Introduction

Inventing tools that support advertisers in generating ideas

In the course of our research it was discovered that 89% of 200 award-winning ads fall into a few simple, well-defined design structures. This evidence may appear perplexing and difficult to account for, at least at first glance. However, this discovery and subsequent supportive research, gave us the basis to develop the set of tools we are presenting in this book. These tools support the idea generation stage in the advertising process and can be used by any advertising professional to generate his own individual, unique and creative ideas for ads.

The *creation stage* of advertising encompasses the *idea generation* process – coming up with the concept for an ad, the generation of written copy (*copywriting*), artwork of various kinds (*art direction*), and a preliminary or comprehensive version of the ad (*layout*). Many professionals view the initial phase of *idea generation* as the "heart" or "key" of the creativity process. We therefore concentrated our research on developing tools for this part of the process. We wanted to find out *how to come up with ideas for creative ads*.

Strictly speaking, there are hardly any books that focus specifically on the subject of generating ideas for advertising. There are two relevant types of book that deal with adjacent subjects. One is about improving the process of creating advertising, and touches on issues such as writing the creative brief, analyzing the market to identify insights, crafting the creative message, etc. However, this does not address the question of where the actual ideas come from. The second type of book used by ad agencies is concerned with creativity in general. Prime examples are books by Edward De Bono or books about brainstorming in its various styles. In this case, ad professionals use universal creativity techniques, and try to adapt them to their needs. "*Cracking the Ad Code*" is the only book of which we are aware that deals

directly with the issue of how to *come up with new ideas* for creative ads. More specifically, this book outlines methods for actually *coming up with* the idea, methods that originate from and are designed exclusively for generating ideas *in advertising*.

The major discovery in our analysis of over 200 award-winning ads was that, amazingly, nearly 90% could be categorized into distinct patterns. Having identified these patterns, we used them to create the tools in this book: tools that can be used to develop other creative ads.

Can creativity be defined and quantified?

The notion that creativity can be defined and quantified seems a strange one to us. Is it, indeed, possible to measure a creative ad? Is it possible to define "creativity" and discover where it originates so that anyone can then generate creative ideas at will? Creativity seems to be one of the most elusive traits to define. In Popper's phrasing creativity is a divine spark that may not be dismantled and examined by use of scientific tools: "There is no such thing as a logical method of having new ideas, or a logical construction of this process. My view may be expressed by saying that every discovery contains an 'irrational element' or 'a creative intuition' …" (Popper, 1959: 31–32).

Creativity is considered the ultimate of human qualities, central to people from all walks of life. It is one of the key measures of intelligence. Creativity is considered to be of paramount importance for all those involved in the business of advertising in general, and for copywriters and art directors in particular. Creativity is a mission of the entire advertising industry, its *raison d'être*. Successful *creativity management* is the hallmark of a vital and prosperous advertising agency. Creative thought is so valuable in advertising agencies that entire business structures are sometimes designed around the talents of one creative genius.

Oddly enough, creativity has remained a rare topic in marketing research, even though the undisputed success of many products may be attributed to consumer creativity. Likewise, it has remained relatively unexplored in the area of advertising creativity. Thinkers and researchers in the field tackle the question of where creativity comes from – is it possible to define it by rules – or is it something that can not be defined – an inspiration?

Creativity: An academic perspective

Intuitively, many believe creativity to be something that is immeasurable and unquantifiable, a view shared by many academics.

Boden (1991) suggests that "if we take seriously the dictionary-definition of creation, 'to bring into being or form out of nothing,' creativity seems to be not only beyond any scientific understanding, but even impossible. It is hardly surprising, then, that some people have 'explained' it in terms of divine inspiration, and many others in terms of some romantic intuition, or insight."

Other thinkers and researchers conclude that the secret of creativity is illuminated by the rather vague notion of *rule-transcending* rather than *rule-following*. *Rule-transcending* was defined as *total freedom*: allowing a space for idea generation through eliminating directional guidance, constraints, criticism, and thinking within bounded scopes (Csikszentmihali, 1996). Such elimination of constraints is expected to enhance the accessibility of ideas. This way, ideas can be drawn from an infinite space of ideas (Grossman, Rodgers, and Moore, 1988). Tellis echoes these views, observing that creative ideas flourish in an environment of *freedom from rules*. The simple truth about *rules*, proclaims Tellis, is that they promote *conformity* and suppress *diversity* – one of the prerequisites of creativity (Tellis, 1998: 84–85).

Creativity is described as emerging from "thin air," or even from an apparently complete "void." Sinnott argues that "it is common for a new idea to arise almost spontaneously in the mind, often seemingly out of nothing and at a time when a person may be thinking of something quite different" (Sinnott, 1959: 23). Helmholtz testifies: "[Creative ideas] often enough crept quietly into my thinking… they were simply there… But in other cases they arrived suddenly, without any effort on my part, like an inspiration… Often they were there in the morning when I awoke" (Woodworth, 1938). Poincaré (1952) describes his work on a mathematical problem in the same vein and in a casual manner: "One day, as I was crossing the street, the solution of the difficulty which had brought me to a standstill came to me all at once." Mozart likewise accounts: "When I am, as it were, completely myself, entirely alone, and of good cheer – say, traveling in a carriage, or walking after a good meal, or during the night when I cannot sleep; it is on such occasions that my ideas flow best and most abundantly" (Mozart, 1954: 34).

These thinkers, and in fact a good deal of "common wisdom" regarding creativity, suggests that creativity is impossible to quantify or to study. Yet there are scholars who disagree.

Freud observed (1990: 35) that: "There is far less freedom and arbitrariness in mental life, however, than we are inclined to assume – there may even be none at all. What we call chance in the world outside can, as is well known, be resolved into laws. So, too, what we call arbitrariness in the mind rests upon laws, which we are only now beginning dimly to suspect."

Perhaps the implication of what Freud and others are saying is that copywriters and art directors don't have to be mentally ill or disturbed in order to be creative. Nor do they have to be outstanding geniuses. "Regular people" using common neural processes and sound creativity processes and techniques may indeed do a good job.

However, the theoretical and practical problem of deciphering the *creativity process* that leads to a *creativity product* (i.e. an *appropriate Wow!*) is as yet not resolved. Scholars adopt either the approach of rule-transcending or that of rule-dependent, with only a few entertaining the possibility that both *surprise* and *regularity* can coexist and nourish each other in the perplexing *creative process*. Boden (1995) stresses the necessary balance between *surprise* and *regularity*: "Unpredictability is often said to be the essence of creativity. But unpredictability is not enough. At the heart of creativity lie constraints: the very opposite of unpredictability. Constraints and unpredictability, familiarity, and surprise, are somehow combined in original thinking."

So, how can we invoke creativity?

If, at heart, creativity is a combination of inspiration and regulation as these experts seem to suggest – what processes can we create that will allow us to create effectively?

McIntyre (1977) aptly pointed to the interplay between *rule-following* and *rule-transcending*: "Objective rationality is to be found in knowing how and when to put rules and principles to work and when not to. Because there is no set of rules specifying necessary and sufficient conditions for large areas of practices (such as creative advertising), the skills of practical reasoning are communicated only partly by precepts but much more by case-histories and precedents."

Yet, while experience may supply many new facts which can lead our thinking, it is not a *method* (Blachowicz, 1998: 11). So, if we surmise that creativity requires this interplay between surprise and regularity, we then have

the opportunity to implement a methodology to generate ideas. Trusting sheer *randomness* or pure *chance*, with utter sacrifice of rationality and better judgment, is obviously not a preferred road toward stable and continuous advertising creativity. Some methodological frameworks should be devised and implemented. The essential question remains: what method should we adopt?

Most methods for the enhancement of *idea generation* devised over recent decades have been based on the belief that in order to "ignite the creative spark," all we have to do is break away from existing mind frameworks and search diligently for the *surprising* and the *irregular* – thus reaching the aspired goal of "generating a large quantity of ideas" (Aaker *et al.*, 1992: 372). These types of methods are based on removing judgment and any constraints, thinking as widely as possible – writing down all possible ideas in the hopes that through this, people will arrive at new and different ideas that they wouldn't have previously considered. The implicit assumption behind such methods is that the greater the number of ideas, the greater the probability of achieving a qualitative set of ideas after filtering. Nobel Prize winner Jonas Pulling said: "The best way to get a good idea is to get a lot of ideas." Ideation is therefore arrived at in *quantitative* rather than *qualitative* terms. It is directed in a *random* manner.

It is our contention that these methods have, by and large, directed research and application of advertising creativity into non-fruitful and inhibiting avenues. As to the *synergetic effect* – commonly identified with unbounded randomness methods and presupposing that a group of people thinking together is superior to a "nominal group" in which individuals think alone – at least one study asserted that this plays only a minor role in creativity ideation. In a controlled experiment, ideas suggested by individuals working alone were even evaluated as superior to those raised in brainstorming sessions (Weisberg, 1992). It has been repeatedly and conclusively shown by researchers that the most prevalent method of a *brainstorming* session does not generate more ideas or greater creativity than do nominal groups (Diehl and Stoebe, 1987; 1991). All in all, groups were shown to suppress individual productivity. The quality and originality of ideas generated by groups has similarly been proven to be inferior (Paulus, Brown, and Ortega, 1999; Sutton and Hargadon, 1996).

Often, "the reason we don't see the source of our problems is that the means by which we try to solve them are the source" (Bohm, 1992: 3). The main conclusion of such mounting evidence is that an excess of ideas obscures the *ideation process*, and *randomness* and *irregularity* impede creativity. It has

finally been realized that *total freedom* in idea generation is inadequate (Connolly, Routhieaux, and Schneider, 1993; Paulus *et al.*, 1993; Stroebe, Diehl, and Abakoumkin, 1992).

Creativity as a science

An inspiring attempt at creating an "exact science of creativity" was made during the 1940s by a chemical engineer named Genrich Altschuller. He postulated that there must be discernible, measurable and learnable patterns or formulas underlying successful creative ideas. By reverse engineering more than 200,000 patents and technological inventions, he succeeded in defining about 40 patterns of invention, which he labeled "standards." These patterns could be described and predicted.

The *creativity tools paradigm* takes Altschuller's ideas one step further. If we can define a pattern that unites creative ideas, then we can derive universal *tools* that characterize the evolution of successful ideas. *Creativity tools* were initially defined through reverse engineering of product innovations. The history of a product was traced through its former versions. By portraying the configuration of each product version and subsequently examining the stepwise changes between versions, we were able to observe common patterns of change which we later classified in the *creativity tools*. We found that only *five* tools cover the majority of successful new product innovations instead of 40, making application much more manageable.

The *creativity tools paradigm* strives to imbue *theoretical coherence* into the hectic, highly competitive search for the Holy Grail of advertising creativity. The *creativity tools paradigm* – with its precisely described, step-by-step methods and techniques – is not only a *theoretical construct* but also a *practical approach*, indicating effective strategies for the study and improvement of creative performance. Unlike the approach of unbounded randomness, in which the required expertise is not necessarily related to the creativity process itself, the *creativity tools paradigm* lends itself to training and has the capacity to improve creativity outcomes directly.

Under these disciplined conditions one may enjoy the benefits of a constrained, yet more fruitful and effective search for ideation. As observed by Boden (1991), "constraints – far from being opposed to creativity – make creativity possible. To throw away all constraints would be to destroy the capacity for creative thinking. Random processes alone, if they happen to produce anything interesting at all, can result only in first-time curiosities, not radical surprises."

The universality of patterns or structures and the identification of several structures across various business-related phenomena (e.g. new products, technological improvements, and advertising) suggests that there is something more general in patterns of human processing than the mere transfer of content-based knowledge. Structures represent preferred routes of processing and help the individual process and organize information by using favored processing routes that have been proven in the past to lead to productive ideas and by avoiding processing routes that do not.

The detection and utilization of structures in ads does not necessarily undermine the element of surprise that a consumer may sense when being exposed to an ad that fits a structure. Even when regularities exist, the perception of creativity is not undermined, because it still allows for the generation of ideas to which most people could not or would not have arrived (Hayes, 1978). Ads that match structures may be perceived as superior because they elicit unrecognized familiarity. They rely on structures that have been proven successful in other contexts (possibly even by the same consumers) but are nonetheless not explicitly noticeable within the new context. The inability to explicitly express or even notice the structure can also be found in judgments made by experts.

These structures involve commonalities in the way an ad is built. It does not suggest commonalities in informational content. Indeed, recent studies have revealed that ads that repeatedly use the same structure are consistently judged as highly original and favorable, and retain the benefits of *surprise*. It further appears that some design structures give rise to ideas judged as more creative than others, and evaluation of the results may be used to classify them as unique design structures. Their broad distribution and the manner in which they affect judgment resemble the generalized and fundamental rules defined by Hofstadter as *deep concepts*. Such concepts are "normally relatively hidden from the surface and cannot easily be brought into the perception of a situation; but once they are perceived they should be regarded as highly significant" (Hofstadter, 1995: 213).

So, defined structures in ads or *tools* play the role of *attractors*: paths that the self-organized mind tends to follow, assisting the individual to process and organize information by using favorable processing routes proven in the past to lead to productive ideas (see Kelso, 1997). The small number of paved routes (i.e. basic mental operations or mechanisms) avoids spending "a lot of time going down blind alleys" typical to brainstorming (Otnes, Oviatt, and Treise, 1995), and offer the much demanded "escape from freedom" which reduces anxiety (Fromm, 1971), thus maintaining – in Einstein's words – the

"joy in creative expression and knowledge," and sustaining the "courage to create."

The use of *creativity tools* assures the generation of creative ideas that most people could not or would not have arrived at without them (Hayes, 1978). Experiments show that individuals trained in the *creativity tool* technique are able to generate new ideas superior to those generated by untrained individuals or people using rival techniques – as judged by experts in their fields who were blind to the existence of *tools*. Moreover, most of those tool-fostered ideas are not replicable by any other ideation technique.

Finally, *creativity tools* enable the repetition of messages, highly contributing to awareness and recall, without worrying about loss of the customers' attention or the ill effects of boredom. There is of course no guarantee that *creativity tools* will be relevant in any particular situation. However, these *tools* were assigned a high depth value precisely because they tend to crop up over and over again across many different types of situations (new products, marketing, sales promotion, and advertising creativity, etc.) and because we notice that the best insights to many problems come when *creativity tools* "fit" naturally.

Looking for a method in the creative madness

This book was born out of academic research seeking to discover if there is a discernable model behind creative ads that could be captured and classified. We found that there is.

For research purposes, and in order to create a common language, we considered an ad to be creative if it is considered to be so by advertising professionals. Practically speaking, all of the research was performed on ads that won awards in major advertising festivals. Surprisingly enough, when evaluating the ads that won these creativity awards, we were able to distill a number of distinct tools.

These tools or patterns are underlying structures or logical forms that are shared by a large number of creative ads. The basic idea is quite unintuitive. Normally, when faced with an exceptionally creative ad, our attention is drawn to the question of what makes this ad different, interesting, and exceptional. In other words, we tend to be concerned with understanding the *uniqueness* of a creative ad. For our research, on the other hand, we focused on the *commonalities* that creative ads share with other creative ads. Our research identified

eight "types" of creative ads, characterized by eight patterns of creativity. This means that, according to our research, in some 70–80% of creative ads, at least one of these eight patterns can be distinctly recognized.

Expressed in a different way, our findings revealed that, beneath the surface, nearly all of the creative ads that we analyzed were, in fact, variations on the same eight themes.

The patterns that we discovered fall into two families.

- The Unification family
  - Unification
  - Activation
  - Metaphor
  - Subtraction.
- The Extreme family
  - Extreme Consequence
  - Extreme Effort
  - Absurd Alternative
  - Inversion.

Generally speaking, the first group deals with manipulating the various resources that are available for conveying a message. In this sense you can say they all deal with the medium, in a wide interpretation of the term. The second group deals more directly with the message of the ad, and more specifically – on telling the story of the message, always taking one of its key elements to the extreme.

Although we are not privy to the historical process by which an award-winning ad was really created, we have discovered that the actual result – the ad itself – follows a pattern that can be easily recognized, once you are aware of its existence. It is our assumption that the people behind creative ads apply these patterns unconsciously. In fact, we often hear from experienced agency professionals that they have certain "formulas" that they follow. This is common when creative individuals work with the same partner for a number of years during which they develop their own language and working procedures.

Once the patterns became visible, it was possible to use them for more than just classifying existing ads; the patterns can be used as guidelines for the creation of new ads. Therefore, we have transformed each of the eight patterns into a usable tool with step-by step instructions to take the advertiser from a creative brief to creative ideas that fall within the pattern. We teach these pattern-derived procedures to advertising professionals and they use them to come up with ideas.

Effectiveness of creative ads

Are all creative, award-winning ads necessarily effective? This is hotly debated in the advertising world and has been researched extensively. We deal with the task of generating creative ads, working on the assumption that, without a conclusive answer to the previous question, everything else being equal, a more creative ad is always preferable.

Integral to our knowledge of *creativity* is the notion that the *creativity product* is a construct of *novel ideas*, *useful* or *appropriate* to the situation. Amabile (1996: 5) determines that an outcome "will be judged creative to the extent that it is a novel *and* appropriate, useful, correct, or valuable response to the task at hand." It would be nice to think that, in some measure, "creative" awards also take into account their appropriateness for their task – how well these ads will work for the client. However, in order to arrive at more concrete answers, we have undertaken additional research that can give some weight to the effectiveness of ads that fall into the patterns that we uncovered.

After discovering the patterns, we undertook follow-up studies to determine how design structures of ads influence viewer judgment according to a number of parameters: originality, sophistication, uniqueness, and attitude towards the product. We showed participants pairs of ads for the same products – the ads were identical to each other, except that one had a tool-matching element – the element that made this ad fall into the pattern – and in the second ad, the tool-matching element was removed (Figure I.1).

(a)

(b)

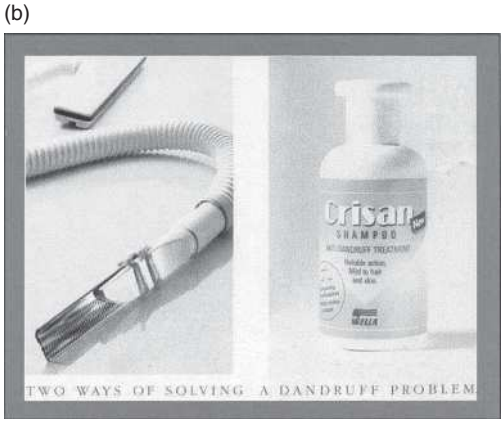

Figure I.1 Vacuum: (a) comb off; (b) comb on.