up with an empirical answer to the question, ‘What makes ordinary people happy?’

What he found out is an interesting validation of the existentialist viewpoint. Happiness is not a function of who we are, but rather of what we do. More particularly, happiness is a function of the relationship between whatever task we happen to be engaged in at a given moment and our particular level of skill in doing that task.

An easy way to describe that relationship is to do so geometrically. Imagine a circle that represents who you are in the following behaviourist conception: each point in the plane of the circle identifies a job that you might find yourself doing as well as your skill level or capability of doing that particular job. So, inside the circle you would find all the points that identify jobs you would find very easy to do. In mathematical terms, your skill level or capability is greater than the difficulty of the job you are trying to do. For example, tying your shoe laces, brushing your teeth, riding a bicycle and signing your name might be activities found inside the circle. Outside the circle are points that stand for jobs you would find very hard or even impossible to do because your skill level is not up to the task – that is, your skill level is less than the difficulty of the job you are trying to do. These might be activities like playing the piano, speaking Chinese, flying an airplane, doing brain surgery, to name just a few.

## Total boredom

Now consider, what would it feel like if you were to spend all of your life inside the circle? What emotions would you most likely experience? You would probably feel bored out of your mind! If you

were to spend all your time in the centre of your circle, in the perfect safety of your comfort zone, where things are easy and you do only the things you already know how to do, life would be like the voyage of Mister Robert’s ship: an endless cruise between tedium and monotony.

Now consider what it would feel like when you occasionally find yourself in a place well outside the circle, tasked with things beyond your level of competence. What emotions would you experience then? You would probably feel anxious and afraid. In those situations, you find yourself in over your head with the situation totally out of control, feeling the surging emotions of panic.

Now consider a third possibility. Imagine you have pushed out to the circumference of the circle, which is the edge of who you are and are not – the boundary between self and non-self. Balanced on this knifeedge, your skill level is precisely matched to the difficulty of the task at hand. As you push the envelope of the self, according to Csikszentmihalyi, you will enter a new state of consciousness, what he calls the Flow State. In the Flow State, time seems to disappear. As your performance enters this groove, your mind starts working on all cylinders and work becomes effortless, Zen-like. You and the work become one, and emotionally you feel as good as it is possible to feel. This optimal state of human experience is the Flow State.

This is what actor Johnny Depp talked about recently in *USA Today* when discussing his work. ‘You should be pushing yourself to the absolute brink of failure, in terms of like, “Boy, if this don’t work, it’s going to be real bad. And if it does work, it might be great.”’

‘There is simply no such thing as a risk-free return-on-investment in a real marketplace of ideas’

Of course you cannot stay in the Flow State indefinitely. Eventually you must come down from this high and loop back to your comfort zone to rest and recharge. Every time you push the envelop and visit the Flow State the result is that – much like the growth rings of a tree – the circle of the self is enlarged. You will have grown.

**Growing as a drug**

An easy place to see this in operation is in the world of video games. When you take your first steps to learn the rules of a new game, on Level 1, everything feels unfamiliar and awkward. Before long, Level 1 becomes too easy and you are ready to move on to the next level. At each level of the game the cycle repeats itself and what was hard at first becomes easy. As you master each level of performance, you are drawn inexorably to the next, where your mind becomes once again totally absorbed in the difficult play.

What is so incredibly addictive about playing video games is that, at the highest level you are capable of, you enter an excited, optimal state of consciousness – the Flow State. The primal human need for the experience of growth, for even such a trivial activity as play, is such a

powerful drug that it can overpower other basic needs such as for sleep, food, and even sex.

This model of growth is not just limited to theorising about human psychology. Researchers in a variety of fields from biology to economics to physics have, in the last 20 years or so, been applying the new computational methods of chaos and complexity theory in multi-disciplinary think-tanks like the Santa Fe Institute. They have generated fundamental insights into the nature of reality. One of the basic themes of this new science is that creativity is released in the natural struggle between order and chaos.

**Creative tension**

These two extreme states of nature represent the inside and the outside of our circle of the self. A highly ordered state of nature, like a rock crystal, is predictable, describable with geometric certainty, and ultimately lifeless. A highly chaotic state of nature, like a plasma gas, is totally random, wild, unpredictable, and ultimately meaningless. All the really interesting things in nature, according to complexity theorists, occur at the boundaries between these two states, where complex systems achieve just the right

creative tension between predictability and randomness. Life itself, the theorists believe, arises on the creative edge between order and chaos.

By analogy, advertising can be thought of as performing this balancing act in the process of growing a brand. From an analytic standpoint, it is perhaps useful to modify the circle metaphor somewhat by thinking of the boundaries of a brand as a many-sided polygon. In this way, we remind ourselves that most brands have a number of sides or dimensions of performance along which they can compete. But the idea is still the same. The goal of the marketer is to determine how to grow their brand in the mind of the consumer by finding out which edge can be moved most easily for the greatest competitive advantage. One way you push on the edges of the brand is with advertising.

As a rule, marketing managers are rewarded for building the business, not for keeping it the same size. What this means from a brand standpoint is that the marketer must actively grow the equity of the brand in continuously creative ways. You can add to the equity of your brand, for example, by communicating product news to the consumer when there is

FIGURE 2

**Stretching the brand**

| Diagnostic rating                            | (Correlations)  |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|
|  | The ad fits the way I already think and feel about Company Name | The ad gives me a new idea or feeling toward Company Name, and I can see how it fits Company Name | The ad does not fit Company Name at all |
| Entertainment                                | -0.08   | +0.12   | +0.46                                   |
| Relevance                                    | +0.37   | +0.58   | +0.13                                   |
| Made me think about the product in a new way | -0.24   | +0.52   | -0.69                                   |
| Liking                                       | +0.27   | +0.42   | +0.10                                   |

(N = 25 commercial pre-tests)

□ ○ = significant statistically

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something new to say. You can change your messaging to adapt to the fast-changing competitive marketplace and latest consumer trends by emphasising a different feature and showing a different face to the consumer. You can reposition the brand, by associating it with a new and different set of competitors. You can re-define a core brand value by giving it a new definition or meaning that your competitors haven't thought of yet. Or you can create new emotional associations with the brand through storytelling, celebrity endorsements, or other tricks of the advertising trade.

### Stretching meaning

Whatever the strategy behind a particular ad campaign, the most effective advertising stretches the meaning of the brand in the mind of the consumer, but not too far. Like Goldilocks, the consumer will choose to respond to advertising that is not too safe and not too risky, but that is just right. She responds best to the adver-

tising that gives her a new idea or a new feeling towards the brand, but one that still fits her pre-existing concept of the brand. The empirical validation for the creative director's rule-of-three is shown in some simple research we have conducted in the Ameritest pre-testing system.

When we pre-test a commercial, one of the questions we ask consumers is to place the ad into one of the following three categories based on their perception of the brand.

1. The ad fits the way I already think and feel about *Company Name*.
2. The ad gives me a new idea or feeling toward *Company Name*, and I can see how it fits *Company Name*.
3. The ad does not fit *Company Name* at all.

This has been a useful diagnostic for understanding the effectiveness of television commercials. To illustrate, Figure 1 (using a sample of 25 commercials that were tested for a leading packaged-goods

client) shows how responses to this question correlate with other research scores.

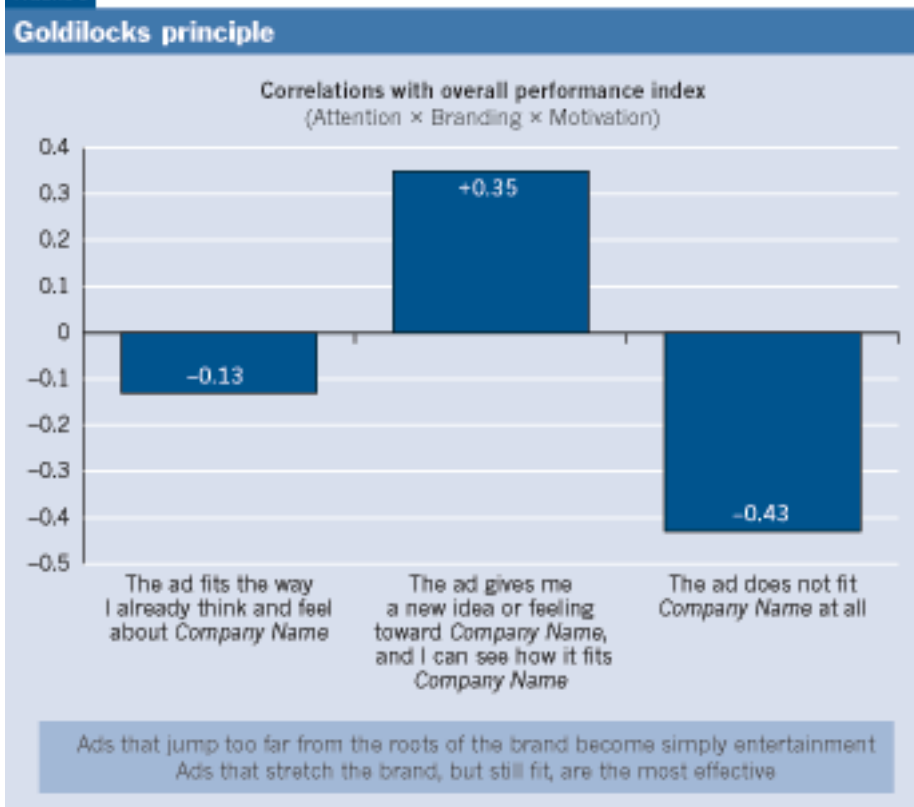
The first number you will notice suggests that creative ideas that don't fit the brand can be quite entertaining. Since entertainment value is a major predictor of attention-getting power, this type of advertising can be quite successful at attracting attention to the execution. However, as the second correlation shows, it is not considered relevant by the consumer connection since they do not see how it fits the brand being advertised. So this risky type of advertising, while attention-getting, is not as likely to actually sell anything.

Communicating an idea or feeling that the consumer already has about the brand is relevant and confirms the value of 'reminder'-type advertising. Even more relevant is advertising that communicates a new idea or a new feeling, but one that still fits the brand in the eyes of the consumer. This kind of advertising helps consumers to see the brand in a new light, to think about it in a new way. Interestingly, this is the kind of advertising consumers like best.

The overall effectiveness of a television commercial is a combination of three distinct variables: attention, branding and motivation. We can combine these into a single overall measure of performance, indexed to the total database of all ads tested. Figure 2 shows the correlation between this metric and the 'Goldilocks' branding question. As you can see, ads that stretch consumer perceptions but still fit the brand perform the best.

Creatives understand intuitively, as this data confirms, that one of the riskiest advertising strategies is to not take any creative risks. But creativity, as it has always been understood by the masters of the craft like David Ogilvy, is an exercise of disciplined freedom. Consumer research provides the discipline to help find the boundaries of how far you can stretch the brand, so you're free to take those risks. ■

FIGURE 3



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