

Credit: Haley Saba

Stop controlling, start creating

Why it's more important to focus on efforts rather than results.



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A few years back I had a client.

This client had a beautiful website. That beautiful website had been designed by a renowned design agency. And on that beautiful website the client published articles that were well-reported and infographics that were quite attractive.

From the outside, everything looked professional. Healthy. Successful.

But the client had a problem. Traffic wasn't growing.

What can we do to improve, they asked.

I asked about the amount of content.

No, they said, we can't change that. Our budget is maxed out.

I asked about the quality of the content.

No they said, we can't change that. We like our articles, they're thorough.

I asked about where they distribute their content.

No, they said, we can't change that. We don't have the staff.

Then they thought for a minute and then asked: What if, instead of making any of those changes, we just redesign the site?

Why would you do that, I said. That's the thing that's *least* wrong.

Because, they said, and I will never forget this: *that's the thing we know we can control.*

The search for certainty instead of explanations

I've thought a lot about that client. They had a lot of challenges. They were aware of those challenges. They wanted to improve. That's more than most.

But they were searching for certainty, rather than for an explanation.

They should have been asking: What does our audience want? Why do they want it? How can we give it to them? They should have been looking for explanations of their marketplace.

Instead, they were asking: What do *we* want? How can we make what *we* want with as little pain as possible? They were looking for certainty of themselves.

The result: They had created a perfectly consistent asset creation machine that very few people outside that machine cared about. A bright and pretty dead thing.

In other words, they spent very little time creating.

Instead, they spent all their time trying to stay in control.

The search for consistency instead of coherence

Who hasn't spent their time trying to be in control? After all, the scariest thing in the world is to create.

Creativity is an exploration of an unknown. It's trying something, seeing whether it works, then iterating on the effort until the result improves. It's testing your way to viability.

If this sounds like an organism scratching around in the dark to find the best source of light and food, well, there you go. Organisms are great explorers. Organisms have very good product-market fit.

Creating content for brands? Same same.

To be successful, the brand must be consistent. Not consistent in results, though that will come. Rather, consistent in efforts.

Consistency of effort creates coherence of results.

If you think that's not true, consider any successful brand. Apple is a successful hardware company because they created a consistent process of building the iPhone. Each new iPhone release is different, yet the product iterations are coherent. They have "iPhone-ness".

Ford is a successful automobile manufacturer because they created a consistent process for creating the F-150. Each new model is different, yet the product iterations are coherent. Ah yes, the buyers says, this quacks like the duck I know.

WIRED is a successful magazine because they created a successful process for making WIRED magazine. Each new issue is different, yet the iterations in features and interviews and photographs are coherent. Good read, every time.

And so this is what I tell clients today.

Focus first on efforts, rather than results.

Focus on building an engine of creativity, rather than a facade of assets.

Focus on the relationship with your audience, rather than yourself.

Ask what they want.

Ask how you can give it to them.

Figure out how giving it to them fits with your brand priorities.

You shall surely be successful.



Steve Bryant

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Steve specializes in content strategy, branded content, product development, and editorial operations. Yes, he'd love to get a drink.



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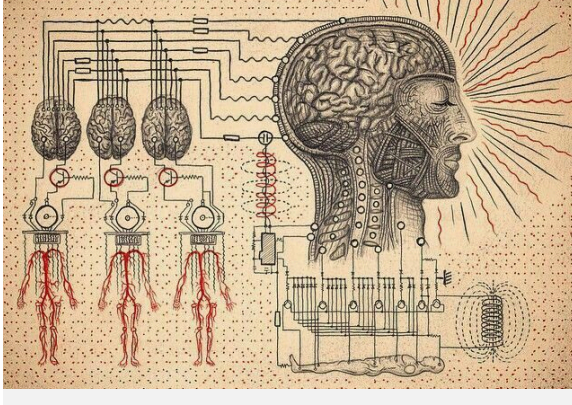
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