

My dictionary tells me that when I ask for creativity, I can expect to get, “the ability to use the imagination to develop new and original ideas or things, especially in an artistic context.” I have trouble with this definition because Brand Managers see the words “imagination”, “new” and “original” and off they go – any idea is a good idea as long as it is “creative.” Which is why, when I hear the word “Creativity”, I reach for my revolver.

Business for me isn't an artistic context - unless needing to sell more while spending less counts as art – so then to be any use, the definition of creativity needs to be heavily qualified, to the point where I think another phrase does a better job describing what's needed.

My vote goes for “Insightful originality.” Creative thinking is no use whatsoever in marketing if it is not corralled by relevant facts and acute observations – two disciplines noticeably absent in far too many marketing departments and advertising agencies, as people are far too busy sat in meetings hunched over their Crack-berries to notice anything going on around them. But occasionally, one does see it, and over the years I observed that there were two critical attributes required in people if they were to be capable of insightful originality: the inquiring mind, and the prepared mind.

The inquiring mind has a perpetual sense of wonder, driven onwards by dissatisfaction with the status quo. “Why do people DO that?” “Why CAN'T we play in that market?” Swiffer would not be improving our lives beyond measure if someone hadn't asked, “Why CAN'T we sell a duster for \$5 just because people currently buy 10 for \$1 from hobos on the doorstep?” Why indeed. But alone, this can be a frustrating if not destructive attribute if it is not counter-balanced by the fact-rich mind, replete with an in-depth understanding of operations, capabilities, markets, customers and consumers.

Without the prepared mind, the Swiffer would have stayed as just an electrostatic super-duster. But some bright spark realized that the benefits of picking up dirt, as opposed to merely moving it around, could also apply to the humble floor-mop. And not only that, but P&G also already possessed the very technology to soak up oceans of dirty water much better than any mop – diapers. Hence was born the Swiffer wet jet, which is little more than a diaper on a stick with a water-pistol strapped on. Brilliant! But equally, the prepared mind without the enquiring mind is invariably tedium personified. You need both.

My own personal low point on the topic of creativity came when I had returned from a bout of sick-leave to discover that a lemonade-flavoured line extension had been packaged, not in a boringly printed box which was sized to fit on tens of thousands of boring confectionery fixtures, but in a large yellow plastic lemon. The lemon was definitely original, but where was the insight? Aha, I was told, it would stand out on the Cash&Carry shelves shouting “LEMONADE FLAVOUR”, then would inspire the retailer to brighten up his customers’ lives and place said lemon prominently in the hot zone on the counter. Our products don’t get on the counter because our packaging is boringly utilitarian.

By this time, it had already gone into production and I think you can guess the rest. It was, of course, a disaster. Retailers didn’t want large plastic lemons cluttering up the place; and consumers didn’t know that the few lemons they saw contained chocolate bars, let alone lemonade flavoured ones. The only decent bit of creativity to come out of the debacle was from an account manager who realized that the packages, when displayed two together, bore a startling resemblance not to lemons, but a pair of

enormous, yet pert and clearly excited female breasts. Just what convenience store owners needed to advertise the latest offerings on the back shelf of the magazine rack.

So the next time someone mentions the word “creativity”, take a long, hard look for the enquiring mind and the prepared mind. If you only see one or, even worse, neither, aim right between the eyes.