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Abstract: This paper offers some thoughts on the current state of play in creative thinking and practice, and how we as entrepreneurial marketers might embrace an alternative methodology in order to promote an improved understanding of business.

When I feel well and in a good humour, or when I am taking a drive or walking after a good meal, or in the night when I cannot sleep, thoughts crowd into my mind as easily as you could wish. Whence and how do they come? I do not know and I have nothing to do with it. Those which please me, I keep in my head and hum them; at least others have told me that I do so. Once I have my theme, another melody comes, linking itself to the first one, in accordance with the needs of the composition as whole (Fletcher, 1999:21, quoting Mozart).

INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

Two domes, five centuries apart. One a major global visitor attraction, the other redundant, empty, abandoned, the result of government meddling with creativity, of incessant top up funding and lack of strategic direction. The first is the Sistene Chapel in Rome, whose ceiling is bedecked with the paintings of a now long gone great master, Michelangelo Buonarotti (Welch, 1997); the second, as if you haven’t guessed by now is the Millennium Dome, originally hailed as the saviour, protector and promoter of British creativity and innovation. Not now though, since the first ‘For Sale’ notice appeared in The Sunday Times\(^1\) calling for interested parties to contact a website for further details. How innovative! Strange that the Sistene Chapel had no theme park whizz kid, board of directors or government support. Granted His Holiness the Pope and others did have

\(^1\) A For Sale notice appeared on page 14 of the Business Section of The Sunday Times (31/12/00) asking interested parties to contact www.henrybutcher.com for further details.
some say in the matter but it was and is still essentially the creative genius of Michelangelo that continues to provide enjoyment, amazement, motivation and spiritual well-being for millions. This is all very well I here you say, but how can we as entrepreneurial marketers learn from such a curious tail of success and failure?

CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT

From a personal perspective, I first embraced creative thinking and practice at school as I studied for my ‘O’ level art qualification. I was to be found on many lunchtimes not in the Form Room or outside kicking a football, but in the Art Centre practicing my drawing and painting skills. This paid dividends at the end of the day when I gained top marks in the exams and had my work shown in a travelling exhibition in my home country of Northern Ireland. However, my creative endeavours after this point were not to re-emerge for a number of years. Of course I wished to continue my studies in art at ‘A’ level but was told that it would not fit into the timetable for my other subjects, mathematics, physics and chemistry. So much for creative stimulation at an early age, as the social psychologists have advocated for decades (Amabile, 1996). After studying Civil Engineering at university, where I decided that I would much rather be able to derive the mathematical formulae instead of being told to apply a set number of rules to engineering situations, I began to think that I would prefer following a career with opportunities for being innovative instead of being cloistered in uncreative practice. Returning home to Northern Ireland after graduating I took several marketing qualifications, ultimately resulting in studying for a PhD. Throughout this period, I worked to a disciplined schedule, absorbing the tried and tested theories of marketing and noting their usefulness and not so usefulness in reality.

One of the emerging themes from my doctoral studies was the notion that creative orientation could assist the smaller firm in gaining competitive advantage. If creativity could apply as a theoretical and practical construct here, I began to think of other situations where this might also be the case. As my teaching responsibilities increased, I realised that creative thinking could be applied to a number of possible scenarios. To date, I have taught creative elements in both undergraduate and postgraduate courses in database marketing, product policy, marketing management and small business marketing. The construct appears to hold true, although due to varying situations, it needs to be adapted from time to time. If this then is the case then I feel that creativity is an important element in marketing and entrepreneurship that has been ignored for too long both in academia and in
the world of business. We depend too much on textbooks by the ‘gods of marketing’, when in reality the models and theories promoted by theses gurus break down outside formal decision making structures (Kotler, 1999; Macdonald, 1999). By providing a more critical perspective in teaching marketing and entrepreneurship, learned formulae can instead mutate into something much more suitable and apt for the dynamic 21st century where globalisation and technology are key factors in the business world, including the university environment. Enough of my personal meanderings for now, but which I shall return to later. Instead, I aim to present some further thoughts and evidence of creative orientation in other fields in order to assist understanding of the phenomenon.

INVESTIGATION AND IMPORTANCE OF CREATIVITY

Previous papers have offered some thoughts on the origins of creativity and how it may be measured within the firm and at individual level (Fillis and McAuley, 2000; Fillis, 1999; Fillis, 2000a, 2000b). Originally derived from a study of the smaller arts and crafts firm (Fillis, 2000c), creative ability has been shown to exist in other areas such as architecture and computer software design. United Kingdom government thinking appears to promote a culture of creativity and innovation. Just over a year ago I attended a conference and workshop on such a topic at the SECC in Glasgow.

Companies represented at this event included Cisco Systems and Polaroid, two leading edge technological innovators. At the end of the day, a panel session answered questions from those taking part. One member of the panel represented a government-funding agency and told those attending that the agency was only prepared to fund projects which they deemed to be very low risk. I sat aghast but then I should not have been too surprised. Despite government spin on the importance of developing an innovation culture, creative ideas and products were being starved of funding due to inflexibility and lack of forward thinking by the agencies which could do so much to assist the entrepreneurial marketer.

I have attempted to formulate a model of creative measurement, taking into consideration certain internal and external factors, ranging from the impact of the social environment to the positive or negative impact of the workplace environment on the fostering of creativity in business. This model needs further testing but at the early investigation stage, it seems to

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2 This was a one day conference and workshop called Ideanation Scotland’s Innovation Day 2000, sponsored by the Royal Bank of Scotland, Scottish Enterprise and Lanarkshire Technology and Innovation Centre.
hold true. Models such as these, I believe, should be equally as valid as the formal marketing models of the works of Kotler et al. In teaching creativity within the marketing and entrepreneurship fields I have given this model to students in order to visualise their own existing or potential creative abilities as well as in assisting them to understand the merits of offering different, if not new, ways of thinking in marketing.

Other commentators have also offered some important thoughts on the contribution of creativity to the economy. Fletcher (1999) acknowledges that creativity pervades both scientific and non-scientific activities but chooses to investigate how managers in the creative industries can obtain the best creative efforts from their employees. He sees the optimisation of creativity as paramount to success, but recognises the importance of firstly uncovering the motivations behind such behaviour, whether it be ambition, money, fame, self-fulfilment or other driving factor. He presents figures of those employed in the creative industries, citing statistics of employment of creative people in such bureaucratic organisations as the BBC which ultimately depends on creativity and innovation to survive in the marketplace (Fletcher, 1999:7). This suggests that creativity can survive despite certain unfavourable circumstances in the organisation, as long as the longer term mission is to offer a product or service with some degree of creative differentiation. Fletcher notes the growth in consumption of creativity by the ever growing audience through such mechanisms as television, videos, records and tapes.

However, he makes an important point that, despite mass demand for creative products, the end result cannot be reproduced at will, unless the numerous television repeats of classic creativity such as Only Fools and Horses and the like are taken into account. Fletcher makes another important observation when he notes that many commentators tend to take the country’s commercial arts as its culture, but then culture is much more than this, embracing values, attitudes and behaviour of the community at large. Increasing affluence and leisure time will fuel demands for more creativity. Those industries with the best chance of capitalising on this will be adept at harnessing the talents of the creative people they employ, resulting in the transference of their innovative thinking into desired products and services. Fletcher visualises the creative industries at both the micro and macro level. At the macro level, creative output is defined and divided by the level of the basic product – e.g. music, design, fashion, architecture, and advertising. Here there is little interchange of creative people between one area of expertise and another. At the micro level, differences appear so diverse that managers and creators rarely see any
similarity between their own activities and other sectors. Although there are
differences, the management processes in all creative industries have areas
of commonality, but are inherently different from other economic sectors.

By being able to think creatively and subsequently produce innovative
products and services, this then should provide creative people with a degree
of monopolistic power over those who do not possess such abilities. The
problem with managing creativity is that many firms tend to treat such
ability as a commodity. One of the key differences between firms in the
creative industries and those practicing scientific or other type of creativity
is that the former tends to work to tightly defined time scales, with short
product life cycles. In the crafts, for example, certain creative products may
be produced as a one off or a small batch, with no repeat manufacturing
runs. Compare this to an innovative type of car assembly line which, in
theory at least, has a much longer lifespan. Fletcher notes the need for
control and restraint over creative personnel. This should be compared
contrastingly to the business philosophy of Andy Warhol who created
suitable conditions for the transmutation of ideas, resulting in innovative
artistic products (Warhol, 1975). He argued that is was beneficial to hire
personnel whose ideas contrasted with his own thinking. As a result of their
interaction, the creative output from the clash of views could product a
much more fruitful outcome. This compares similarly to Arthur Koestler’s
notion of ‘bisociation’, involving the putting together of two unrelated facts
or ideas to form a single identity (Fletcher, 1999:27):

“I have coined the term ‘bisociation’ in order to make a distinction between the
routine skills of thinking on a single ‘plane’, as it were, and the creative act, which,
as I shall try to show, always operates on more than one plane. The former may be
called single-minded, the latter a double-minded, transitory state of unstable
equilibrium where the balance of both emotion and thought is disturbed.”

The concept of ‘synectics’ may also prove useful in attempting to unveil
creative competitive advantage from an entrepreneurial marketing
standpoint. Synectics is derived originally from the practice of
brainstorming which I adopt in my teaching from time to time. An example
of this involves my showing students extracts of video material focusing on
modern art. I attempt to get the students to think of successful creative
practice through the examination of the work of artists such as Salvador
Dali, Jackson Pollock and Tracey Emin. Fletcher (1999:27) cites William J.
Gordon as the brainchild of synectics, or the joining together of different
and apparently irrelevant elements:

“It is the function of the mind, when presented with a problem, to attempt to make
the strange familiar by means of analysis. The human organism is basically
conservative and any strange thing is threatening to it. When faced with strangeness, the mind attempts to engorge this strangeness by forcing it into an acceptable pattern or changing its private geometry to make room for the strangeness...But basic novelty demands a fresh viewpoint, a new way of looking at the problem. Most problems are not new. The challenge is to view the problem in a new way. This new viewpoint in turn embodies the potential for a new basic solution.”

The raw material cost of creativity is highly sensitive to the rules of supply and demand; e.g. there are many more 'wannabee' singers than academics. Success usually in the former results in much higher financial rewards than the latter. This does not, of course take into consideration the degree of quality of the offering. Can we hope that in academia that by adopting a more creative philosophy to teaching and research that we will be commensurately rewarded? It is important to remember that, at least in the beginning of their careers, creative people are not motivated by money but rather by other factors such as self actualisation and the freedom to practice what they want to do.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This paper has offered some thoughts on the current state of play in creative thinking and practice, and how we as entrepreneurial marketers might embrace an alternative methodology in order to promote improved understanding of business. Perhaps if those behind the Millennium Dome had critically examined previous successful creative endeavours such as those outlined here, then we might have seen a much more fruitful outcome. As such, I recommend that we should always look back to the Michelangelos and Salvador Dalis of the past as well as forward in our research and teaching in order to uncover alternative modes of thinking in marketing and entrepreneurship, and at the same time hope that governments and funding agencies will also embrace elements of this alternative philosophy.

REFERENCES


