

## *other people's words*

Our brains are wonderful things. They work from the moment we get up every morning until the moment we get to the office.  
– Robert Frost, poet

## *the what and why of creativity*

Like me, a small group of my friends are in some shape or form a 'creative director,' and each of us are amazed at how people are fascinated with our titles, or more so, with creativity on a personal level. We've all had someone come up to us – usually away from the listening crowd – and plead, "Can you help me be more creative?"

The questions may vary but are essentially the same. Sometimes the question is general, such as "What exactly is creativity?" Or in reverse it's specific, such as "Where does an idea come from?" Sometimes it's shockingly direct, such as "So what makes you so creative?" – which we've come to realize is their clever way of comparing their perceived lack of creative skills to the ones they believe we've been given along with our titles.

While we're all happy to talk about creativity, none of us believe these well-intentioned people know why they need to be creative in the first place. The best of them understand that a creative director creates value by developing strategic ideas to further the business objectives of a company or client. The worst of them simply wants to be the creative one who livens up a hallway conversation or a Friday night party. Of course, our group believes it's best to find those qualities in the same person, but that's our own point of view. The bigger point is that there's a considerable number of people in public relations who don't know why they need to be creative, and more concerning, a considerable number of these people – both clients and agency staff – who say they don't have any interest or need in being creative.

I find that a) wrong, b) sad for their sake, and c) not surprising. After all, 'being creative' has historically described someone who's subversive and rebellious, or a person who falls outside of the traditional, normal or accepted path. For many cultures and societies, creativity (also known as 'being different') is an unwelcome attribute for a variety of reasons. In my circle of friends, we've even encountered people who believe being creative is somehow incompatible with being professional.

In the 10 years I've been a creative director at Burson-Marsteller, I've happily witnessed two exciting developments. First, the P.R. industry during the past decade has embraced the importance of creativity in many ways – even if it's mostly been at a surface level. Second, and more important, people have attached a growing personal level of importance to creativity, perhaps because of the industry's increased focus. In other words, communications professionals are now more likely to know that being creative is no longer a 'nice to have' – it's an essential requirement of their day-to-day job. Again, I'm not sure they know why – but every step is an improvement.

I can sympathize with the people who may not understand why it's important. It's easy to take creativity for granted because it has long been improperly defined and its purpose misunderstood. When we think of creativity – even when we're associating it with business – most of us define it in some kind of context to art. After all, we've been taught our entire life that creativity is how an artist creates art. For business, we think of other vital skills needed for executives to manage business, such as leadership or accounting.

Creativity – particularly for those people who work specifically in public relations – is inextricably and narrowly linked to generating ideas or tactics in a brainstorm. I rarely if ever hear people say creativity is fundamental to articulating strategy, analysing information and data, or developing and conveying messages to target audiences. So why is creativity given such a limited role in the communications process? To me, that's like playing golf without using clubs until the 18th hole.

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Even during the brainstorm process, creativity is improperly used and misunderstood. As one example among many, let's look at the people who attend brainstorms but don't fully participate – if at all. We all know them, if we haven't been them ourselves. We sit there for most of the brainstorm wishing we could burst forth with brilliant ideas, but more often than not, all we do is use up the oxygen in the room, leaving less of it for the others. Our brain works beautifully all day long until we have to use it to come up with ideas, and then suddenly it goes dark as if hit by lightning.

Why? Because, in the back of our heads, we somehow equate the skills needed to being creative in a business context to the skills we believe an artist uses to create art. Of course we know we aren't creating art, but we confuse two types of creativity: artistic creativity and business creativity, and they are entirely separate skills. It's not hard to understand the confusion. In school we're taught history but we're not taught creativity. (Remember, art class is the wrong type of creativity.) So, it's natural to blur the two skills into one, and moreover extremely easy to give ourselves an all-too-common case of creative paralysis which can have serious side effects. In other words, we have brainstorms which finish with empty flip chart pages.

The chief problem here is the lack of a proper definition of creativity. Let me correct myself: the problem is that there are too many definitions. Depending upon which source you use, there are nearly 500 definitions of creativity, most of which are directly related to art or artistic creativity. It becomes more complicated because we can't see, touch, use or experience creativity in the same way as someone else, and it can only be demonstrated by its outcome – also known as an idea – which has no standard element of measurement to help us define creativity in a business sense.

*A great creative idea is one of the last legal means of providing a client with an unfair business advantage*

Creativity would be easier to define if it was an exact science, like mathematics. An exact science is knowledge so systematized that you can predict and verify it through measurement, experiment and observation. For example, mathematics has specific elements which you can define (such as the number 1), and finite and repeatable steps (like addition) which together allows you to create the same single answer, again and again and again. Thus,  $1 + 1$  will always equal 2. In chemistry (another exact science), two parts hydrogen plus one part oxygen is the eternal recipe for water.

While creativity may not be an exact science, it's still a science. It has specific elements which can be defined (like an idea), and there are finite and repeatable steps (like the rules of a brainstorm). The difference – and the fun – lies in the glory that creativity creates the opposite of a single answer. By compiling different elements together, you create trillions of answers. (I didn't say they would all be good answers, but that's another discussion for another time.) Now you know why some feel creativity is the opposite of science – an 'art,' which means innate (not learned) knowledge, which is commonly known as 'talent.' For those who are or are known as creative, coming up with lots of ideas is as natural as breathing. It's a talent. They want an idea, and it comes to them like a bolt of lightning. The real question comes whether we can teach others how to create that flash of light for themselves.

But while I like to argue that creativity is a science, it's definitely not exact. Like religion, it requires a leap of faith or belief that it's there and it works. A proper definition of business creativity also helps things tremendously, so here's mine which I'd like you to consider: creativity is your ability to create as many ideas as possible so you can select the best solution which will counteract a specific problem or issue, which in turn, will help to achieve or accomplish a measurable business objective, goal or result.

Typically this definition is different than expected but not altogether unreasonable. What's more, if you believe this definition is accurate, then consider this: if you had a defined objective, and you knew exactly what issues or concerns were standing in the way of you achieving that goal, couldn't you create several ideas, and then select the best idea which would accomplish both tasks? Nearly everyone says yes. So, you may not be able to paint like Picasso, but you can confidently say that you're creative. All we did was give you a useful definition to put your creativity in its proper context.

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Now, the question of why one should be creative becomes paramount. One of the world's greatest creative thinkers (who by chance was also one of its greatest scientists) famously said that "insanity was doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." If, as a P.R. or marketing professional, you use variations of the same objectives, the same strategies, the same tactics, the same ideas to try and achieve new results, then by Albert Einstein's measure, you are insane. Being creative in business is the only skill you have available to you to create ideas – regardless of whether they ultimately become objectives, positioning, messages or tactics – to keep up with the rapidly changing landscape in which any of us are trying to run a business, generate a profit, increase the share price or attract employees. To use an oft-expressed quote, a great creative idea is one of the last legal means available to us to create an unfair business advantage.

Finally, to return to the original question, can you learn to be more creative? Yes and no. You can't and won't learn architecture if you don't want to be an architect, and the same is true with creativity. Just like an athlete who practices to be a better athlete, you can practice creativity to be more creative. But this requires – no, demands – that you believe you are creative. In reverse, if you keep telling yourself you are not creative, then I absolutely promise you that you won't be creative. Or, as my dear Grandma used to say: you will always live down to your own expectations.



The creative@work points-of-view are based on my work and training in creativity and innovation with clients and employees of Burson-Marsteller. Please don't hesitate to send me your comments, questions, input and arguments for future issues to my e-mail address below. As well, feel free to share these POVs with your colleagues and friends.

All of the creative@work POVs are available on <http://www.burson-marsteller.com/pages/insights/povs>.

Best regards,



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### Burson-Marsteller

Burson-Marsteller is one of the largest communications advisory and public relations firms in the world, and proudly holds an unrivalled track record in Asia Pacific. With its first office in Asia more than 30 years ago, Burson-Marsteller Asia Pacific twice in the last four years received *PR Week's* 'Asia Pacific Agency Network of the Year' Award. Burson-Marsteller Asia Pacific has 25 offices in 14 countries throughout Asia, Australasia and the Middle East.



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