

Thinking back on the early days of my agency career I recall that sense of enthusiasm that used to arise when we pursued engagements that we'd never handled before, like a client-to-be in a category that we hadn't previously worked in, or an opportunity in a new and evolving medium. It was these pitches that got us stoked more than the tried and true, been-there-done-that ones. As creative people in a creative business my colleagues and I were always drawn to anything new and different. And we suffered for it.

The Cost of Creativity

When an entrenched specialist is invited to compete for opportunity outside of his area of expertise, his reaction is often something close to terror. The specialist believes that when an opportunity within his area of focus comes to him, there is nobody better qualified to help the client-to-be. It is from this belief that the specialist draws confidence – confidence that puts the client-to-be at ease in the buying cycle, and confidence that lets the specialist take control of the engagement. Once the specialist enjoys operating from this position of strength any invitation to step outside of it will cause him to feel uneasy and vulnerable. The generalist craves the new and the different. The specialist craves situations he has seen before.

Autonomy & Creativity

Creative businesses are riddled with highly autonomous people who eschew routine, preferring to reserve the right to adapt to every situation differently. This should not be surprising, as autonomy is a sign of creativity. Highly autonomous people are quick to think on their feet, they are keen to solve new problems and they crave being placed in situations they haven't previously experienced.

In testing agency principals for business development aptitude, it's rare for me to see an autonomy score below the 75th percentile. The majority of principals I test score in the top ten percent of the population. Business development personnel are almost equally autonomous. Being able to think on ones feet and deal with unforeseen situations with aplomb is a strength that leads many autonomous people to sales careers. But a by-product of this wide-spread autonomy is corporate xenophilia – a firm-wide desire for the new and the different. Someone who excels at dealing with new situations will quite logically pursue them. Properly harnessed, this xenophilia is an asset that drives the firm to explore every nook and cranny of its area of specialization and bring an ever-evolving perspective to solving its client's problems. Un-harnessed, this love of the new and different will manifest itself as corporate ADHD with symptoms across all key benchmarks of business success.

Harnessing the Autonomy Beast

Just as an unbridled racehorse puts out lots of energy but wins little, so does a poorly positioned creative firm. Positioning is the harness that turns the autonomous nature of the creative person into a valuable asset. Trying to position a highly autonomous creative principal, however, is often as futile as trying to bridle the untamed thoroughbred. It is completely at odds with their nature.

Once the harness is on and the results of narrowly directed power (confidence and wins to name just two) are experienced, however, everything changes. Someone operating from the position of strength afforded by narrowly-directed power will not want to operate from anywhere other than this position.

The Horror and Benefits of Repetition

One of the reasons it's difficult to entice the autonomous creative principal to the positioning harness is that the limited and repetitive nature of the specialist's work horrifies him. He imagines the specialist's life to be boring beyond his capacity to endure. In truth, inside the smaller world of the specialist is a world larger and more nuanced than the generalist can imagine. But, without arguing further against the validity of the generalist's fears, I'll point out that the specialist benefits from two types of repetition in powerful ways that the generalist never can: repeated observation and repeated activity (process).

Improving the Firm through Repeated Observation

If you watch a cycle long enough you will begin to see patterns in that cycle. After you've watched enough cycles the patterns jump out at you quickly, where the untrained eye sees none. The autonomous generalist's excitement comes from facing a problem he has never encountered before. He cannot wait to learn more about it. The focused specialist's excitement comes from facing a familiar problem and recognizing what he is seeing when others around him are bewildered. This pattern recognition, which can only come from repeated observation, allows the specialist to offer a quicker and more accurate diagnosis of the problem and prescription for a solution.

The generalist will command less money for the same job and take a less direct route to a higher-risk solution. The specialist, who in reducing the viable number of alternatives is able to charge more, is also able to quickly spot the patterns of his clients' challenges, thereby allowing him to diagnose less expensively. The net result of charging more and costing less is profit.

Now, if you had a business or a career on the line, which firm would you hire? Would you hire the firm with the less expensive, longer, higher-risk route to a solution, or would you pay the profit premium to the specialist who deals with these types of challenges all the time? Now ask yourself which firm you would like to own? If you are a business owner in pursuit of profit, all of a sudden the new and different isn't so exciting, is it?

Repeated observation drives an advantage in pattern recognition that, relative to the generalist, allows the specialist to diagnose quicker and more accurately. This in turn delivers a product advantage – it makes the firm better.

Improving Closing Ratios through Repeated Process

Like repeated observation, repeated activity (repetition at problem solving) delivers a product advantage, but it also delivers a sales advantage by helping to improve closing ratios.

It is almost inescapable that if you address a similar problem many times you will eventually develop a systematic approach to solving it. Through many attempts you will try different approaches, discard the least effective ones and improve the more effective ones until you arrive at a methodology that delivers a quality solution with consistency. But if the problems you tackle and the types of clients and industries you work in all vary greatly, you will never have enough experience in any one area to develop and meaningfully refine an approach that delivers a consistency of high quality outcomes. This is important because it is your ability to convey a *consistency* in high-quality outcomes that causes the client-to-be to select you over others.

Your client-to-be already knows that you are capable of producing high quality outcomes (you've shown that in your portfolio), but what he doesn't know, and what will help him form his decision more than anything else, is his *likelihood* of receiving your best work. He looks at your portfolio and thinks, *'This is great work. But, where's the bad work? Where's the mediocre work? What's your ratio of great work to mediocre work? Every firm I've met with has shown me great work, but how do I know that if I hire you I will get great work and not mediocre work?'*

This is where a defined process, built from repeated problem solving, sets the specialist apart from the generalist late in the buying cycle. If the specialist can demonstrate that he follows a defined process, honed by working on these types of problems all the time, then he will leave the client-to-be drawing the invaluable inference that *little variability in process equals little variability in outcomes*. If you can leave your client-to-be thinking, *'I get it. I see how this works, and I see how it would work for us,'* then you will secure the deal. This, more than anything else, is how you crack the closing nut.

Most firms claim to follow a defined process, but beyond the Process page of their website or brochure, their claims are rarely borne out. When clients-to-be start to ask specific questions about methodology, as they almost always do late in the buying cycle, it becomes obvious to them that the generalists do not follow a prescribed methodology of any meaning. *How can they? They don't focus on the same type of problems long enough to develop a specialist's approach.*

Wrapping Up

The creative individual's need for the new and different is inherently at odds with his firm's need to focus. Most creative firms are collections of autonomous, routine-averse individuals set loose within poorly focused organizations. Highly autonomous creatives are fascinating, capable people. But without the harness of a properly focused positioning, they will always drag the firm toward the new and the different, never allowing it to build a deep expertise and benefit from repeated observation and repeated activity.

It's a bit ironic that the creative ability that leads people to this business is such a barrier to their success in it. You don't need to fight or ignore your autonomous, creative nature to succeed in building a creative firm, but you do need to harness it.

Hey, do you like sugar? I just happen to have a couple of sugar cubes here in my hand. Come just a little bit closer...