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OPINION

Woolley Marketing: Mad Men or Math Men?

In his regular column for Mumbrella, Trinity P3 founder and global CEO Darren Woolley suggests a rethink is due for technology's role in advertising.

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By **DARREN WOOLLEY**

The conversation on art versus science is like being back in the secondary school playground – before COVID lockdowns – with the jocks, the geeks and the emos. But the advertising playground has its own groups. Traditionally the domain of the creative, increasingly it has been invaded by the geek and nerd. And while some see technology and creativity complementing each other, there is still a prevailing view that never the twain shall meet.

Only in the last few weeks have I had agencies championing their creative prowess while sneering at the increasing role data and technology plays in marketing, beyond new digital channels for them to display their creative excellence. Even marketers often find themselves falling into thinking that an agency is either creative or data capable and not both. In discussing potential pitch candidates, a client rejected an agency because they were too 'data-smart'. Code for not creative enough.



Cartoon by Dennis Flad, with permission (2021)

At a recent AdForum Consultant Summit, my colleague Jeremy Taylor in the UK reported that all of the holding company presentations highlighted their investment in data and technology, but few had solved the integration challenges of bringing this together with creativity. At the other end of the scale, there are an increasing number of independent agencies implementing and integrating data and the supporting technology to inform and enhance their insights and creativity.

The problem or challenge is not the belief that science and art must work together in advertising, but how to make the two work together. Too often we hear about data and tech being matched against art. The novelty of the creative brief given to an AI and a human to see who would come up with the best idea. Or that automation will replace creativity. Or data analytics will somehow replace strategy. The fact is almost all of the technology available – be it AI, automation, big data or RTB – they are all simply tools. Data and AI are tools to provide opportunities for greater understanding and insights into people. Automation is an opportunity to relieve talented people from the mundane and boring, so they are able to focus on where they most add value.

I always liked the story told by John Lasseter of Pixar fame about the juncture of technology and storytelling. He had been fired by Disney in the early 1980s because he believed Disney needed to move from traditional cell animation to computer animation, which in those days was in its infancy. Remember, in 1984, Tetris and Boulder Dash were the hot new games on the market. Computer graphics was in its infancy. His sudden firing led to him being hired by LucasFilm Computer Group, which later became Pixar, and the rest is history.

There is a short documentary from behind the scenes at Pixar, where Lasseter recounts working with the computer programmers. This was a time before today's wonderful graphic interfaces, where computer animation was coded line by line and one simple shape or move could take days or weeks. Lasseter would sit with the programmer and see what they were working on. It might be – for instance – a rod shape, and John would ask if they could make it bend in the middle like an elbow. Or an oval sphere and he would ask if they could stack them on top of each other. Weeks would go by and excitedly they would call him in to show

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him what they had achieved through painstakingly coding hundreds and thousands of lines of code.

These shapes and movements were put together to create characters and led to the first breakthrough computer animation short: The Adventure of Andre & Wally B – a boy and a bee. Eleven years later he created and released Toy Story. By working with the technology, Lasseter and his cohorts were able to create a whole new genre of film.

Instead of thinking about technology as the starting point, we need to recast it as the tool set available to the people who can best put it to use to create something new, magical and worthwhile. The films Lasseter made have grossed more than \$USD19 billion and entertained millions. When advertising and marketing gets the creative and technology mix right, what can we produce? And please don't tell me more Facebook ads.



Darren Woolley is the founder and global CEO at Trinity P3. Woolley Marketing is a regular Mumbrella column.

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