Four simple ways to cultivate creativity

By Matt Stefl

Creativity is high in demand and low in supply. How can the industry increase the wattage?

In today’s world of advertising and marketing, change is the only constant. Well, except for the need for creativity … That will never change. Products, services and brands have always needed to outsmart and out-create their competition in order to outperform them. It’s a necessary skill that’s no longer reserved for so-called "creatives," it’s needed for just about every role in our modern marketing world.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise that a recent study conducted by Adobe indicated that creativity and problem-solving were two of the top three most "in-demand" skills looking forward over the year.

So what exactly is creativity? The basic academic understanding of creativity is, "the ability to generate unique and novel ideas that are relevant and useful." Recent research has uncovered that our creative abilities have actually has been declining over the last few decades, with some calling it a "creativity crisis."

The thing about creativity is, it’s not easy to cultivate. It’s quite the opposite actually — it requires effort and dedication, and much of the process can be downright painful. For many people, it’s a very emotional process. Fortunately, with practice, you can find ways to spark creativity and generate a process for yourself. With this in mind, here are four surefire tips for cultivating creativity:

#1. Do something. Starting is the hardest part — it sucks, especially when you’re not quite sure where you’re headed. With that, it’s essential that you just do something. Anything. Just find your place and begin. Maybe it is a combination of reading, synthesis and note-taking. It can be very freeform in the beginning. You can use the "notes" feature on your phone, for instance, and keep a running log of thoughts, ideas and questions. Once you overcome inertia, momentum is easily built.

#2. Believe in yourself. As you continue to immerse yourself, your mental process will look like a sine wave — peaks of inspiration and troughs of despair. You’ll vacillate between feeling uber clear and inspired to feeling like a hack. In those low moments, it almost always feels like you’ll never find clarity. But It always comes. Every time. Doubt is your worst enemy.

#3. Walk away. Fill up your brain with gobs of information in, on and around the topic to get as close to "expert status" as possible. This usually results in some level of confusion and fatigue. There comes a point where your critical thinking mind will be simply be tapped out. Thinking harder never helps; it actually hurts. That’s when it’s time to walk away and give yourself some distance. Insights are often born in the space between thoughts. While this sounds easy, it’s not.
With the clock ticking and a deadline approaching, it feels irresponsible to walk away, almost like you can’t afford to. But in reality, you can’t afford not to.

#4. Get re-inspired, elsewhere. Immersing yourself in something 180 degrees away from what you’re working on seems to have magical effects. There’s something about the yin to the yang that tends to shake things loose. The more unrelated, the better. It doesn’t have to be physically far away, but mentally far away. Non-focused meditation, humor and exercise are all proven to spark creativity.

Getting to creative insight and clarity is 90% of the battle. Aside from getting started, the rest is easy, if not almost mechanical. Once you have a seed of insight, the entire narrative becomes evident and everything else just seems to fall into place.

That said, there is never one way to do something — in the creative community, the more ways the better, actually. So, how do you cultivate creativity?

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