

Doing the creative thing as a team: why and how?

Jude Browne and **Tim Hollins**, Headmint, explain how a company's creativity can be fired by effective team selection, and reveal some tools to aid the process

AS TODAY'S CONSUMERS cease to become the passive recipients of brand messages, it is increasingly crucial that brand custodians can ignite and exploit the explosion of ideas that develops from brand 'co-creation'.

Brands are simply the sum of the experiences people have with them. To make these experiences consistently count as good ones, brand-orientated companies need to engage more of their own organisation in the creative process, beyond the creative and marketing people. In a world where numerous studies show increasing brand commoditisation, increasingly similar advertising and the real need to engage people, not simply interrupt them, there has never been a greater business need for creativity – at business, brand and communications levels. Creativity needs to work in more places, more often.

Brands: a process not a task

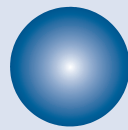
A living brand is a pattern of behaviour, not a veneer applied on the outside by creative communication partners. Just as people can change their clothes without changing their characters, so can brands. It is no longer for brand custodians just to manage the 'look and feel' of the brand, but to cultivate its true, consistent character. So great brands must be the process of internal cultivation, not just a marketing department task. This requires a different creative way of working.

FIGURE 1

Suns and Satellites

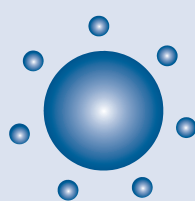
Core values are Suns

- Unchanging
- Few
- Commonly held



Secondary characteristics are Satellites

- Diverse
- Changeable



Here, we explore some ways that brand custodians can work with brand 'co-creation', in collaborative idea development, a process designed for those who wish to cultivate, rather than just 'administrate', their brands. In it we highlight the most common barriers to organisational brand creativity and describe some strategies for brand custodians to apply – methodologies to help people help themselves. We need to understand what truly creative brand ideas are, and why they are of critical importance, before addressing some common barriers that, in our experience, prevent organisations from delivering creative brand relationships.

Great brands are not all logic

There has to be 'magical rationality'. In any long-run scrutiny of outstanding brands, the elements of brand DNA, the unique combination of components that provide distinctiveness and real value, are, without exception, intangible and more often than not quite elusive – closer to magic than logic. That is why it is rumoured that Richard Branson refuses to write a detailed description of the Virgin brand – he wants to keep the magic!

For many businesses, this issue, logic versus magic, sits at the heart of the brand creativity problem. In most companies, logic (strategy) is separated from magic (creativity) by a wide gap. In the blue corner are strategic thinkers, who would describe themselves as analytical, logical, numerical, verbal, and linear. In the red corner are creative thinkers, who are intuitive, spatial, emotional and physical. That is why so many companies have problems cultivating creativity into their brands: because strategy is a left-brain activity and creativity is right-brain.

What is a creative brand idea?

A creative brand idea affects, directs and challenges the whole of the business. Often the best ideas do not seem that clever. Some even seem obvious. But they are new. Great brand ideas are valuable. Great brand ideas are realised; they show up everywhere.

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Consider a huge global business like Nike. Phil Knight, the founder, once told the *Harvard Business Review* that his brand idea was 'justified irreverence', an idea dripping with magic not logic. You can see it in the shoes, the athletes and the ads, even the sporting ideas Nike invents. It is everywhere.

Although you may never be able to control fully the consistent reproduction of great brand ideas, the chances of them occurring can be increased. Great ideas need help to be born.

One of the most sure-fire ways of achieving this is to ensure that the brand is focused on by diverse, cross-functional groups. An array of functional disciplines, and also cultures (both organisational and ethnic) and ages have a greater chance of coming up with unique ideas.

It's not easy, because it is tempting, when putting together a team to crack a brand issue or problem, to select team members who think like you. Chances are your team will get along really well and get a lot done. But will the ideas be truly innovative? Probably not, because participants will come to the problem ►

with the same mind-set and they will leave with it. This is underlined by Robert Sutton in his book *Weird Ideas that Work: How to build a creative company*. One of his top suggestions is to employ people who make you uncomfortable.

But you need to help them to be different ...

Hanging out with people who think just like you makes life a whole lot easier, and it is true that bringing people together just because they are different, have diverse attitudes or make each other uncomfortable is not the same as putting together a truly inventive team. Warren Bennis and Patricia Biederman, in trying to understand how some of America's most pioneering, resourceful teams cooperated and collaborated their way to success, undertook an analysis of the blend of individual and collective genius needed to create something new and exceptional (1). Just like cracking the gene code or launching into space exploration, building a world-class brand cannot be accomplished by one person, however exceptional they might be. There are too many issues to be identified, too many connections to be made. The investigation spanned seven truly pioneering teams, from Apple and the Presidential election team that put Bill Clinton into office, through to the Disney studio. The commonality was that all the teams produced work that was enduring – or as Steve Jobs said, 'put a dent on the universe'.

Creativity audit

Hence, a useful exercise we developed called 'Great Creative Groups', which allows a diverse brand team to audit their own creative abilities using a ranking framework against the 12 characteristics that Bennis discovered to be common to these remarkable teams. They can then identify and work on the gaps to become a more creative but diverse team.

1. Superb people and knowing where to find them. The leadership has the know-how to attract people better than themselves.

- 2.** Great groups and great leaders create each other. Collaboration is a necessity. Command-and-control styles do not work.
- 3.** A strong leader who organises the genius of the others. The leader can only realise his or her dream if the other people are free to do exceptional work. The leader is the steward, keeping hope alive in the face of setbacks.
- 4.** Talented people who can work together. Tolerance of personal idiosyncrasies, sharing of information and ideas. Colleagues who advance the common cause are essential.
- 5.** The right person has the right job. Truly gifted people are not interchangeable. People do what they were born to do.
- 6.** A group of people on a mission from God. Everyone gets it. A crusade, not a job.
- 7.** An island – with a bridge to the mainland. Creative group create their own worlds, customs, dress code, jokes, private language; they treasure their secrets; they have fun, despite working in the commercial world.
- 8.** A self-perception as the winning underdog. Building on team insecurity as positive energy.

9. There is always an enemy. The enemy is external, not internal.

10. Optimistic, not realistic. A belief that they will do things not done before. They do not know what they cannot do and are not sure that the impossible exists.

11. The leadership gives the talent what it needs and frees it from the rest. Most of all, people want a worthy challenge, a task that allows them to explore all of their talent. Low on bureaucracy.

12. They are part of a real marketplace. Great creative groups are places of action. They make things that need to be sold.

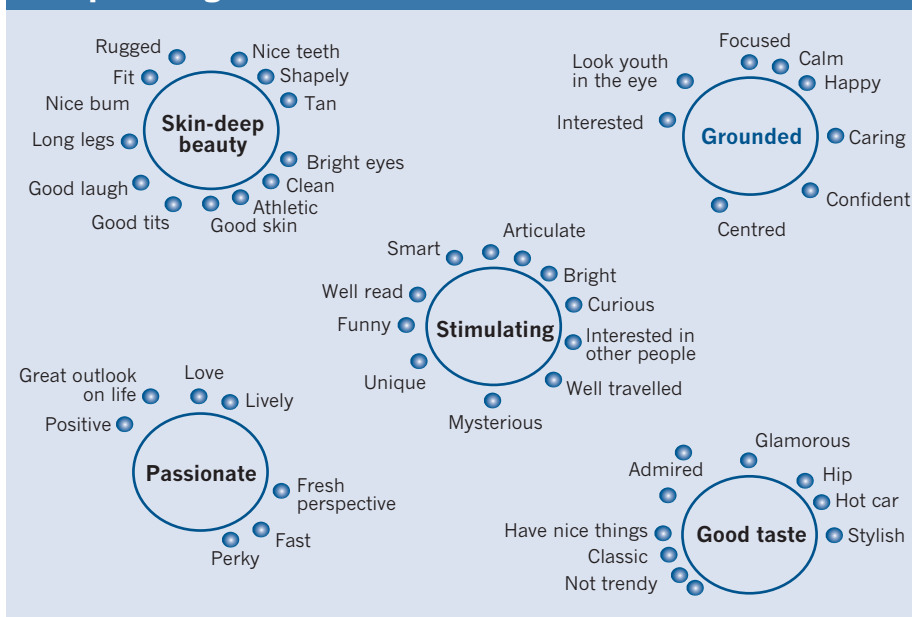
Understand the unexpressed

Working with brand teams across the globe on becoming more creative with their brands, we have uncovered some important lessons. The first, and often most creative, leap is that brand creativity comes from combining elements of brand DNA in an unusual fashion.

The second lesson is that it is difficult to trace the origin of an insight. Ask innovators where their groundbreaking idea came from and the answer will invariably be 'out of nowhere'. In other words, it is messy: creativity is a combination of concepts, and is random.

FIGURE 2

Example: being attractive



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Many subjects that marketing and brand-building must examine and clarify are complicated, multi-faceted and highly subjective: brand values, consumer motivations, market segments, cultural contexts.

So we developed a technique to help us explain and account for such things as core brand truth and marketplace insight, at one and the same time. ‘Suns and Satellites’ is a hierarchical model used to elicit core values and secondary characteristics, which can be used to create a simple (not simplistic) graphic ‘map’ of your brand and unearth possible unique creative DNA combinations (see Figure 1).

In this exercise we ask teams to consider the widest possible range of associations for their brand. Not just ‘hard’ tangible aspects, but also less tangible ‘soft’ associations – emotions, attitudes, values, feelings, colours, sounds, memories, sensations, shapes, and so on –

then start clustering these associations together.

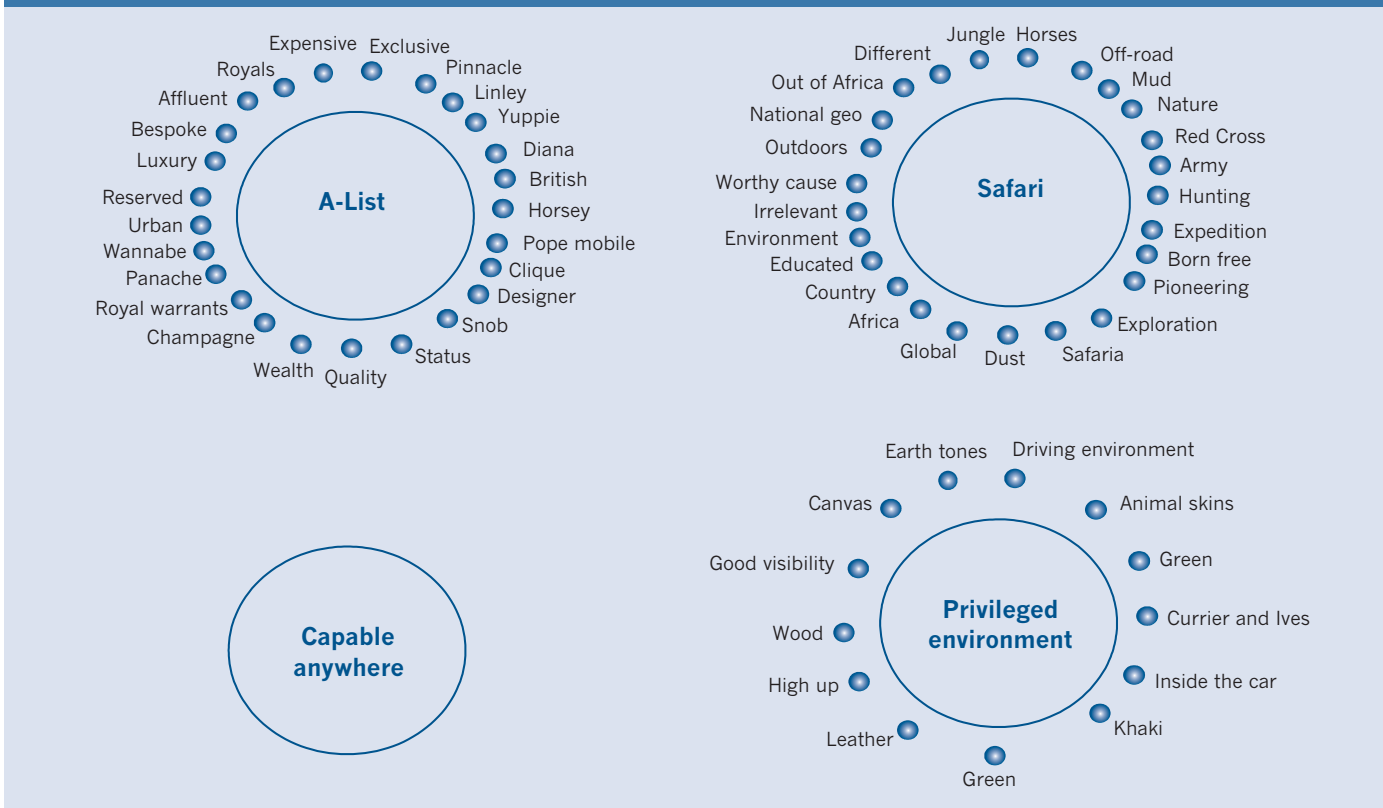
Often the subject matter is not just the brand but the context it exists in, the territory where critical insight can appear. Figure 2 shows a DNA map concerning the subject of ‘being attractive’ for a cosmetics brand.

Our experience of working with countless brand teams in many categories has shown that when combining elements of a brand’s DNA, the more far-flung and independent, the more creative the new solution. In other words, if the components combined are very different, the new idea will be correspondingly more creative.

Truly creative brand ideas are groundbreaking, because the elements of DNA are so unexpected and the combinations so atypical, they are true juxtapositions, as for Land Rover in the US (see Figure 3). New combinations of the critical elements do not always lead to brand magic, but sometimes they do. ▶

FIGURE 3

Land Rover: mud and caviar



Think about the following: Sebastian is aged 32, unmarried, outspoken and intelligent. His degree is in Economics. As a student he was deeply concerned with third-world debt, African aid and the anti-globalisation movement. Which statement is most likely to be true?

1. Sebastian works in advertising.
2. Sebastian works in advertising and is an active supporter of Oxfam.

The correct answer is A, but if you answered B you will be in good company. Our minds make a number of assumptions about Sebastian. Key words such as 'aid', 'African' and 'third-world' are associated with Oxfam. Therefore, we are more likely to make assumptions about Sebastian as a person, rather than keep an open mind. Chains of associations can work very well in moving swiftly from the exploration of an issue to an appropriate action, but for creative brand thinking, chains of associations leading to broadly held assumptions stifle alternate ways of thinking.

If we are to have new, creative ideas about either an existing brand or a new one, why don't we go and ask consumers? As Gary Hamel points out, 'Consumers are notoriously lacking in foresight.'

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So, insightful brand strategy, product innovation or communication, are often rooted in discontinuity. Discontinuities and disruptions do not just happen – they can be artificially engineered. All markets develop conventions and conformities. These are questionable, because they may be based on old assumptions, rather than fact. But they can easily become sacred truth. Questioning those that appear the most suspect can lead to new hypotheses that form the basis of new insights. One of the most effective ways of teams manufacturing a new way of looking at things is through an assumption reversal, as this encourages them to view things from new perspectives.

So, how can you and your team break down widely held assumptions when confronted with a particular challenge? A useful technique that we call 'Renegade' works as follows.

1. Think of a brand and the category you are in. Are you already making assumptions?
2. List all the accepted conventional thinking around the category, the consumer and communication in the category.
3. Challenge each assumption by thinking of a way of changing it.
4. Choose those that you find to have the most potential.
5. Apply them practically. Non-marketing people are really good at this: they have less marketing 'expertise'.

Here are two examples.

1. The way we think about it: cigarettes are unhealthy.

A new way to think about it: 'Healthy' additive-free cigarettes.

2. The way we think about it: Soda brands are about who the brand is.

A new way to think about it: Soda brands are about who you are.

Jones Soda puts your photos on its bottles. Visit www.jonessoda.com to see how, in many ways, this company does not behave like a normal soda company.

Doing the creative thing as a team: why and how?

These days there are more reasons than ever to seek out creative brand cultivation, making the best of the natural tendency towards brand co-creation. Creativity needs to work in more places, more often, throughout the company; that is why it is more of an internal team game than ever before. Brand development is a process of internal cultivation, not just a task for the marketing department. A creative brand idea affects, directs and challenges the whole of the business.

Brands are not all logic; there has to be magic, but magic needs to be nurtured; given the right conditions. Magic makes sense, but only if sensibly managed.

So great brand ideas can and do come from anywhere, but they need help to be born, particularly in the parts of the business that are not fashionable and are not marketing. Someone knows something you need to know, and you need to know how to find it out. Both organisations and the people in them have set up processes that kill off attempts to escape 'more of the same' brand thinking. That is why so many new ideas get eliminated, because they do not tally with current values, or organisational, brand or category norm.

Brand ideas that work often start from help in understanding the unexpressed core. The people working right inside the business understand this core, because they work with it every day, but invariably take it for granted.

Brand ideas that work need help in recognising that consumers notoriously lack foresight. A point of view and a purpose will take you a long way, because people want to know what you stand for and how you can help them. Show your path, not their footsteps.

The magic of brands depends on the people who deliver it. The challenge is to make them uncover their own real brand magic, not something dreamed up in a communication company brainstorm. That is the real brand magic, which will stick with you and me, because we believe and trust it.

Open your mind

So, in summary, do the creative thing as a team. These days there are more reasons than ever to seek out creative brand cultivation, making the best of natural brand co-creation. All brands can achieve this, if their teams have an open mind and are willing to participate in the brand, far beyond their field of expertise. Break down associative barriers; combine brand DNA in new and surprising ways.

Even if it is logical to stick within your own field of expertise, brand creativity comes from teams that desire to seek out and connect ideas and concepts from apparently unrelated backgrounds. ■

1. W Bennis and P Biederman: *Organizing Genius: The Secrets of Creative Collaboration*. Addison-Wesley, July 1998.



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