

THINKING

GETTING

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# I'VE GOT A BRAND NEW COMBINE HARVESTER

Clients need agencies that can see the broadest answers to problems

**T**he creative industries account for about 9 per cent of UK GDP. Advertising within that generates about 2 per cent. We're about the same size as farming, but a lot more confused.

The advent of the internet doesn't change the rudiments of advertising any more than the advent of the combine harvester changed the rudiments of farming. Advertising is still in the business of ideas. Farming is still in the business of crops. Ideas still exist primarily in the mind, just as crops still grow primarily in fields.

Crops are the visible emblem of a broader agenda called estate management. It's about sustainable growth. Ideas are the visible emblem of a broader agenda called brand stewardship. It, too, is about sustainable growth. Farmers saw the opportunities of the combine harvester and moved on. We saw the opportunities of the internet, and proclaimed we were no longer in the business of advertising.

To our knowledge, there is no farmers' union for combine harvester drivers, there is no Worshipful Society of People Who Know How to Spread Manure on a Steep Incline. And yet, adland is a war-zone of battling guilds and tribal jealousies.

In this primitive arena, clients endure friendly fire, semantic jousting, and obscure acts of creative witchcraft, when all they really wanted was a good idea, deployed well. In fact, advertising has been so slow to re-assemble itself, that clients have, in their frustration, begun to impose their own sense of order on the dysfunction that greets them. Who can blame them?

## Constant refereeing isn't only exhausting, it's dangerous

Fifteen years ago, rosters were about managing talent and, through nobody's fault but our own, they have become an instrument for managing confusion.

Fifteen years ago, the line that separated display advertising from direct marketing had all but disappeared. Now, the line is back, but as a line drawn by clients through budgets and agency relationships denoting not a technical difference, but a tribal one. And, whereas 15 years ago, agency brands were clearly imprinted in the work they produced and were the basis by which agency selection was made, now clients are forced to take agencies apart in search of the individual expertise they need. Our feuding sense of specialism has allowed agencies to become less important than the talent locked inside them.



COLIN STOUT

We are going backwards, and the further backwards we go, the more radical and forensic our clients are forced to be in their procurement.

So what do they need?

They need an agency with a wide-angled lens. An agency whose lens is capable of allowing in as much as possible, and who can produce a compelling plan of engagement. One where Scripts and Journeys and Ads all play a part. They need an agency that can see the broadest answers to the business problem and be able to manipulate and decipher them into the right executions. Not executions based on closest-to-hand platform experience or outdated roster delineation.

For if we do not offer this quickly enough, we are in danger of being forensically disengaged.

## Take-outs

- Clients have been forced to find order from our chaos
- We must return clarity to our client-agency partnerships
- Return talented production to its rightful owners
- Build enhanced, more wide-angled, great creative agencies again

## Making agencies great again

Fortunately enough, this is already happening. Agencies are finding their renaissance. But in a way once thought totally unacceptable.

Time and again we see senior digital agency talent crossing the water to adland. Why? Because adland is finally becoming a place where digital ideas and experience couldn't be more valuable. Where the most creative get to leave behind the hindrances of production-based business models and frustrating industry pigeon holing.

In most cases, digital agency skills are built around 80 per cent production, 20 per cent creative and strategic. This 20 per cent can now join a creative agency model that's entirely opposite.

So what would be left behind if they did? Something very powerful and concentrated. Something more valuable to our industry than we may yet realise: A renaissance of our production industry.

A Soho 3.0. Newly fuelled with talented developers, designers, and platform specialists able to deliver on any assignment with no fears of confused agency direction. Just great craftsmen working alongside more enlightened creative agencies. (Not ad agencies, nor digital ones, but fresher, broader thinking and wider-angled ones.)

Real, sustainable value for clients and for us still resides in knowing that an agency stands on the shoulders of a great heritage in strategic capability

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and brand leadership. Clients don't want, nor do they need, to pay for things twice. The refereeing that surrounds this can be made simpler and the confusion of multiple, often biased opinions, would no longer overwhelm.

With less energy consumed defending turf, there's more available for creating the next innovation. Inevitably, there will be winners and losers, and some that defy convention – thank God for them, for counter cultures keep the world spinning. They break away, they foster new ideals, they establish new protocols and these inevitably, over-time, become part of the infrastructure. The mainstream. Paradoxically, and rather beautifully, it's "going mainstream" that establishes the fuel for the next counter culture, the next innovation.

The digital pure-play (with its notable exceptions) can evolve into a world-class centre of digital craft. Soho 3.0 can happen, and if it does, we'd witness some of the most significant, global, industry shifts we'd ever see; finally returning clarity to our client-agency partnerships; returning talented production to its rightful owners and allowing enhanced, more wide angled creative agencies to continue to lead the way... Whatever their produce might be.

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