

Creative Survival in the Wasteland

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Abstract

I'd like to begin this morning with a creativity drill to help us open our minds to visual thinking. Television is an emotional medium, so visualize the emotional impact of the mental images we'll be working with here.

Creative Survival in the Wasteland

David A. King

I'd like to begin this morning with a creativity drill to help us open our minds to visual thinking. Television is an emotional medium, so visualize the emotional impact of the mental images we'll be working with here.

This is from a discussion of the merits of television written by Wayne C. Booth for *Daedalus* called "The Company We Keep." In his piece, Booth describes an "intensely crafted" television advertisement for AT&T.

So, sit back, turn on your mind's eye and see what you can see.

Scene one: Open on older man in a "show biz" setting. He's standing while listening (perhaps with his eyes closed) on the phone. (Note the association with fun, vitality.)

Scene two: Cut to living room scene with the corner rug thrown back. Little girl is tap-dancing with shiny, new tap shoes. Proud father holds phone down near tapping as mother beams proudly. (Continuity of generations, parental pride.)

Scene three: Cut back to elderly man as he smiles more widely and begins to impulsively dance to the same step himself. (The phone makes you want to dance, it expresses your love for family.)

Scene four: Cut to brand-new Army recruit with brand-new short haircut. He's rubbing his head and phoning home about it.

Scene five: Cut to barber friend or Dad sitting in his own barber chair listening to the phone and laughing. (Troubles shared by phone give joy.)

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Scene six: Cut to girl standing on head in yoga position. She's on the phone.

Scene seven: Cut to another girl doing the same. (Share, share, share.)

Scene eight: Cut to young man in cowboy clothing—hat, jeans, etc. He has just competed in a rodeo, still has a number on his back and chest and is a little the worse for wear. . . . He's on the phone and happy. (He's sharing news of his victory; the phone brings good news.)

Scene nine: Cut to young woman in jockey outfit fresh from the race. She's full of mud. She's talking very happily on the phone. (More victory, more joy.)

Scene ten: Cut to locker room with hockey player waiting on phone. Lots of bustling around him. (Victory? Slight suspense.)

Scene eleven: Cut to toothless little boy on phone in same uniform, whooping it up about his father's victory. (More victory, more joy.)

Scene twelve: Cut back to locker room as champagne is poured over player's head and he breaks into a big toothless smile. Freeze on smile, identical to his son's.

Creative Potential of TV

With the wasteland stereotype hanging over us, those of us who work in television need to be more keenly aware of the creative potential as well as the misuses of the medium.

Television is an emotion-laden medium; it needs emotion to be effective and it plays on emotion when it is effective.

But is television important?

Well, the answer about television's importance lies in whether it works for you. Does it do what you want it to do?

Let's walk through some aspects of creativity and television—and maybe a little creativity in television—that contribute to making television work for us.

The main difference between creative people and uncreative people is that creative people think they are creative and uncreative people think they are not.

Occasionally we encounter a state of mind that tells us there are people who are infinitely more creative than we are. This can happen when we have seen something we feel is imaginative and creative and didn't occur to us. This is a myth. It is a bubble that needs to be burst.

There are very few truly creative geniuses around. More often than not, the person that is looked to as visually creative is one who pays close attention to small details. She or he has spotted a color combination that works, a lighting technique that works, or an editing or framing style that works. Then they apply it to their task.

Discovery consists of looking at the same thing as everyone else and thinking something different. So, when you watch television, don't watch it, dissect it. Does your spouse respond to something on television visually? If so, watch for the small part (used creatively) that is causing the effect and think of ways to use it to satisfy your needs.

How We Watch TV

The 1982 *Summer Journal of Broadcasting* has an article that tells us how we watch television. The act of viewing moving images is a complicated task that includes the ability to make assumptions and then continue to test them.

Example: A cop show that gives clues and then leads up to whodunnit.

Some have said this is basically a process of forming and testing hypotheses as the images continue to mount one on the next. Well, what I'm suggesting is that you sit back and analyze how you form the assumptions and why. Then, probe how and why others do the same thing.

Take that knowledge and insight and begin to think about how they can work for you. Look at the small details. Don't control or confine your thoughts. Search everywhere for those small details. Don't let practicality and rules cloud your vision. David Ogilvy, well-known advertising executive, said, "Rules are for the obedience of fools and guidance of wise men."

I've always thought that when I explain the gem of an idea to someone and they say, "C'mon, be practical," I'm on the track of something good.

I've found support for that in Roger Von Oech's book, *A Whack on the Side of the Head: or How to Unlock Your Mind for Innovation*. In it he tells about a manager, thought to be creative, who has a sign on his office wall that says, "Every rule here can be broken, except this one."

That's the clue for bursting the bubble, for debunking the myth. If you want to be creative, begin by whacking yourself on the side of the head to remove all traditional barriers.

As Von Oech suggests, there is an artist side and judgment side to each of us. When you are contemplating a new project, or stuck in the middle of an old one, shut off the judgment side and let the artist side run free, with absolutely no constraints.

For instance, Von Oech tells about a session similar to ours that took place at a paint manufacturing firm. Their problem was paint removal. Someone suggested that one way might be to mix gun powder with the paint when it is originally made. Then, when you want to remove it, all you had to do is heat it up and it will explode off the wall. What a bizarre idea. But it helped the group focus on the real problem: "What other ways might we create a chemical reaction that would remove the paint?"

Getting a Bright Idea

Let's take a couple of minutes to explore what Arthur VanGundy in his book *108 Ways to Get a Bright Idea*, calls ideational fluency. This is a method to develop new ideas.

Here's an exercise he suggests:

1. Generate as many conventional ideas as you can, even if it is only one or two.
2. Select one of these and as rapidly as possible generate what might be called solutions from free association with this idea.
3. Select the worst three solutions, the most unpractical, ridiculous solutions of the group and jot down all the positive aspects of these ideas.
4. Using these positive aspects, try to modify the solutions to one or two practical ideas.

Another way of generating ideas, according to VanGundy, is to browse through a magazine and select a totally unrelated photo (unrelated to your problem) and review its positive points, focusing on why they are positive.

My suggestions for you in television are very similar. Ask yourself why that news intro works, why does that used car ad attract attention even though it's so tacky?

Immediately after something happens on television that attracts your attention, try to describe on paper, in as much detail as you can, what you saw. You'll find your selective memory will help you identify some of these small details I've been talking about.

The Creative Environment

What are the major ingredients of internal and external creative environments? VanGundy's book has some good suggestions.

1. *Self Awareness.* Try to be aware of who you are, where you are, and what your part is in the process. To be truly aware, we need to know what we are capable of becoming and doing—what is in the past is not important—where and what we are now is what will make us what we will become.

2. *Motivation.* What motivates you? Don't be judgmental—be frank! Is it money, power, thirst, sex, self-esteem, fear, prestige, love, hate, achievement, or recognition? If you are inhibited because society seems to say your motivation is wrong, don't tell society. Just be able to understand and accept it yourself.

3. *Ability to defer judgment.* Try not to be judgmental. Let an idea loose and follow it—or let your co-worker or subordinate go—see where they end up.

4. *Self-Confidence.* Self-confidence is the difference between those who achieve and those who don't. Achievers know themselves. They have failed in the past, but have built on that failure to produce success.

5. *Curiosity.* "You gotta want it," is the slogan from some overachiever athletic groups, but it's the same here. You gotta want to know why did it work? Why did it happen or not happen?

6. *Optimism.* Don't let failure alter a basically optimistic outlook.

7. *Flexibility.* This means mental flexibility. Develop the ability to alter your point of view to come up with some new ideas.

8. *Open Mindedness.* This really means being tolerant and at least partially accepting ideas that conflict with your own values. Don't be blind to obvious problems, but don't shut something out before it has had its chance.

9. *Ability to Fantasize.* Fantasy is a good way to relax the judgment side and allow you the chance to separate yourself from the idea so that your own conscience inhibitions don't slow you down.

10. *Tolerance of Ambiguity.* This will allow you the chance to follow a problem through rather than be so uptight that you choose the first solution rather than waiting for the best.

Saying No

Now, let's try another exercise. How many of you have ever caught yourselves saying no before you've actually had a chance to review the idea in question? Have you ever noticed how many ways there are to say no?

Let's review some of them and see how many of us are guilty at one time or another of using these words. These come from a book entitled *Creativity is Forever* by Gary Davis.

We've never done it before. . . We've tried that before. . . It won't work. . . It's not in the budget. . . Too modern. . . Too old-fashioned. . . Let's discuss it at some other time. . . You don't understand our situation. . . We're too small for that. . . We're too big for that. . . We have too many projects now. . . It has been the same for twenty years, so it must be good. . . Won't we be held accountable? . . . We need more lead time. . . Be practical! . . . Let's wait and see. . . I don't see the connection. . . The board will faint. . . That's not our responsibility. And of course the classic: No adolescent is going to tell me how to run this operation. . .

Positive Thinking

Moving back to more positive thinking, let's take a look at some of the specific visual details you can focus on when you are contemplating an audio-visual project.

When you are sitting back in the evening succumbing to the opiate of the masses, before your brain clicks out altogether focus on things like:

Images. Are they visually appealing? Why?

Music. Does it work? Do you find yourself tapping your toe absent-mindedly? Is anyone else in the room attracted to the music? Why? How old are they? Are they people similar to ones you'd like to reach?

Editing. Do the pictures just fit together, or is there an interesting visual flow? Are you being visually led from one point to the next to make your assumptions, or are you occasionally left ambiguously to figure out what you are really seeing?

Transitions. Are you jolted by seeming non sequiturs? Or, are you allowed time to move from one idea to another with ease? Are you led to the next idea, or are you simply left to move on your own? Actually, this is dangerous, your next move might be to change the channel.

Match action to action. Does one hand movement seem to meet the other in the next scene? Was it supposed to? Do you ever find yourself jolted mentally because one scene seems to jump slightly to the next? Is there an even flow to the visual images because the action seems to match from scene to scene?

Match action to music. Does the beat of the music actually attach you to the visual images? Do action and music work together to create an environment you find visually appealing?

Match action to words. Is what you hear also what you see? Should it be?

We talked about assumption setting earlier—the cop show example is fairly rudimentary—but what happens when ambiguity is thrown, purposefully, into the process? Don't shy away from ambiguity because you feel it has an effect on assumption setting.

In a promotional spot I produced for our quarterly research magazine, I used ambiguity to disrupt the assumption setting process in an effort to attract attention in a short (20 second) period of time. The key is to keep the image and the action very simple and with few distractions, so the ambiguous action attracts all the attention.

In this particular spot I controlled the setting by making the background and all of the associated props yellow or yellow-tinted. I used a blond actress in a pale yellow blouse. Everything was visually harmonious. Then I introduced ambiguity by making various incongruous items appear on her yellow breakfast plate. The catch was that each of these seemingly incongruous items was featured in an article in the research magazine. The key was to create a quick and positive emotional response because of the ambiguity.

Here we are back to emotion. I think we've come full circle.

Television's emotional attraction to the widest, most diverse audience is what makes it work. Take a look at the most effective short television spots and you'll see emotion at its absolute. McDonald's commercials spend more time setting

up emotion-laden scenes than telling you how great their burgers are.

The University of Oregon has spent some time analyzing television's usage and its emotional appeal. From that study, they have developed two student recruitment spots that utilize information gathered in a public opinion poll translated into the raw emotion of television. It's early to tell, but these two spots appear to be effective.

The important point I want to leave you with is that you can be as creative as the next person, if you pay attention to these small emotional details.

Risk is an important aspect of creativity—you must get out and try. If one project is not completely successful, look around, ask those so-called stupid questions and find out why. Then try again.

Creative work is not for the timid. You have to lay yourself and your work out on the table to be judged. Then, accept the consequences of the judgment and jump in again.

If you are a manager and have producers working for you, prod them, but allow them the time and space needed for the cerebral part of their job. If you're giving an assignment, state the problem initially in an ambiguous fashion so as to not restrict the imagination of your producers.

Above all—what we do should be fun. If you are having fun, if your co-workers and subordinates are having fun, it shows in your work. And on television it shows better than anywhere else.