

Manager & E-Manager

Adapt to survive and thrive - A question of creativity: why managers need to have creative instincts

By James Cope, Business Link Adviser

Never underestimate the power of creativity – it is an essential tool if your business is going to succeed and continue to succeed. However, whilst children are nearly always wonderfully creative, acting out fantasies and performing in plays, many adults have lost, or think they've lost, the creative instinct or fail to recognise how important it continues to be.

Businesses and sometimes whole industries, can assume they are 'safe' if they continue to simply provide the products that are popular today. But that is a very high risk strategy. No-one thought that there was a need for a personal cassette player, believing people would always listen to records, but innovation and creativity spurned a multi million pound industry, but that came and went in a couple of decades, superseded briefly by personal CD players, soon themselves supplanted by the now ubiquitous MP3 player. When many businesses are struggling to survive, let alone thrive, creativity is essential. As Charles Darwin said, "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change." Innovation is therefore essential for business survival, and if you don't your competitors will be the ones who thrive.

There are many ways that people in your business can be dissuaded from being creative. If your business is very hierarchical, for example, it may discourage people from sharing their thoughts for fear of being shot down. However, when coming up with ideas, it's important to understand what your market is comfortable with. Rather than change anything for the sake of it, spend time understanding how your market works, then use creativity to give yourself a first-mover advantage. You don't have to do something utterly new. You might apply an idea you've seen work for another company, or a concept you've read about. The important thing to note is that any change is appropriate to your business. Business Link (www.businesslink.gov.uk) gives independent, free advice on this, and can sign-post you to a range of support.

In these tougher economic conditions, managers are trying ideas they might once have ignored. As budgets for lavish marketing campaigns dry up, for example, some businesses are using social media channels to reach new customers. Instead of stopping employees from spending time online, managers are promoting their products through Facebook or Twitter. Be open to change: talk to your team and be willing to recognise opportunities. Everyone is experimenting, and there is no 'winning' formula, so don't be afraid to join in or think of something completely different.

With websites recognised as an essential channel for reaching customers, businesses are looking for more sophisticated ways to maximise the reach of their site. They may seek to increase their Google ranking through search engine optimisation, but they also need to create inbound links from other websites. Some managers are translating offline networking – going to an event and handing out business cards – into online rapport, harnessing the power of other websites to raise the profile and sales of their businesses.

With online marketing, you can measure results and gauge value for money as never before. Google Analytics makes it possible to see where traffic is coming from and which pages are popular. Clothkits is a popular clothing brand that was revived online in 2008: through Business Link it found consultants who helped it to monitor site traffic. When it became apparent the site was attracting a high degree of ‘social’ traffic, including bloggers with an interest in sewing and handicrafts, owner Kay Mawer saw the chance to develop this, and the site now has an interactive section with her own blog.

Southampton-based Ace Lamps wanted to track the success of its Google Awards campaign, and set up analytics to develop a picture of what was working. With the help of Business Link, the business was able to reduce its pay-per-click budget by 50%, getting rid of keywords or campaigns that weren’t performing. It also created a successful YouTube campaign, making short films that have attracted thousands of hits. Many businesses are using YouTube with great success – from Recruitment Juice’s spoofs on *The Office* to Blend Tec’s ‘blend anything’ challenge.

Creativity doesn’t have to be about drama and story. It might manifest itself through small improvements. Some businesses have failed to recognise the strategic importance of their websites, seeing them as more of an add-on, than an integral part of operations. Look at your internal procedures, and see whether changes can be made. Your database of existing customers could be a forgotten goldmine. Many e-businesses focus on attracting new customers while neglecting those who have already bought. Asking simple questions (how often do they buy, how much do they spend, and when did they last buy?) helps you to analyse your customer base and get customers to spend more.

Business Link guides and works with thousands of small businesses to help them reconnect with customers and sharpen their competitive edge. Establishing an open culture, in which employees feel free and more energised to contribute and own ideas, is a start. However, coming up with ideas is the easy part. Turning concepts into reality, and keeping creativity on the agenda, may be more of a challenge.

At a strategic management level, creativity and innovation may entail having specific business insight and the knowledge to drive forward a solution. For others, it may require problem solving skills to address functional issues.

However, some managers may feel they don’t possess the creative spark. What can they do to get back in touch with their creative side? It’s important to remember that few

people have outstanding natural flair for creativity. The rest of us have to practise. Tools such as force field analysis (a social science technique invented by Kurt Lewin in the 1950s) can help you weigh up the driving and opposing forces for an idea, while Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats technique enables you to examine a matter from different perspectives, understanding the complexity of a decision to make the right choice.

Managers gather lots of useful information and insight in the course of communicating with colleagues, suppliers and customers, but may lack a framework to formulate these ideas, or drive change. Some products and technologies have a predictable development path, so being creative is also about being willing to look ahead and position yourself for the time when your business can benefit. Creativity requires time, effort and persistence but once you open your mind to your own potential it can take you and your business a long way.

Contact Business Link (0845 600 9006) for more information about workshops and seminars on e-commerce and other creativity-related subjects. Visit businesslink.gov.uk/innovation for help with exploiting your ideas.