

Are advertising agencies the cobbler's children? (Part 2)

 By Jessica Tennant

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In answer to the question, Lauren Woolf, founder of Mrs Woolf, told delegates of Business of Design Johannesburg 2017 the key findings from her Masters thesis, the problem and the implications.

First, Woolf explained the paradox of the cobbler's children (who have no shoes): It's when we hold a competence or expertise in something but we always tend to use it for others, not always seeing that it may be ourselves who need that input. "It's a human condition. We can give the best advice to others, and sometimes while we're giving it, we're actually cognisant that we should be taking some of it ourselves."

A good example of this is William Shakespeare. His daughter was in fact illiterate – probably one of the biggest paradoxes and ironies that can explain the metaphor of the cobbler's children.



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In the case of creative companies, her research explored whether those who ideate, create and innovate for others do so for themselves as well?

Key findings

In answer to the question, Woolf's key findings suggest that creative companies do see themselves as the cobbler's children who have no shoes and that their leadership recognise that they're underutilising the marketing discipline to encourage creative thinking of their own businesses. Paradoxically, this is what creative agencies use every day to assist their clients.

Her research showed that marketing and business innovation were a low priority and mostly off the agenda. The agencies she spoke to spent less than 2%, excluding awards, on their own marketing and business innovation activity. 20% of them had someone who took care of the marketing function, but out of them, only half were experienced or trained in that organisational discipline.

“But there was one thing that was absolutely unanimous,” she said. “All the leaders I spoke to all wanted to do more, they all wanted to do it more often and they all wanted to be better at it.” It was ranked as high importance, but low in terms of action and delivery.

Roadblocks

- The problem isn't that the agencies 'don't have the time, the money or the resources', but that they just don't prioritise it.
- Another common thing the respondents said was that they don't need to market because their work is their marketing. While this is true, that's not enough because it's a competitive environment and so you need to do things differently and make a cognizant effort to get your voice heard.
- “The third, and I suppose one of our creative crosses to bear at times, is our ego.” Either too much or not enough.
- Then you need to know your story or narrative and position, and you need a strategy because it's so easy to say yes to everything. What are you saying no to?

The most significant find in the research, however, was how the strong correlation between the level of marketing priority and activity, and the leader of the business.

In other words, it all depends on what type of leadership is running the business (a marketing warrior, a culture creator or a dynamic disruptor) and where their strengths lie. “This, for me as the researcher, was the epiphany. That's when the lights went on and I realised there was a shift in the direction of the research, because the shift moved from the cobbler's children to the cobbler himself/herself. If you follow the metaphor, it's like why isn't the cobbler giving their children shoes?” In other words, it's all about **leadership**; it's all about **you**.”

Implications

Woolf advises you to have self-knowledge; to understand what you're good at, what you love doing, when you're in your moment and to accept when you're not. She says there needs to be a balance between leading and doing, between belief and action, and to take action by hiring yourself, teaching yourself and hiring help if needed. Peter Drucker, a management consultant also known as the 'father of marketing', once said that if you have a business, there are only two things you have to do: innovate and market. The rest is a touch of bullsh*t. “That is really what it's about. You can't ignore it, because that's how businesses grow.”

Take the home advantage, she said. “We are sitting on the bleeding edge of ideation and ideas. We are exposed to culture, the best marketing ideas. We own the competency. Step out of the business long enough so you can work on, not only in, the business.”

For Woolf, the implication is that she only works with creative companies and strongly believes that every creative company should survive and thrive. “This is where the ideas that will change things will come from, this is where they do, so every time a creative company closes, like a couple of agencies did in the last month, to me it's like a fairy dying. It shouldn't happen. Creative companies need to survive and thrive and to do that they need to innovate and create for themselves and then share that narrative in the market so clients, talent and industry know that creativity means business.”

ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

Jess is Senior Editor: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com. She is also a contributing writer. marketingnews@bizcommunity.com

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