

Data & creativity: How opposites attract in a connected world

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Irrespective of the industry you're in - be it marketing, finance or healthcare - data is pretty important these days. Essentially, data is information about customers, and the more you know about your customers, the easier it is to get them to buy your product or choose your services. Or something like that...



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Data is touted as the panacea for everything from declining retail sales to supporting agricultural research in rural areas. Back in 2017, *The Economist* suggested that data may be the new oil, which soon became a refrain among those in the know. So while data is valuable, like oil, its true value only comes to the fore in a refined format.

Creativity is data's refinery. Without creativity, data lacks impact, appeal and emotion. Creativity is the art to data's science, and it is art that ultimately speaks to the heart of the matter (the human!). So rather than viewing it as an either/or, or elevating the one above the other in importance, we need to consider them as equal partners. Data can enhance creativity, but it cannot replace the sublime, hard-to-define "wow" factor that is true creativity.

Instead of considering how to bridge the gap between data and creativity, or entertaining the argument that data is stifling creativity, a more useful and accurate approach would be to embrace the value of data, while elevating the importance of creativity. In this Think with Google article, CEO of TBWA/Melbourne, Kimberlee Wells, talks about creativity as the superpower and data as the compass that guides the superpower to where it can have the most impact.

The power of the personal

The connected world is also a cluttered space, in which personalisation is the antidote for businesses. Customers have multiple options at their fingertips and a brand's best defence against being swiped away is to offer a personalised experience, based on accurate data.

What data hands professionals in the business is a tool that takes the guesswork out of marketing and advertising, helping them create targeted campaigns that reflect a deep understanding of whom the customer is, their location, as well as their needs and preferences. That ability to creatively engage customers in an authentic and relevant way significantly boosts potential return on investment for the brand, usurping the primarily useless (easy to ignore) marketing "fluff".

When data is leveraged as part of a creative approach to personalisation, the results are typically preference, loyalty, engagement – the coveted trifecta.

Less guesswork, more impact

"Why guess when you can measure" could easily be the catchphrase for data in respect of its application in business today. Data helps to take the guesswork out of almost every business function, but particularly marketing and advertising. Data tells us what customers want, when they want it, how they want it, where they want it and so much more. When this information is used as the compass for driving creative, the potential for making the right impact at the right time is significantly raised.

But don't discard the gut feel

As humans, the head and the heart are often in conflict (like data and creativity sometimes), but the one serves to support the other. Sonal Dabral, chief creative officer Ogilvy South East Asia and Vice Chairman India, says it beautifully – especially as India's challenges are similar to ours in South Africa: "Data and tech help us to tell more personalised stories — and those are the most potent stories of all. What we need to be careful about, though, is overreliance on data. It shouldn't make us forget our gut instinct because, without that, our stories will be soulless. Ideas and storytelling that move people are the bedrock of all communication and will never go away."

We live in exciting times – when great ideas can draw on the support of data to give them credibility, relevance and support their impact. And it's ultimately great ideas that change the world for the better.

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