Creative Strategy and the Business of Design

BY DOUGLAS DAVIS

The result of adding left-brained strategic thinking to a right-brained creative problem solver equals clarity on the relationship between business objectives, marketing strategy, and the creative product.

Creatives get various demands and design requests from clients, but there's this exact same request hidden in all of it: "Solve my problem." In this article, Douglas Davis explains the need to explore the words behind the pictures and discusses the business objectives involved in creative problem solving.

At some point during my career, I realised that I lost creative battles because I was ignorant of the larger business or marketing considerations that informed aesthetics. I could write the design proposal, build the team, design or direct the executions, and pitch the ideas – yet I can remember times when none of this served me. Why? I didn't have the whole picture.

Then one day I stumbled into a strategy session. It was a completely new experience. The format was like brainstorming, but for a chess match. The discussion centred on trying to understand who the consumers were for this sandwich shop account we were pitching. What motivated them and why? How would our product fit within their lifestyle choices? Could we credibly position our product as a viable choice for them?

In that one meeting, where I had no formal strategy training to rely on, no concept of business, and no polished marketing vocabulary to add to the discussion, it all began to make sense. *This was that thing* that beat me. I *recognised it*, though I didn't *understand it*, and yet I did have a whole career of carrying out the result of meetings like this. I decided to become what I refer to as "a creative who understands business". So I applied to the Master's in Integrated Marketing course at New York University. The program was laser-focused on brand strategy, digital marketing, analytics, operations, and competitive strategy. The result of adding left-brained strategic thinking to a right-brained creative problem solver equals clarity on the relationship between business objectives, marketing strategy, and the creative product.

This is where I trace the shift in my professional focus from purely tactical to needing to explore the words behind the pictures, understand the strategy behind the execution, and know the business objectives involved in the design process. If you are from the business or marketing side of things you may even be wondering why this was such a revelation. This is

part of the problem. Let's start with what we weren't taught. As creative people, designers, art directors, writers, and those studying to become creative professionals, we *were* taught how to solve the creative portion of the client's problem. And we are good at it. So good, in fact, that clients can't help reason that since you've come through for them so many times with the execution – you must know strategy! The problem with this expectation is that it zeroes in on the very area that is outside the scope of what most of us *were* taught in design school: strategy. In D-school, we *were* taught to focus on the tactical parts of strategic decisions without even knowing what these strategic decisions entail. So when faced with a client's "tell me what to do, this or that" question, we may feel pressure to give a tactical this or that answer. Without any understanding of the marketing or business considerations that should shape this answer, *any answer* is at best incomplete. This is an important area to address as the creative disciplines evolve to the point where the usual client content request now also includes strategic context.

On the other side of the house are the suits. As components of business, marketing, brand, or account management, many B-school programs are adept at imparting analytical thinking, competitive strategy, and marketing tactics. And they're good at it. Yet none of this teaches the skill of how to communicate in a way that gets the most out of the creative team. This would account for occasions when the brief – the document that should clarify and inspire the creative process – makes it harder for creatives to do their job. It becomes clear that the area outside the scope of many business programs is inspiring designers when creative briefs are as long as a novel, are missing essential information on the target or are filled with irrelevant information. This is a dynamic time when our creative jobs are even more essential to business than in the past because of the way

business is annexing design, as it previously integrated marketing. From Mckinsey & Co advising clients to differentiate through building a design driven culture,[1] to IBM adding digital design agencies to their ranks,[2] the shift is profound. Right-brained creativity is the spoonful of sugar that makes the business or marketing objectives (the left-brained component) palatable to the public. It underscores my belief that injecting creativity into the beginning of a business discussion is the way to boost the success of the outcome. Whether you are a creative focused on how beautiful the work can be, an account manager focused on pleasing the client, a new-business hunter focused on winning new accounts, or a marketer moving the needle on the metrics, creative problem-solving is a team sport with the same goal. Stellar communication ability should be the common denominator among the creative and business players on the business, but this is where what we *weren't* taught makes the process harder.

So here's what I'm proposing we do about it. Leveraging the big opportunity at the intersection of business strategy and creative execution requires understanding the problem from the point of view opposite your own. As creative people, we must approach our jobs as strategists specialising in creative business solutions because we are fluent in the language spoken on the other side of the brain.

Learning this language helped me to win more business, get more design work, and here's an example of what that could look like.

Becoming a Creative Strategist

In the Fred Nickols paper "Strategy *IS* Execution: What You Do Is What You Get," he states that "*strategy as contemplated* and *strategy as realized* are often two very different matters. Strategy as realised is the outcome of efforts to execute strategy as contemplated." It makes sense that if creative people are included at the table contemplating strategy from the outset,

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the more likely that strategy is to be realised when they execute. When I apply this thinking to our creative profession, it underscores my belief that injecting creativity into the *beginning* of a business discussion is the way to boost the success of the outcome. More importantly for the long term, it is the way to make the value of your relationship with the client invaluable.

Translate what they say into what they need

Though our clients, whether internal or external, come to us for a variety of very different reasons, projects, budgets, and scopes of work, they basically show up with different forms of the exact same request: "Solve my problem." They, like any other person needing an expert, arrive in front of you wanting your professional opinion of the viable options they have – that is, they want your leadership. Knowing this, we can read between the lines to identify what they *really* need and fight the impulse to simply respond tactically. We need to determine the business and marketing objectives that should guide the way forward.

"Solve my problem" is not how the request is communicated to us. The request often will sound like "I need a website," "We need a new logo," or "It's time to update our packaging." But none of these requests really hit at the heart of what the client's business or marketing

objectives are. That's where your work as a translator comes in.

They Say: I need a website.

We Hear: They need a cool website! (a tactical request)

As I mentioned, most of us who went to D-school were taught to focus on the tactical parts of strategic decisions: the finished product, the details, what it looks like, the colours, the typefaces, the layout. But if you respond to a tactical request with only a tactical outcome, you are leaving strategy out of the equation and miss the bigger picture of what our creative business solutions are supposed to achieve. Yet the bigger picture is exactly why we are all in the room, to find the strategic approach with the most effective design execution. In order to get more perspective, I'm proposing that we dig a little deeper and learn to hear the request a bit differently.

Let's face it: If you get vague direction from the client ("I need a website"), it's because they don't know exactly how to communicate their objectives. They're looking to you as the expert.

I believe this is the opportunity we miss to make the client's relationship with us much more valuable than the "just get it done" transactional relationships we've all had. Sure, they need a new website. Now that that's established, isolate the key business objective – i.e., what the organisation needs for a creative business solution (the website) to accomplish. This will be how they will define success. And they'll need to hit certain goals within that definition to move the needle on the way to achieving that success. If we can focus the creative team while developing our recommendations with that definition in mind, I can assure you that you'll have their attention when proposing solutions. Now you're focused on solving their strategic job responsibilities through design.

They Say: I need a website.

What We Can Translate: The Marketing Objectives (wrapped in a cool website)

Knowing what they're trying to accomplish with the website lets us translate their wishes into realisable design objectives. They might want to:

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BUSINESS IS ANNEXING DESIGN, AS A RESULT DESIGNERS MUST LEARN TO SPEAK AND UNDERSTAND BUSINESS, IN ORDER TO **UNLOCK THE POWER OF VISUAL CREATIVITY WITH WORDS IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS**, TO DO OUR JOBS WHILE REMAINING ON BRAND, ON STRATEGY AND ON MESSAGE.

- Increase traffic
- Increase repeat and unique visits
- Increase number of page views, increase time on site
- Increase average order value
- Increase pass-along value
- Facilitate brand advocacy

For example, the head of e-commerce will need to increase digital sales, therefore the website she asked for will need to be responsive, should be optimised for SEM (search engine marketing) and SEO (search engine optimisation), and will need a component to drive traffic and extend its reach through being easily shareable in social media.

When you dig deeper, you see that her actual needs are a lot more complicated than the original request.

They Say: We need a new logo.

What We Can Translate: The Business Objectives

A request for a logo usually has a lot of business objectives behind it. For example, a brand manager is responsible for the product portfolio strategy, so that logo he requested will need to be part of a larger identity or packaging that should facilitate loyalty and be distinctive enough to remain top-of-mind when the consumer is considering a purchase in that category.

Your Role As Translator Will Open Doors

These types of translations are how you unlock the difference between a one-time transaction and a long-term relationship. Get to the root of why they need what they're requesting. Once you've gotten their attention with your strategic approach, they may be more likely to take creative risks with you. Speak to the business objectives that keep the client up at night and see what happens. You'll probably have a similar experience as I did: Once, after being

awarded a sizable account, I asked my new client, "Why'd you give us the business?" The client responded, "Because you challenged us." This was my confirmation that I addressed the key business objectives and understood what the people who were responsible for the business needed to accomplish. Get to the reason behind the request.

Remember business is annexing design, as a result designers must learn to speak and understand business, in order to unlock the power of visual creativity with words in the creative process, to do our jobs while remaining on brand, on strategy and on message.

As business evolves, remaining relevant as a creative professional will take more than creativity – you need to understand the language of business. Though you have proven creative skills, now it's time to incorporate business insight. Once you understand the value of understanding what the people across the table are thinking, you'll be able to think like they think to do what we do. **EBR**

About the Author

Brooklyn-based **Douglas Davis** enjoys being one of the variety of voices needed in front of and behind the concept, strategy or execution. His first book, *Creative Strategy and the Business of Design* was just published June 2016. Douglas is an Associate Professor within the Communication Design Department at New York City College of Technology and an adjunct in the Branding and Integrated Communications (BIC) program at the City College in New York City.

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