

How to spark the creative process

A course could offer your staff an insight into how to harness creativity best.
By Louella Miles

African drumming, Windsor's Theatre Royal and immersion rooms may not at first glance seem to have a lot in common – but they all have a part to play in unleashing creativity.

Marketers need to be given the tools and the environment to work creatively. This doesn't just mean being able to think differently when briefing agencies or developing prod-

YELLOW SUBMARINE BEATS THE DRUMS



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ucts, but developing lifestyle changes that affect performance at home and at work.

If that means putting them in a frame of mind where they are more likely to be creative, so much the better. And that is where activities such as drumming, painting and theatre studies come in.

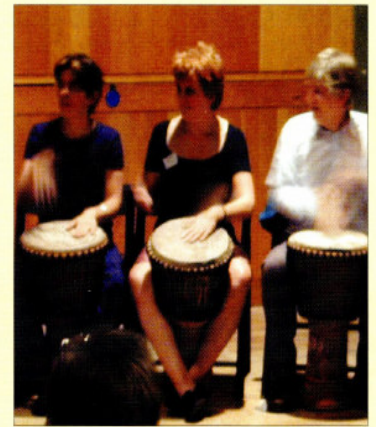
Independent financial advisers Legal & General recently sent a group of marketers on a creativity course led by Hot Brushes, a training company that organises art workshops designed to improve business performance.

The idea, says Angela Robertshaw, marketing director at Legal & General, was to produce a piece of art and then remove two-thirds of it without detracting from the end effect. "It was quite difficult," she admits, "but it related to business, stressing the need to focus on what is really important and improve the core without getting distracted by peripherals."

Natural tendencies

It is also a matter of understanding the nature of creativity, and accepting how individual minds operate. Marketers need to distinguish whether they have a natural tendency towards left or right brain thinking, believes Steve Mills, director of MTP Partners in Business Learning.

"The former is all about logic, sequence and analysis, while the latter is all about colour, creativity and the whole picture," says Mills, whose company creates bespoke courses for clients including Unilever.



With a name like Yellow Submarine, this agency shouldn't, in theory, require any help in the creativity stakes. But then, its principals don't actually view it like that.

The below-the-line firm, now ten years old, started training in a formal sense about five years ago. Up until then, the company was small enough for the creative impetus of its directors to energise all members of staff.

But size brings with it a new set of problems. In a bigger organisation the type of creativity that once came instinctively now had to be worked at. "You have to turn it into a model of excellence that you can repeat," says managing director Kevin Stott.

One course uses role-playing to teach participants to lead creative sessions within teams, not just techniques to stimulate creativity.

"On the third day we briefed another group who took the role of an ad agency and had to come up with

creative ideas, before swapping roles," says Carina Schaefer, assistant brand manager for Dove Skin Care and Cream at Unilever, who has just returned from a three-day MTP session. "Before the workshop we knew that we needed to be creative

"In a sense, creative training has to be part of training as a whole, so it's about creating an environment that stimulates creativity. You can't have an organisation that is stifled part of the time, then goes into a room and is creative."

The company tries to give 'crew members' thinking strategies for a successful life, taking a holistic approach and recognising that they are the same person at work that they are socially and in their private life.

"You carry the same values and the same behaviour, whether at work or at home," says Stott. "Those things predetermine your creative predisposition."

That's why he now works with a leadership coach specialising in neuro-linguistic programming (NLP),

a way of creating and reproducing excellence that enables you to consistently achieve the results you want both for yourself, your business, or your life.

A recent training module, part of an NLP master practitioners course, saw him taking part in African drumming, led by Doug Manuel, corporate and creative director at Sewa Beats. He uses traditional African drumming as a vehicle for learning. The group were given a short – but intense – session on drum rhythms. Then individuals were chosen to lead the music.

"It was about creative leadership," says Stott.

"The challenge was to demonstrate what comes next – telling a group what to do after just 20 minutes of training."

somehow, but didn't know how to do it within the team. We also learned the importance of setting up the right environment and atmosphere. It emphasises the point that you can learn about creativity – you don't need to have had it before."

Schaefer says the course has already paid dividends in helping her be more inspiring when briefing agencies. She has also been able to apply the techniques with fellow team members when brainstorming on new product development. ▶

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Unilever has also been running Project Catalyst, a scheme involving short employee placements in the arts. According to the company, the project has reached 45% of its employees.

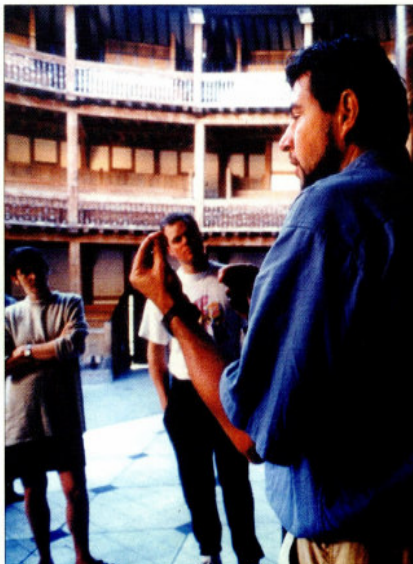
"It raises the profile of creativity throughout the organisation, making a case for the arts as a provider of inspiration and sustained creativity," says a Unilever spokesperson.

"The inclusive and varied nature of the project means all employees can find something of relevance to their working lives. The internal and external development of skills through volunteering maximises employees' potential, which in turn attracts varied recruits to the company."

For her part in Project Catalyst, Anna Creed, brand manager for deodorants at Unilever, volunteered to work with Thomas Matthews, a small company that uses recycling materials in displays.

"Using my skills in branding I helped it to communicate its brand and produce a business plan," says Creed. "It really showed that arts and business are not dissimilar. We all need to tell consumers what we are about and have the same types of challenges. The project made me use my skills in different ways without the luxury of a huge budget," she adds. "In the working environment we are very business-focused and use repetitive ways to deal with problems. Catalyst made me think in different ways."

For those in need of help on the creative front, there is no shortage of courses. Trade bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Marketing and the Institute of Direct Marketing run their own versions and Cranfield School of Management's Praxis Centre has an agreement with London's Globe Theatre, where it runs a series of programmes combining the techniques used in management development and theatre training.



occasional brainstorm or is it more fundamental – such as an atmosphere of entrepreneurialism, innovation and freedom from process? It certainly isn't dress-down Fridays and fire-walking seminars," he adds.

No matter how much a company may wish to foster an atmosphere of entrepreneurialism and innovation, however, there's no way that it can guarantee it on a 24-hour basis. There are times when sheer pressure of work is going to squeeze out time and space for creative thinking.

In an attempt to combat this without resorting to wacky courses, some companies provide an outlet, such as a room where creative thought processes can be stimulated and given a framework in which to thrive.

Branding firm Corporate Edge has opened rooms dedicated to the creative process for clients including GlaxoSmithKline and Cadbury. Stuart Dickinson, creative director at the agency, calls them "immersion rooms" and describes how he encourages clients to use them.

"We use techniques, processes initially, to define an area of creativity," he says. "We use co-ordinates – for example, honesty, strength and surprise – rather than a strategic straitjacket, because clients need a sense of flexibility."

"If you go back to the early days of corporate identity consultancies, they would create a manual by which you would know how your identity should be implemented," explains Dickinson. "But the resulting manual often stayed on the shelf, gathering dust, or was used, but didn't allow for movement in the brand, thus risking not being presented at all."

Creative framework

Dickinson believes that when an organisation intends to change, it needs to maximise its creativity.

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Reed Iraining runs a course called LIES (Leadership, Innovation and Enterprise Skills). The main rationale behind this two-day course, run in London once a month, is to get people to realise that the biggest barrier to innovation and creativity is their own fear of risk.

Jim Bodoh, director of corporate branding consultancy Citigate Lloyd Northover, is a fan. "Its session on creative thinking provided us with a set of practical tools – more often associated with solving business or strategic problems – that our creative team has since found useful in tackling day-to-day visual and communication problems," he says.

"Aside from the business benefits, the deployment of fresh-thinking techniques is valuable in its own right because it cuts across established habits and patterns and, by definition, helps stimulate fresh thinking."

Measurable resource

Are such sessions worth the outlay? It depends who you talk to. Jonathan Gabay, a lecturer on creativity at the Chartered Institute of Marketing, believes that delegates on his course often feel frustrated, worrying about being unable to justify why they want to be more creative.

"I show them ways to make creativity a measurable resource. The reason why you need to be creative, from a marketing point of view, is because it is all about a point of difference. Today it is about teaching how to establish an emotional sales point

Praxis Centre: runs a series of programmes with techniques used in management development in conjunction with theatre training

AVIS TREADS THE BOARDS

The Avis employees who met in a Windsor car park one February morning were full of trepidation. They knew they were going on a course, they just didn't know what sort.

When they reached their final destination, the Theatre Royal, all became clear. After a welcoming session and a business review for 2003, they began The Theatrical Challenge.

"The day was about getting messages for the year ahead across, and done in a way that was fun and would integrate the teams," says Nick Grandvoinet, Avis director of corporate sales. "Pricing, marketing and sales operate to a certain extent in silos, so to get them to operate together in this way helps."

Delegates were split into six teams and took part in theatrical workshops, culminating in a five-minute performance in front of their peers.

Each group was taken through three different workshop sessions with a professional actor, looking at presentation skills used on stage, being aware of different types of body



The Theatrical Challenge: Avis staff looked at presentation, movement and eye contact

movement, and how to keep audiences interested through eye contact.

"This is the third year that we have used Poise Marketing, and each time it has come up with something creative," says Grandvoinet. "The Theatre Royal was one of the stronger ones, in terms of the venue, the activity and a theme that was very robust."

The first year saw Avis staff create a huge oil painting, but with each team

making a separate section, and year two had a musical theme, with the team being broken into different groups before coming together as a musical whole.

The one thing to bear in mind, according to Christine Oliver, director of commercial support at Avis, is that all the courses evolved from a basic concept, but were then brainstormed into a training package that would solve business issues.

with your customer through being different. That's not being different for the sake of it, but being different through coming up with ways of connecting with that customer."

Of course, to detractors, any course claiming to instil creative thinking

is nothing more than an expensive jolly. "A lack of creative thinking is a symptom of an excessively corporate process-oriented structure, as the people themselves will be implicitly creative, but don't feel able to express it," says David McCann, joint

managing director of marketing agency HHM.

"Creativity, or the lack thereof, is a consequence of the internal brand of the company. What does a company mean by creativity and what does it mean to the people? Is it an

but to be truly effective, creativity needs a framework, stimulation and some rules. "Creative co-ordinates", explains Dickinson, are stimulating reference points that describe the way an evolving organisation wishes to behave, communicate and act.

They should be used whenever the organisation creates something – be it something internal (such as human resources strategy) or an external brief to an agency creating communications materials, as a way to guide the output. They feed from the core thought of the brand, but are designed to stimulate change, rather than confirm the status quo.

Corporate Edge has been working with a BBC programme development teams on its creative processes. This work introduced the principles of brand creation to programme-making, including the development of a focused and stimulating brief, idea-generation techniques and screening.

"The principles of successful creation are the same whether the product is an FMCG item or a television programme," says Peter Shaw, director of Corporate Edge. "You have to understand the audience, competitive pulls on their time and look at what you can learn from other creative success models."

The bottom line is that creative thinking – no matter how stimulating the environment – can get tired. So any course that refreshes the parts left unmoved by daily interaction with colleagues has to be worth a little investigation. ■

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