

Sept 2023

From Good to Great: Improving the Odds.

Raising the standard of UK advertising creative:
barriers, best practice and actions.

A report by Laurence Green



thinkbox

*“Creativity is the
biggest ROI multiplier
within our control.”*

Paul Dyson, accelero, June 2023

Foreword

**By Margaret Jobling, Group Chief Marketing Officer,
NatWest Group. President of ISBA.**



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When Thinkbox asked me to give my perspective on the burning topic of creative quality, I didn't hesitate to offer up my own experience and observations. I've spent many years in the pursuit of creative excellence and effectiveness, working on brilliant brands such as Lynx, Dove, Cadbury and now in my current role at Natwest and as President of ISBA. I'm passionate about advertising outcomes and the enduring contribution of brand-building creative ideas in a marketing world that is ever more science-y and short term.

As one of the interviewees, and someone taking a keen interest in the findings more generally, it is really important that brand owners and their agencies share a common understanding and interest in how we can develop great work, more often.

But we also have to recognise marketers and their creative partners are operating in turbulent times, with more pressure on budgets, complexity and less time to pause for breath than ever before. We can all benefit from taking stock, acknowledging the new (and old) barriers to the pursuit of creatively conferred commercial advantage, and recommitting to best practice.

What follows is a practitioner-led overview of the stuff that's getting in the way of 'great' and what we might do about it, and I commend not just its intention but its practical application.

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This report is brought to you by Laurence Green. Laurence was co-founder of the agencies Fallon London and 101, and is a past Convenor of the IPA Effectiveness Awards. He's an independent advisor to creative businesses and has recently been appointed the IPA's Director of Effectiveness. Some of the things he's been involved in, like the Cadbury 'Gorilla', Škoda 'Cake' and Sony 'Balls' campaigns, still nip at his heels 15 years on.

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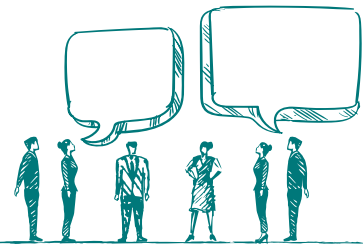
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Thinkbox has long championed great advertising creative, not least because the TV (AV) media that the organisation represents has historically lent itself to creative fame, thanks to its unique combination of rich creative possibilities and broad reach/scale.

At a time when evidence suggests that advertising creative standards are slipping (you can find this in the pages of the advertising trade press and across publications such as the IPA's *Crisis in Creative Effectiveness* and *Lemon*), Thinkbox asks: What prevents us getting from good to great (or sometimes even to good) more frequently as an industry?

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From various research options, we concluded that a practitioner-led inquiry would add more visceral colour and help us to arrive at more practical actions than a wider, desk- or data-based review.

Informed by Thinkbox's own long list of Academy winners, we arrived at a shortlist of agencies and clients with a proven track record of great work and conducted 45-minute, deep dive, qualitative interviews with the most

senior folk on each side of the creative development process: chief marketing officers and marketing directors on the one side; chief creative officers/ executive creative directors, chief executives and chief strategy officers on the other.

(Many had chaired or sat on creative, effectiveness and/or agency awards juries so were especially well placed to offer a market-wide opinion.)

34 interviews

Typically but not always one-to-one, and face-to-face wherever possible.

3 expert witnesses

To provide a perspective from beyond the day-to-day.

21 agency folk from 12 agencies

Across a mix of creative, strategy, exec management and production roles.

10 clients across 9 brand-owners

All CMOs at big and impressive client companies

Participating agencies and clients

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Expert witnesses



Sir John Hegarty,
The Garage Soho



Tim Lindsay,
Chairman, D&AD



Steve Davis,
CEO, APA

To expedite buy-in, respondents were told in advance of the research hypothesis and research sponsor but typically little more. Replies on the day were therefore a helpful mix of pure instinct and some prior thought and/or canvassing of colleagues.

All opinions were well-informed and well-considered, and often passionately held. This is something these clients and agencies think/worry about a lot... when time allows.

Fieldwork was conducted in April and May 2023, concluding May 21st.

This document shares initial findings and provocations across five sections: Creative 'state of the nation', Common creative barriers, Creative development best practice, and Some practical actions for all.

Creative state of the nation



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Though one of the start points for this project was a decline in (TV) advertising standards over time, this was either dodged or rejected by several of our interviewees in favour of a more general sense that we could simply be doing better here in 2023!

(A small minority rejected the premise outright: “What evidence do you have that standards are falling?” This may be worth exploring separately as there are some longitudinal data sources that may hold the definitive answer, rather than just the court of public opinion.)

Those who were happy to start our conversation with a comparison with the past invariably found in favour of our initial hypothesis: that standards are sliding.

This was sometimes framed as a general criticism of the advertising experience (in TV specifically: ‘selling’ displacing ‘salience’ and ‘involvement’ as the creative modus operandi; too much repetition; ‘interruption’ now simply less tolerable, etc.)

More typically, criticism took the form of a straightforward assessment of this year’s creative vintage versus previous eras: all the way from CDP’s restyling of the short form commercial as “60-second theatre” to the late 90s/early 2000s and ads like ‘Surfer’, ‘Cog’, ‘Balls’ and ‘Gorilla’.

(Agencies were typically quicker to draw these specific comparisons.)

More sceptical voices talked about creative ‘survivor bias’: that, by definition, we remember the more memorable work from previous eras. Others argued more generally that the advertising past is not a helpful guide to the advertising future: that there is little to be gained by comparing and contrasting epochs when the opportunities and challenges

that lie ahead are so very different. Too giddy a fascination for the great work that went before would simply provide the wrong route map.

Without exception, though, whether or not they were drawing comparisons with the past, everyone agreed: **we can do better.** (And remember: these are the people already doing it well!) And have to: because gloom can be self-perpetuating. There was universal agreement on one thing though:

“The bar can always be raised.”

Many interviewees spontaneously offered up a point of view that TV (AV) was holding up better than other media as a creative canvas, with outdoor especially singled out as a medium that has fallen from creative grace. When quizzed on this, others agreed: that **TV advertising is holding up competitively but in a market where creative standards are mixed and only occasionally great.** (It was interesting how often McDonald’s ‘Raise Your Arches’ was mentioned as a TV advertising exemplar. It single-handedly seems to have reminded people on both sides of the creative advertising contract what good looks like, but right now is something of a loner. Plus, the ‘energy’ is often elsewhere: TikTok most obviously.)

All of that said, these practitioners are an optimistic bunch (it’s a precondition of agency life, for sure) and many could find green shoots when pushed. So in that spirit...

Common creative barriers

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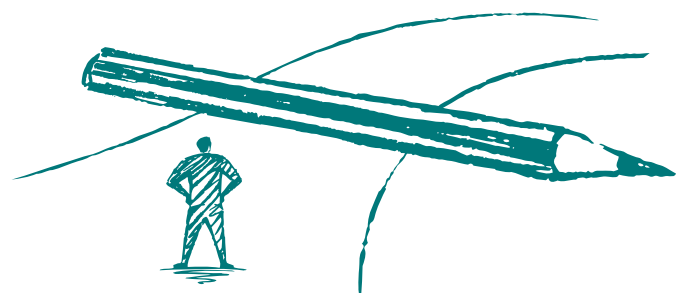
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This research highlighted quite how many barriers there are to great creative, and quite how interwoven they are. Asking interviewees to contemplate best practice (below) helped to consolidate some of the themes but for now here's a long list of those barriers. Some are old, some are new.

Some we can do little about but others we can tackle: whether that's with big gestures, small actions (because 'every little helps' in advertising also) or simply by raising consciousness of our sub-optimal behaviours.

It's worth remembering that getting to truly great work (work that stands the test of time, "the only test there is") has always been difficult. So much can go wrong, and that simple truth holds today.



Time

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The single biggest barrier to great creative was typically deemed to be time, in all its varied forms and not necessarily in the way you'd expect. Time cuts into creative excellence in a number of ways.

From time spent **establishing a common mission and a shared understanding of what good looks like**, to time spent **crafting an idea**.

From time spent **on the right things** (typically agreed as 'brand platform' and core creative assets) to time **allowing ideas and campaigns to bed in**.

Few people actually cited project timings as the issue (TV/AV projects enjoy strong visibility/long runways), fast-moving tech brands the only serial offenders. Plus: there are tools that can help, and some people relish a fast pace.

“I'd rather do a pitch in 5 days than 6 weeks.”

Tom Bender, ECD, Mother

But poor allocation of time more generally can be an issue on both sides: from client teams spending too much time on the tactical/minutiae to agencies spending too much time on 'non-core' assets.

“If you're not careful you can obsess over TikTok when - for us - it probably just warrants a short conversation.”

Dom Dwight, Marketing Director, Taylors of Harrogate

Time's running-mate, **money** (as in, budgets and/or fees) was mentioned less often but, of course, runs through everything also: whether it's scrimping on production (or, more typically, forcing scope creep) or gradually exacerbating the creative agency talent drain. Money might well be an invisible drag on agency confidence and may even be trimming client ambition, but it's not what people are talking about or citing as the elephant in the room.



Complexity

Complexity was deemed a much bigger immediate barrier: again, on both sides.

“Complexity gets in the way of creativity.”

Craig Inglis, former EVP, Sage and former CMO, John Lewis

The fragmented modern media mix, let alone the much wider concerns of the 21st-century marketer, can be bewildering.

The (still relatively recent) opportunities and challenges presented by **digital media and digitalisation** more generally have presented a **tyranny of choices and/or spaces to be filled**.

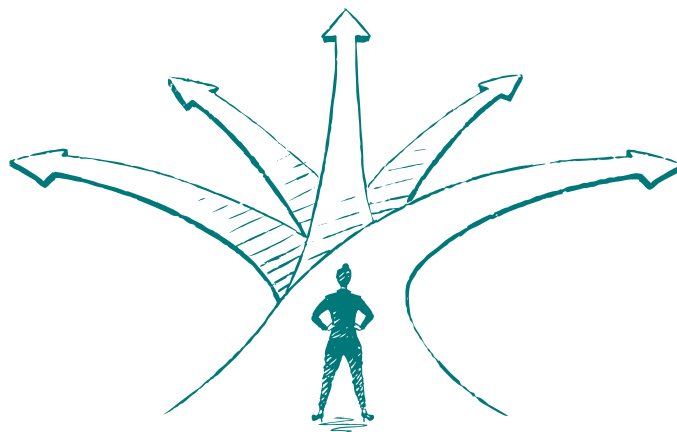
“The modern CMO is a unicorn.”

Margaret Jobling, GCMO, NatWest Group

Clients talk about “how many choices there are that I have to make now”; “how many levers I have to pull or not pull”.

On the agency side, about “quite how many assets I’m being expected to configure, reconfigure, supply”.

Neverland’s Jon Forsyth put it this way: “There are fewer ambassadors for marketing... and definitely fewer ambassadors for creativity. ‘Brand’ feels like indulgence. Transformation, data and customer service are all better answers to “What do you do for the business?”



Short-termism

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Digital media and digitisation have also tilted the talent mix towards scientists and away from artists and compounded the drift towards short-termism and immediately measurable activity, (in turn exacerbated by the cost of living crisis).

Everyone has their own version of this: the clients now running massive online and offline operations, the producers trying to keep up.

As Binet and Field have demonstrated, that's flipped the predominant advertising model from long to short.

But it also means short tenure, on both sides of the fence. It's often described as the two-year tour of duty as the marketing director, but agencies have had a lot of churn recently as well for various reasons.

The apotheosis of this – and noted with particular horror by agencies – was **the rise of project work** rather than retained relationships.

This can often transmit into a culture of caution as success begins to look like 'another project' rather than the collective advancement of the business cause by trusted and trusting long-term partners. As one contributor put it:

"Accounts create a rhythm, a certainty, a level of trust at their best, that projects just can't help to generate."

Short tenure and project work encourage short-termism: a kind of vicious circle. When we think short we're broadly thinking at odds with great creativity and great brand building.

"The problem in advertising is getting long-term thinking going and sustaining it."

Dom Dwight, Marketing Director, Taylors of Harrogate

That would be bad enough in its own right if there were nice, long planning horizons to work through all this stuff, but, of course, we don't because **short-termism in all but the fewest businesses is absolutely rampant.**

This manifests in a few ways.

Firstly, there's a business reality that short-termism means not just quarter-by-quarter scrutiny, but now week-by-week, day-by-day, and even hour-by-hour. **We're increasingly being invited to drive with our noses up to the windscreen.** Long-term thinking ("the most valuable thing we do") must fight for oxygen.

"Business has become more focused on resources than return."

Zaid Al-Qassab, CMO, Channel 4

Risk aversion

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In this climate, **risk aversion** and a general **climate of fear** is another obvious barrier. (It always has been, and may, of course, be an unhelpful framing anyway):

“I don’t want to wake up, walk down a risky staircase, have a risky breakfast and drive a risky car to a risky job.”

Sir John Hegarty, Co Founder and Creative Director, The Garage

But risk appetite also has a new dimension: the social media wildfire if things go wrong.

“Social media means scrutiny like never before,” observed Neverland’s Jon Forsyth, and this perhaps, on occasions, makes the penalty for failure bigger than the reward for success:

“The system is creating safer work. We’re norming rather than storming”

Margaret Jobling, GCMO, NatWest Group

The **tyranny of performance** was mentioned by nearly all of our interviewees. “Incremental but guaranteed,” seems to trump the less predictable but highly advantageous discontinuities that creative leaps can bring about. **Efficiency rather than effectiveness** is the default business setting. **Logic is squeezing magic.**

Campaign practice

The complexity of the mix, coupled with increasing sophistication around customer journeys, is also deemed by some to have had an indirect knock-on on creative standards by redrawing the emphasis paid to campaigns as a hoop for brand activity at a point in time rather than, or as well as, over time.

“Production is now about creating hundreds of assets.”

Agency CPO

The **need for a campaign to hang together across many disparate strands** (often achieved through look and feel rather than adherence to idea) has inevitably drawn some attention from the need to sustain and renew a campaign across time, which was historically achieved by learning from previous executions and attempting to raise the bar within known and commonly understood tramlines.

Hybrid working

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More generally, fraying relationships aren't helped by hybrid working.

More than one agency leader decried the loss of social capital and cultural vitality, specifically in pursuit of "the final 2%" that takes good to very good, or very good to great.

Sparks and serendipity are lost when creative business is conducted by Zoom.

What everyone kept coming back to was the hotspot of creative development: the idea that's in its infancy, the "baby turtle on its way to the sea" as one creative director described it. That baby turtle is simply better defended by people who know each other well, know what good

looks like, and have conversations after the meeting rather than just pressing 'end meeting'. There's so much stuff around the edges that can be lost.

One of the truths that emerged is that often the great work we see comes from truly robust high-conflict but high-trust conversations. And they're just better done in the room.

Havas's Xavier Rees has another perspective on this: "It's so important to be together. We cannot produce our very best work if we're apart... you need to be able to feel the room when creative is at stake."

Layers of decision makers and lack of access to the top

Further barriers come in the form of **lack of access to senior decision makers** (for agencies) and/or **lack of buy-in/belief** from other corners of the organisation. The former dramatically diminishes agency influence and the power of advertising to answer business problems rather than just brand briefs... and, at its very best, to animate an organisation. The latter is nuanced, and doesn't currently favour TV.

"Does the CMO have the ear of the CEO? If they don't, you don't."

Andy Nairn, Lucky Generals

Beyond a knowledgeable coterie of CMOs, it's too easy to fall back on misplaced notions that what's shiny and new is better... or just to be in thrall to the immediately measurable.

Agencies especially were quick to cite the fall of marketers and agencies downstream. Of equal worry – and perhaps related – is that the principal value-adding role of advertising as brand-builder rather than sales driver is in danger of erosion.

Closer to home, too many **layers of decision makers** and **bad processes, including bad briefs** don't help – "The workings have replaced the work," says Dan Watts, ECD at Pablo.

Both agencies and clients recognise all of the above. Then there are some barriers that are more keenly felt on one side of the fence than the other...

For agencies (and the odd, highly engaged client)

Creative awards that reward the wrong stuff

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“They’re more out of kilter (with what works) than ever before,” lamented Andy Nairn of today’s creative awards.

The feeling was that they have created perverse incentives, especially for middleweight creatives in the reputation-building stage of their careers. That 28 of 32 Cannes winners in 2022 were purpose-related was an oft-mentioned statistic. More generally it was noted that (tactical) activations win more attention and praise at awards shows than (strategic/ongoing) brand-building. It’s about “interesting executions not big ideas” said Margaret Jobling.

In the absence of other incentives, creatives are drawn to doing “the work that wins” rather than focusing their time on the next iteration of a long-running campaign. “Creative awards have bitten us back,” said Sir John Hegarty. But where’s the acclaim for the everyday excellence – “the stuff that pays the mortgage” as Mother’s Chris Gallery puts it?

“Creative energy and firepower is focused on work that nobody is going to see.”

Dan Cullen-Shute and
Stu Outhwaite-Noel, Creature

Creative fashion

Creative fashion – and, ironically, its dilutive creative effect, as ads start to resemble one another – was also spontaneously mentioned as a barrier to the very best work. Unsurprisingly, awareness of executional trends and their potential to usher in an ‘age of average’ was more alive in agency circles. Limiting creative tropes included everything from the John Lewis-ification of advertising (described by one respondent as “long ads in the wrong hands”) to the more debilitating

and frankly less ambitious rise of copy-heavy brand manifestos (or “ads that explain the ads”, in the words of Publicis’s Ben Mooge).

One final elephant in the editing suite: those quick-cut creative montages that cover all the customer bases without the benefit of a binding brand story. Like jigsaw pieces that don’t resolve as a clear picture, they are – in the memorable words of Mother’s Chris Gallery – a kind of “vignette-y spaghetti”.



Diminution of craft skills

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Agencies are perhaps also more alert to the **diminution of craft skills** over time (although this is in danger of being a generalisation, since skills in, for example, design are deemed to have improved). Many reported that the deliberate transfer of skills from one generation to the next (and indeed an appreciation of what has gone before) has been lost in the hurly burly and happy egalitarianism of the modern agency.

But TV especially is “80% idea, 80% execution”, as one especially seasoned and revered interviewee has put it.

Standards of advertising writing were specifically called out, including the discipline of writing a tight TV script (“It takes experience and draughtsmanship.”).

“It’s terrifying how little people know about the great work that’s gone before.”

Jonny Parker and Chris Birch,
joint ECDs, VCCP

Some agency execs wondered aloud about **talent drain** (“There are fewer insatiably curious people. We’ve lost the foraging instinct.”) and the **loss of folk memory** (“You learn from the past, and from experience.”).

Other villains

Agency folk are also quick to call out **bad research** (typically pre-testing) as a creative impediment, either because research methodologies directly drive solid but unremarkable creative solutions (in the quest for “a green on Link”) or unpick the whole.

Other villains include **dubious best practice** imported from short-form digital media and even the **primacy of data**.

This “leads us towards average rather than the shock of the new... we need to find the truth that no-one else has found” says VCCP’s Clare Hutchison.

Outliers questioned the **creative commitment** at holding group level and one ECD went so far as suggesting that the **ethos of excellence** had perhaps been lost... at other agencies, of course.

For clients

Business focus and creative authority

Clients, by contrast, cite agencies' **aversion to selling** (or at least a reticence to explain how their ideas work to drive business fortunes).

“I need a partner with credibility with the Board across the stack.”

Mark Given, CMO, Sainsbury's

On the other hand, some clients (and indeed some self-aware agency folk) point to the **loss of the mad men/ women** of yore: the unreasonable geniuses who see the world differently and add value accordingly. Agency leadership in 2023 looks different from 1983, or even 2003, in most ways for the better... but some creative ambition, creative authority and, yes, creative wilfulness – has been foregone.

A final word on barriers

You'll notice how little of the above relates to the quality of the actual creative proposals in play today. I don't think this is deflection, but rather reflects interviewees' determination to cheat/reverse some of the **systematic dysfunctions** that are getting in the way of great.



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Reversing the conversation from barriers to best practice begins to reframe the problem more positively. And **optimism**, unspoken as it often was, seems to be a pre-condition of creative achievement.

“Optimism is our oxygen.”

Our interviewees have all worked on ‘great’ (from John Lewis, McDonald’s and Amazon to Superhumans, Cadbury and IKEA... and all the way through to what3words and Secret Escapes) and were quick to cite common conditions in which ‘great’ can flourish, the absence of which has the reverse effect.

Querying best practice also encouraged people to build out their reflections and recommendations in a more linear way, across the beginning, middle and end of the creative development process, all of which matter. (Each one a necessary but not sufficient condition in its own right.)

“My job is to create the conditions for creative people and work to flourish.”

Zaid Al-Qassab, CMO, Channel 4



At the beginning

A shared mission

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Great creative starts with a **shared mission** across the agency and client team and a **clear sense of what good looks like**. As alluded to above, this is often helped by a strong historic relationship. From agencies' point of view: a great client who believes in the power of creativity, and believes in them. From clients' point of view: an agency that is genuinely trying to do the right thing for their brand and business.

Or, as summarised by Leo Burnett's Charlie Rudd, "ambitious friends."

"Great work happens when everyone and everything comes together," argued Publicis's Clare Donald – a sentiment echoed by many. "If you're unsure of the mission you'll be blown by the wind," said ITV's Jane Stiller.

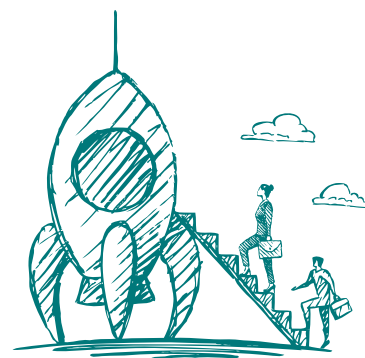
"Clarity of mission: it all starts there."

Craig Inglis, former EVP, Sage and former CMO, John Lewis

"It's still all about the client-agency relationship," says Havas's Xavier Rees, a point emphasised by Kate Stanners at Saatchi&Saatchi: "Spend time together, client and agency, setting out what you understand great to look like, because it is different for every single one of us, and for every single project. Sharing other work, discussing what we like, and setting out our collective ambition... You need to put the time in upfront."

"Brief in hope, not in fear."

Richard Huntington, CSO, Saatchi & Saatchi



A single-minded springboard and clear definition of 'job to be done'

A **good brief** is single-minded, signed off and a great springboard in its own right. Creative time is spent addressing it rather than (re)writing it. The **job to be done** is clearly set out up front. The horizon is long, not (just) short.

"The brief never changed," said Craig Inglis and Rick Brim of the famous John Lewis work.

"Things go wrong when you lose sight of what you're trying to do."

Xavier Rees, CEO, Havas

In the middle

A memorable idea

The creative key is a memorable idea with roots and wings: “Because they’re not going shopping ‘til tomorrow... or even next year,” explained Channel 4’s Zaid Al-Qassab.

This is typically founded on a **good insight**, and thereby ‘right’ for the brand. It’s a **simple thought that works emotionally**. “Evoke emotions, because human beings are emotional units,” continued Al-Qassab. “Tears first must flow,” says Saatchi’s Richard Huntington.

And the idea needs not only its own **magic dust** (and sometimes wonkiness) but also **creative stretch** across platforms and ideally across time.

“Brilliant brand work that makes an emotional connection will drive the best ROI, and help your performance media to work harder.”

Margaret Jobling, GCMO,
NatWest Group

Bought (and sold) with conviction

The idea then needs to be presented enthusiastically, **debated honestly and bought decisively**, ideally by a single decision maker.

When ideas are surrounded with conviction, they beat out all the turbulence and all the questions that are asked of them.

“When mission and creative align... you can crash through anything.”

Craig Inglis, former EVP, Sage
and former CMO, John Lewis



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Towards the end

Trust in production running mates



Another key ingredient in creative success is production running mates that get it and add or subtract the right stuff as well as bringing their **craft** skills to bear – whether trusted creative lieutenants like Dougal Wilson for John Lewis, or someone new to the brand, like Edgar Wright on McDonald's.

Kate Stanners, Saatchi & Saatchi's Chairwoman & Global Chief Creative Officer, is a strong advocate of the benefits of this: "Allowing everyone at every stage to build on something: the music, the lighting, the performances. It builds and builds and builds... We see those touches that probably weren't scripted; those things that have been allowed to happen. I know, throughout everything I've ever done, it's a moment, a look, and you just go, 'Bloody hell, that's it! That's the pivot!' That's what will be memorable to people."

The client (and agency) **keeping out of the way** is also vital. The midwives have got this!

"Don't let anything get in the way. Foster and feed the idea."

Hannah Pain, Head of Marketing, McDonald's

Appropriate idea-led explosion into other channels

Not into every other channel, but appropriate channels, and to be led by the idea rather than execution.

Celebrated and then measured correctly

Then celebrated again.

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You can run most of the great campaigns that everyone talked about through this checklist and find every box ticked. It's unusual but not impossible.

Creative checklist:

- Optimism**
- A shared mission**
- A single-minded springboard and clear definition of 'job to be done'**
- A memorable idea with roots and wings: a simple thought that works emotionally**
- Bought (and sold) with conviction**
- Trust in production running mates**
- Appropriate idea-led explosion into other channels**
- Measure, report, celebrate, repeat**

The red thread through it all is optimism, mission, teamwork and imagination. Though luck will be needed also :-)

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“You will remember great advertising because of all the work that’s gone into it: every single person that has played their part, and no one let anything drop, and everyone kept going, because they knew that they had set the goal and they knew what it could be. For me, that’s what great work does. And great work works.”

Kate Stanners, Chairwoman
& Global Chief Creative Officer
at Saatchi & Saatchi

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The barriers and best practice outlined hopefully spur action in their own right both agency- and client-side, but here's some starters for ten for discussion, either because interviewees offered them up themselves or because they feel like relatively straightforward actions against our agenda.

Remember what's possible. It helps with the optimism thing.

Cast a critical eye over your **inputs versus outcomes**. Are you spending your time and money on the stuff that drives the biggest outcomes? Re-resource accordingly!

Spend time together, ideally when there's nothing on the table. Hold **creative ambition sessions**. Find time to talk about the work you've done, the work you like best (especially from others)... and why. Articulate a common creative goal.

“The client relationship is not more important than the work. The relationship is for the work!”

Xavier Rees, CEO, Havas

Better briefs and better feedback. Agencies can lead the way on these, respectful of the limited time today's clients have to learn, let alone practise this stuff.

Go long, not just wide. Forgive the first pancake. Repeat winning formulas. Don't move on too soon – “We undervalue consistency,” says NatWest's Jobling. “We chase the new.”

“In 2023 it's quite hard to make anyone bored of your campaign,” agrees Lucky General's Andy Nairn. “We should be talking about wear in, not wear out.”

“Consumers crave familiar, agencies crave novelty.”

Richard Warren, Director Brand, Marketing and Experience, Nationwide Building Society

Commit to measurement and reporting, even against/especially against the brand rather than activation task. It's the currency of our times.

Fight the drift downstream: maximum value for all lies higher up the food chain.

Bring the spirit of Christmas creative development to bear on the everyday. As Publicis's Ben Mooge noted, the focus and discipline we bring to ‘the Christmas spot’ should really be our year-round modus operandi: “We have healthy conversations about the role of the brand and how we want the audience to feel.” Two pillars of good creative communication that should be given oxygen 365 days a year!

For agencies: don't talk down what you do. Push back on dubious rules.

For clients: involve, or manage, your CEO and CFO. Find ways to secure their understanding of the commercial criticality of a strong brand (not just immediate demand) and the role of creativity in creating commercially advantageous impressions.

A final word

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And so we come to the end, of this project and paper at least. But also to new beginnings, of course, because one of the winning features – and occasional consolations – of the brand communication business is that there's always a new creative opportunity just around the corner.

I hope you can put some of the findings we've shared into practice soon enough, whether that's as a quick audit of how you did last time, as a conversation starter between campaigns or as a route map for your next round of creative development. Because if I've learnt (or, rather, relearnt) one thing from this wonderfully inspired project it's that truly great work rarely, if ever, **just happens**. It is, more typically, the happy outcome of **advantageous conditions, deliberately forged** by client and agency.

Work that is merely 'good' is not to be sniffed at, of course: creative advertising of any stripe beats non-creative advertising. But 'good' by definition never truly fires the popular imagination and the P&L like the very best stuff does. It is often the consequence of modest or conflicting ambitions, of too many hands on the tiller, of meetings that go one way rather than the other, of punches pulled.

Great work, on the other hand – as we've heard from its proud parents – is characterised by soaring ambition, by an idea held keenly by a few, by stout resistance to those who would bend or break it, by craft all the way to the wire.

Don't get me wrong. The path to great can be a bumpy one, as all my interviewees acknowledge, and you will need luck also. Our map is not infallible, but we hope serves as a reminder that behind and before 'great' lies a methodology, or at least a spirit, that can be learnt and practised.

If the barriers we have identified seem overwhelming, or the best practice we propose proves elusive, cling to one finding and truth. That as you descend once more into the valley of creative development, **optimism is your best friend** and pessimism your sworn enemy.

Optimists travel through life wide-eyed, looking for good things. Approach creative development in the same way and you may suddenly find yourself staring at great and its starry outcomes.

Pessimists should alight the bus now.

Laurence Green



Appendix A: food for thought

The 'Improving the odds' conversation starter.

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You'll have reached your own conclusions and perhaps a personal 'to-do' list as you've read this paper. But you've probably also been reminded that creative development is a team game, and that robust relationships and healthy conversations are paramount.

So we've taken the liberty of proposing a short 'conversation starter', to be used across the client/agency team: to flush out your own areas for improvement and fashion your own, bespoke version of best practice. It can be downloaded here...



DOWNLOAD

Appendix B: inspiration

What great looks like...

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Because we need to “hold creative ambition sessions. Find time to talk about the work you like best (especially from others)” and “to see what’s possible”.

3 great ads I had nothing to do with

This entertaining and popular series features the UK’s finest creative practitioners talking about the ads that inspired them, and what makes truly great TV advertising. There are now over 50 episodes available, on demand, exploring over 160 of the best ads ever made.

The Thinkboxes

Creativity isn’t just for Christmas; it happens all through the year.

The Thinkboxes bi-monthly awards in association with Campaign is now in its 15th year. Keeping an eye on the shortlist is a great way to keep track of the UK’s best TV ads, as chosen by the Thinkbox Academy.

David Reviews

If you’re not already subscribed to this, it’s a brilliant online resource for companies and people involved in making filmed advertising, showcasing pretty much everything that’s produced, from the great and good to the ‘could do better’! All ‘food for thought’.

The commercial power of creativity

5 slides for your CEO/CFO

Handy charts demonstrating the impact of creativity on key business/financial metrics: sales, market share growth, core financial KPIs and ROI multiplier effect. Spoiler alert – these include new analysis from Paul Dyson (accelero) showing that creativity is the second biggest factor influencing advertising profitability (and the biggest that marketers have direct control over!).

The business case for creativity is [here](#).

IPA Effectiveness Awards Databank

If you’re looking for more compelling evidence of the transformative power of creativity, then look no further than the seminal work of Les Binet and Peter Field. All of their advertising effectiveness publications, based on findings from the IPA Effectiveness Awards databank, are full to the brim with actionable insights and wisdom. [Browse their published work here](#), or explore for yourself over 1,500 detailed case studies and four decades’ worth of evidence-based inspiration with the IPA’s [Effectiveness Awards Search Engine](#).

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