

So how does one create that ‘great idea’ that turns the raw information into advertising that will engage and entertain as well as inform? || There is a fantastic book on playing tennis called *The Inner Game of Tennis* which has a very simple conclusion: relax and let your true self perform. And so it is with creativity, perhaps even more so, I would say. I have always said that I do my best thinking when I’m not thinking: that’s when inspiration strikes. You’ve already fed all the issues, concerns, wishes and desires of the brief into your mind – then you just have to let it percolate. You can talk about it, consider the brief in terms of what you like, what you don’t like, what you would like to see and what appeals. || **Out of that absurd, crazy process pops a brilliant thought: that’s where the magic emerges.** Of course, no one wants to believe it’s so random, but it is.

Now I can hear the corporate minds saying:

‘But if it is so random and unpredictable, how can a creative business operate as a business?’

This is not an unreasonable question to which my answer is: ‘With great difficulty’.

This is probably why wonderfully talented agencies come and go with such regularity, being brilliant, stunning and amazing one

## **minute, then suddenly descending into mediocrity and predictability the next.**

You have to accept the creative process is completely dysfunctional. If you deny that fact, you will ultimately fail. You may get away with it for a while, but then, like paint over rust, the rust will eventually burn through. || **The unpredictability is what makes what we do in advertising so exciting – you literally don't know where you're going to end up. Creativity isn't about predictability – it has to surprise and challenge, it has to be daring and yet motivating.** || In a creative organization, if you understand that, then there's a good chance you'll be successful and continue being successful.

Why does Hollywood produce so many predictable, boring movies? Because they're following a formula. And there's nothing a formula-led mindset likes more than a nice, comfortable process. You can take refuge in a process. Those in business who are formula-led are always trying to find a way of processing creative thought. They want to streamline it. They want to make it more predictable. Their answer: tissue meetings.

Have you ever had to suffer a tissue meeting? All of us in advertising have at some point, haven't we? For those that don't know what I mean, count yourself lucky! A tissue meeting is a stage between the strategy having been agreed between the agency and the client and the final creative presentation. It's a meeting where the agency shares a number of creative routes with the client. The idea behind a tissue meeting is to make the client feel happy and involved with the work they're eventually going to buy. All very reasonable, you might think, but brilliance is rarely reasonable.

## **Everyone walks out of the meeting feeling satisfied, except the creative people – the ones who have to come up with the magic.**

Whoever came up with the completely stupid idea of tissue meetings should be taken out and shot. They are the invention of a predictable mind trying to make the unpredictable predictable. Tissue meetings were created to keep clients happy and to make them feel we are in complete command of what we do, which we're not.

## Creativity isn't a process, advertising is a process.

Creativity is a manic construction of absurd, unlikely irreverent thoughts and feelings that somehow, when put together, change the way we see things. That's why it's magic. If you want to be ordinary then, yes, use a process. || With a process and a series of tissue meetings you can very easily make things obvious, certain and easy to buy. And I'm not just talking about the advertising business – the world is full of predictable things: open any magazine, turn on your television and there they are. Why? Because the world wants creativity to behave like a formulaic process. You can see it happening in any creative industry.

**Process is trying to make order out of chaos. Creativity is trying to make chaos to create order. They are at opposite ends of a spectrum.**

You don't think Leonardo da Vinci went to a tissue meeting when he was painting the *Mona Lisa* do you? Imagine the scene: perhaps Leonardo could have her looking to the right? Maybe she could be wearing some jewelry? Bit more of a smile, maybe? Stick an apple on her head – that would get people wondering. Of course Leonardo didn't go to a bloody tissue meeting – it was a piece of inspiration. A piece of inspiration that has lasted 500 years and still has us standing back in amazement. Believe it or not, that's what any half-decent creative person is trying to do – create something that people will stand back from and look at in amazement. Creativity can change the way we feel about something and will stay with us for eternity. Is that asking for too much? Maybe, but unless we try we'll never get there. And I can guarantee one way you won't get there: in a sodding tissue meeting. By definition, a tissue meeting is trying to corral creativity. I want to set it free. Despite my rant about these meetings they'll still continue. Even I will probably have to go on enduring them. But unless we admit their limitation we won't inspire that great idea, that piece of magic that can do wonders for clients' sales figures.

**But how do you know when an idea is great? And is good the enemy of great? Does a process that gets you to good hamper great? I think it probably does. The more you process it, just like food, the blander it will be.**

I was once asked to present a lecture on what I looked for in a 'great idea'. My initial reaction was that it was a dysfunctional, random process and most of the time relied upon nothing more than inspiration. || But although this is what I believe, simply standing in front of an audience and saying something amounting to, 'I just buy what I like' would have made a very short speech and one, I'm sure, the organizers would not have welcomed. I therefore set about analysing how I went about my work: could I detect any formula? Was there more to it than just instinct? Like riding a bicycle, you don't really think about it. So, I had to interrogate my own beliefs. What was it about an idea that I liked? What turned me on to one thought as opposed to another? Was there a common thread that I could identify?

Now it's important to state that my intention wasn't to develop a simple formula for creating ideas. I think that's impossible. There may be a simple formula for reading a balance sheet, but certainly not one for the creative process. However, there obviously is a process of a kind that you go through as you create. Why do some ideas resonate over and above others? You have to have an understanding of the tools you use to reach a decision about when you have a 'great idea'.

When I examined my own process I realized there was a common thread that was clearly identifiable in all the work I did and in the work of others that I admired.

**The common thread was irreverence.**

**So why do I think irreverence is so powerful? In examining this theory I stood back from the world of advertising and looked at irreverence in a broader artistic context.**

If one looks at European art from before the Renaissance it was far from irreverent. It was the complete opposite and was all about control. One of art's functions was to reinforce the power of authority, be it the church, the monarchy or a despot. Reverence was the order of the day and an artist lived or died by their ability to acquire commissions – pleasing their patrons was essential for survival.

Consider artists working in Italy for the Roman Catholic Church. They had to deal with very similar problems to those designers and people in advertising face today: they had to sell the same product. In this case it was a belief in God and some pretty strange ideas about virginity, chastity and the infallibility of the Pope rather than banks or soap powder – they had to do this over and over again in a way that would still excite and interest viewers who had seen it and heard it all before. The church, just as a client today, understood the need to refresh a familiar theme continually. This, of course, was good news for the many artists. It meant lots of new and lucrative commissions. One example of refreshing a familiar theme is the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. It's a powerful message of papal authority but, more importantly, Michelangelo's innovative and daring style ensured that the message was heard and talked about and regenerated passion and commitment in the concept of the origin of man. || **So, if we accept artists working for the Roman Catholic Church had the same issues to deal with as we do today in advertising, then, in my view, Michelangelo was the first great art director – original, passionate, committed, always fighting the client, over budget and late.** But who remembers that now?

## **There was room for wit and irreverence in Michelangelo's work too.**

Look down from the ceiling to the wall behind the altar in the Sistine Chapel and you will see another masterpiece: *The Last Judgment*. Michelangelo originally painted all of the figures in the fresco – Christ, the saints, angels, the lot – as nudes. Later popes and cardinals were so concerned about the nudity that they hired another artist, Daniele da Volterra, to paint drapery over breasts and genitals. Today, you will see that Jesus seems to be wearing a pink negligee. I'm not sure the great master really saw Jesus wearing underwear in his original vision. So the next time someone alters your work you'll have something in common with Michelangelo.



**Client:** Wallis, 1997

**Art director:**

Steve Hudson

**Copywriter:**

Victoria Fallon

**Photographer:**

Bob Carlos Clarke

Caravaggio used a different type of shocking image to break with decorum, or what you might call the accepted way of portraying a subject. He showed celebrated Christian figures as members of the lower classes. In his painting, *The Supper at Emmaus*, Caravaggio showed Christ as a smooth-skinned young man, to be admired for his physical beauty rather than his holiness. Shocking as that was at the time we now view the painting as a great work of art. It is thought, by some, that Caravaggio was gay, so perhaps that's why he wandered from the conventional depiction into what we now think of as homoeroticism. Who knows?

One can see the stirrings of irreverence in Michelangelo's and Caravaggio's work and sense the eventual impact those stirrings would have. || **Sadly for the artists of that period, being irreverent usually meant they died in penury. And I can assure you that's not a good place to die.**

By the 19th century, art acquired a relative independence and relied less on wealthy sponsors and patrons, from which grew a questioning of the major institutions: the church, the state and the monarchy. And as society developed, becoming better educated and becoming more independent and questioning, the ability of these two massive power blocks, the church and the state, to retain their influence diminished.

Fast forward to the 20th century: economic growth brought with it greater tensions and the need for greater freedom. Competing ideas were emerging within society. || **They were ideas that demanded attention and consideration. With that freedom grew the need to question and explain. What was the nature of society and authority? How did it work? Why was it changing? What was good about it? What was bad? What should be preserved and what rejected?**

The emergence of Dadaism as an art movement after the First World War was a reaction to the meaningless slaughter of millions by callous authorities who would brook no criticism or alternative views. It was this arrogance that drove writers and artists, not only those involved in Dadaism, but elsewhere too, to challenge all institutions and accepted forms of art.

The Dadaists had no fixed beliefs as such, but were driven by the need to shock and attack the established order. Marcel Duchamp's defacing of the *Mona Lisa*, by putting a moustache on her, was one way of mocking authority and the establishment. It's amazing what a simple moustache can seem to represent.

While less confrontational than the Dadaists, the artists and designers of the Bauhaus also dared to do things that broke down traditional attitudes and beliefs. In using industrial materials to design furniture, they challenged traditional crafts and, in graphic design and typography, they changed the way in which we viewed the printed word and absorbed information.

The very essence of art had changed by this time – its function became to force us to think, to reconsider, to challenge. We learned to question, and in questioning liberated our own minds. The most fundamental freedom we have is the right to ask why?

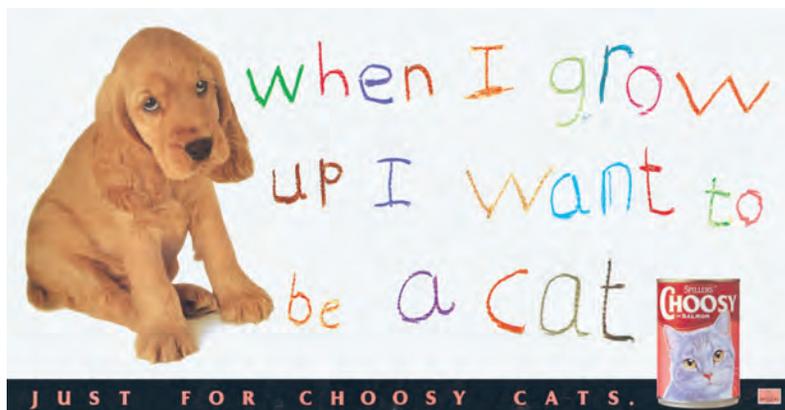
**We want to challenge.**

**And, of course, have the choice to do so.**

This need to challenge didn't apply only to fine art. Music was also affected – just look at the development of jazz, blues and rock 'n' roll. Jazz was the voice of oppressed black America and considered 'the Devil's music' by some. The blues also had a powerful, challenging sentiment driving it. It laid the foundations for rock 'n' roll, turning Elvis Presley into an iconic figure of rebellion known the world over. || **Notoriously, Elvis was not allowed to be shown on American television screens below the waist because the way he gyrated his hips was considered lewd. Of course, to some extent, the censors were right – it was lewd**

Client: Choosy,  
1998

Art director:  
Mike Wells  
Copywriter:  
Tom Hudson



– **but that was the whole point.** || Elvis was the voice of a new generation of people the authorities didn't and couldn't understand. Within society the centre of gravity was changing. No longer did we look up to our elders, but down to a new liberated youth. A generation emboldened with wealth, a desire for change and who wanted to express themselves in their own terms with their own language.

When irreverence touches design it creates opportunities for producing genuinely innovative and lasting work: you can find lateral solutions to design problems such as Alec Issigonis's revolutionary Mini. His brief: to make the car smaller, yet create more passenger space – a seemingly impossible task. But, by throwing out the rule book – being irreverent – and turning the engine sideways, the problem was solved in one stroke: there was more space for the passengers without increasing the overall size of the car. || **I would argue that Issigonis's attitude treated design**

Client:  
Robertson's, 1985  
Art director:  
John Hegarty  
Copywriter:  
Barbara Nokes



Client: Barnardo's,  
1999 and 2000

Art director:

Adrian Rossi

Copywriter:

Alex Grieve

Photographer:

Nick Georghiou



convention with an irreverence that led to the creation of one of the most lasting and influential products of the industrial age.

Today's practitioners of design and advertising are constantly trying to get people to make a choice – a choice between one product and another. Between one design and another. And not only are we trying to get people to choose, we are also trying to get them to accept new concepts and to 'reconsider'. Irreverence is key here.

A great example of this is Cramer Saatchi's 'Pregnant man' poster for the HEC (Health Education Council) from 1970. || **It was trying to get men to reconsider their approach to contraception. As a piece of communication I believe it is a lasting testament to the power of irreverence and, as I describe later, a pivotal moment in bringing Saatchi & Saatchi into existence as an advertising agency.**

**But using irreverence for its own sake is dangerous. Do that and you risk becoming irrelevant.**

The function of irreverence should be to help question and, in doing so, offer a possible solution. If irreverence becomes purely anarchic it eventually turns in on itself and destroys its own purpose. It just shocks and alienates – a fate which ultimately befell the Dadaists.

I would argue that this is what happened to punk in the 1970s. In the end, it only opposed, it didn't also propose. It jolted conventional thinking, it didn't in turn put anything in its place – it created a void but failed to fill it. Elements of it remain in our culture, but as a philosophy it offered us only opposition, and history has taught us that if you're going to knock something down you have to put something in its place. Punk offered us no vision and, if your irreverence is to be constructive, you must not only get people to question, but you must also take them with you.

The infamous Benetton advertising of some years ago falls into a similar trap. Newborn babies and a man dying of AIDS: not the first things you'd think of when it comes to selling jumpers! Yes, the advertising shocked me, it gained my attention. It was, and is, profoundly irreverent, but ultimately it leaves me feeling hollow. I just think: why? What are you saying? Do you really believe in it? And with any advertising if you don't believe in what you've created, your vision becomes empty and meaningless, a sham.

**I applaud anyone's desire to open my eyes, to make me look at things afresh and bring different ideas to my attention. But it must be done with sincerity, integrity and with sympathy – or the danger is it can look as though it's just exploitation.**

Ultimately, it is all too easy to be irreverent in order to gain attention. Here's an exercise in how irreverence works better with a little humour.

**Print the word **fuck** in Helvetica extra bold and you have been irreverent. But, I would argue, to no purpose. What shocks today becomes boring tomorrow. Unless, that is, it has purpose. Now, if I rewrite *fuck* in Copperplate italic I maybe, just maybe, express a sense of humour and wit. By doing that I alienate you less and begin to make you consider the purpose of my irreverence.**

Humour has an important role to play in advertising. We use it because it's a way of making people relax and listen. When your audience is in that state of mind they're more likely to remember what you're saying and act upon it.



**Client:**  
Boddingtons,  
1992 (left)

*Art director:*  
Mike Wells

*Copywriter:*  
Tom Hudson

*Photographer:*  
Tiff Hunter

**Client:**  
Boddingtons,  
1997 (below)

*Art director:*  
Simon Robinson

*Copywriter:*  
Jo Moore

*Photographer:*  
David Gill



**Client:**  
Boddingtons,  
1992 (near  
right)

*Art director:*  
Mike Wells

*Copywriter:*  
Tom Hudson

*Photographer:*  
Tiff Hunter



**Client:**  
Boddingtons,  
1997 (far right)

*Art director:*  
John Hegarty

*Photographer:*  
David Gill



**Client:**  
**Boddingtons, 1992**  
*Title:* Face Cream  
*Creative director:*  
John Hegarty  
*Art director:*  
Mike Wells  
*Copywriter:*  
Tom Hudson  
*Director:*  
John Lloyd



Humour and irreverence are, therefore, interesting bedfellows: they feed off each other, creating opportunities to enhance each other's message. Of course, you can have one without the other – humour is the enemy of authority as much as irreverence. But, as I've already shown, when put together, they have the ability to become more persuasive.

A great example of this belief is our campaign for Boddingtons, a brand of beer originally from Manchester in England. Here was a beer that was differentiated by its creamy head. Perceived wisdom said creaminess wasn't an attribute that sold beer. We disagreed. It was and is what made it different. It was the truth of the brand. So, we created the slogan 'The cream of Manchester' and exaggerated the creamy aspect of the beer showing it as an ice cream cone, as shaving cream, as hair cream and as many more executions. We captured the consumer's imagination with irreverent images and, in doing so, turned Boddingtons into a cult brand.

You can see the lineage in this campaign all the way back to that original Volkswagen work by Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB) in the early 60s.

So as society constantly changes and as brands and products constantly innovate it becomes the responsibility of the creative person to capture the essence of that change and the opportunity it offers. As creative people we have to strive constantly to get others to reconsider, to re-evaluate. But we must do so in a way that is constructive, not destructive. What irreverence

offers us, when used intelligently, is a more stimulating way to create and to capture people's imagination and, of course, their attention.

An added value of irreverence is what it offers organizations. The companies that understand and embrace the power of irreverence are the ones who will constantly succeed. They will be the thought leaders, the ones that challenge established thinking and constantly break the mould. And it will be those companies who will stay on top and provide impetus for growth.

**Irreverence is more than a tool for communication, it is an essential ingredient for corporate success and forms the core of a philosophical approach to creativity – a belief in something that helps me create challenging, persuasive thinking.**

**It's essential, therefore, for a creative company to have a point of view and a philosophical foundation for their work.**

The greatest spur to creating ideas is confidence, specifically the confidence in your ability to make magic. That's the one truth a creative organization must hold on to. Great creative companies inject irreverence and experimentation into the system to stop the warm comforting blanket of mediocrity taking over.

It is also important to remember ideas are just energy. That's what makes them so attractive and engaging, and why people are drawn to them and why they have such power. It's perhaps why we say we 'worship ideas'. Suddenly one understands that phrase far more. Of course, we worship them because we recognize their power, their ability to transform and convert people. And when people talk about ideas they become enthusiastic. That's hardly surprising. || **The origin of the word enthusiasm comes from the Greek: 'To be with God'. Now we know why ideas are so important and always will be. And why, if we constantly insert irreverence into their creation, we'll keep them fresh.**