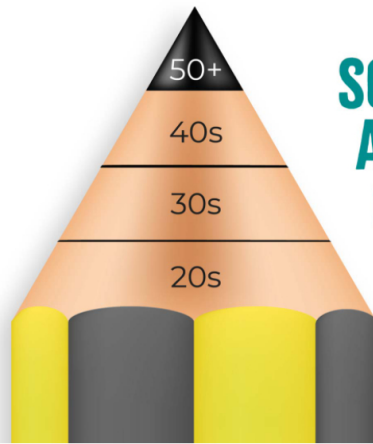


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MICHAEL SKARBEEK: HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE SECOND HALF OF YOUR CAREER

JANUARY 25 2021, 12:44 PM | BY RICKI GREEN | [Comments](#)



SO, WHERE DO
ALL THE OLD
CREATIVES
GO?

Creative consultant Michael Skarbek thinks most creatives will one day face a choice - work for themselves or evolve careers.

When I started working as a copywriter in my early twenties, I wondered what happened to all the older creatives, because I rarely saw them in agencies. It made me realise there was probably a ticking clock on my career, but I had a plan: beat the odds. Okay, not much of a plan. But I was buoyed by the success of early awards and the confidence of a non-receding hairline.

I rose up from junior copywriter to creative director in agency-land, and just before I turned 40, I took a sabbatical. I wanted to travel with my kids before they went to high school, so we flew to California, bought an RV and [drove around North America for a year](#).

Starting a new business by accident

What was supposed to be a year off became, inadvertently, the start of a new business. While I was away, a few people in Australia reached out and asked if I could do some work for them. I did, and as word spread, I started doing more and more. At the end of the year, a new, bigger client approached me and I faced a crossroads: take it on and say goodbye to working in an agency again, or turn it down and go back to an agency role.

To compound my decision, when I returned to Melbourne shortly after, three agencies contacted me to discuss the opportunity of becoming ECD. A year earlier, this would have been a dream - something I'd been working toward my whole career. But I'd only just begun to experience the joys of working for myself, and I wasn't ready to let that go just yet, so I chose that path instead.

From creative to business owner

But here's the thing: I'd spent my whole career in creative departments. I had no training in running a business. And although I thought I could do it, I knew I had a lot to learn. So I joined a mentoring program, and found a mentor who had a similar background to mine - ex-creative, now running a company.

Why do senior creatives need mentoring?

I think many senior creatives will one day face a decision - work for themselves, or evolve their careers. It's the only explanation I can think of that explains the lack of older creatives in agencies.

If you want to allow for the possibility that you might go out on your own one day, even if you're not a creative, it makes sense to start planning for that eventuality. Get prepared. Talk to people who've done it and learn from them. There are a few mentoring programs out there - I can recommend [Trinity P3's Marketing Mentors](#), which lets you choose your mentor and work with them in a way that suits you. It's not just for creatives either.

I use the knowledge I've gained from my mentor on a regular basis. These days my work still involves a lot of copywriting and conceptual, but it's evolved to include areas once outside my agency job title. I help my clients with brand strategy and positioning. I occasionally influence product development, and even designed packaging, to make sure the brand concept was carried through everywhere.

I think this happens to a lot of creatives in the second half of their career. We take what we've learned from being surrounded by talented people in agencies, and apply it to our clients' work. It's very rewarding, and age isn't an issue (at least, not yet). It's no surprise creatives evolve to become creative consultants. But if you've got any other theories or stories about where they go, let me know - I'd love to hear them.

By [Michael Skarbek](#), creative consultant

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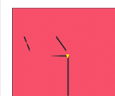
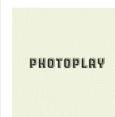


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7 COMMENTS

 **Creative, late 40s** says:


Nice work Skarby. I've chosen to evolve in-agency with some extra study on the side – mainly financial literacy. Those lucky enough (stress the lucky part) to not be turfed by my age already have the ears and trust of clients and management. From there I expanded the remit piece by piece, work closer with the suits, solve more than just creative problems, add more value to the client and the agency. Frankly the kind of stuff I should have started doing about 15 years ago.

[Reply](#)

 **ann ominous** says:

if you can imagine a small hamster wheel wired to an income/awards (income) generator then it won't be too much of a stretch to imagine creatives as hamsters. in other words, if you're not essential to any business, you will become an unnecessary expense and be fired. younger, cheaper hamsters will stay on for as long as they are useful. martin sorrell calls his invention the creative hamster wheel.

[Reply](#)

 **Washed up ad guy** says:


They become bastions of creative excellence, volunteering their sardonic wit in the campaign brief comments section.

[Reply](#)

 **OldCD Guy** says:

I second that.

[Reply](#)

 **Shhhh** says:

Keep it down, Skarby, or they'll all become creative consultants.

[Reply](#)

 **Sarah** says:

Thanks for addressing the wrinkly old elephant in the room Skarby. I think as young creatives we are too shielded from the business side of things – we are excused from production meetings while the 'grown ups' discuss the money, we receive zero financial training and many of us probably don't even know how an agency makes money. Creatives are infantilised and encouraged to focus on poutily protecting the ideas and winning shiny awards. We learn nothing about marketing or business and that stops clients seeing us as equals and partners. So my advice is learn the business side as early as possible. It will enhance your chances of staying on in an agency or help you start your own side gig – or maybe your own agency some day.

[Reply](#)

 **@Sarah** says:

You are wise beyond your years.

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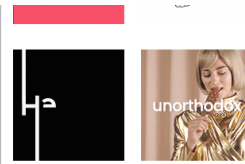
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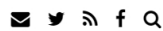
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