I Believe In A Life Less Ordinary

How unfamiliarity breeds love

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Abstract

Our lives are becoming increasingly predictable. Surprise and serendipity are being steadily eroded by search algorithms that tell us what to read and listen to; set-top boxes that predict what we'll want to watch and online filters which ensure we only meet like-minded friends and lovers. Research is being used to create homogeneity, not difference, and human biases lead us to fall quickly in to ruts of repeated behaviour.

This paper argues that while these forces may make a brand's communication more efficient and easy to target, they do so at a cost. The ability to surprise is a powerful tool in the formation of strong brand relationships, yet brands, and the companies that work for them, are losing the ability to wield it. Now is the time to change our ways of working to put surprise and serendipity back in the heart of marketing.

Total word count: 6,997 (excluding abstract, titles, captions & notes)

In the spring of 1944, a young artist called Ellsworth Kelly[1] sailed from New York to England to take part in what would be the most momentous operation in the Second World War, the D-Day landings. Kelly was no ordinary soldier, though. He was a member of 23rd Headquarters Special Troops, a unit unofficially known as the Ghost Army.

The Ghost Army's aim was tactical deception: to confuse German agents and their high command spymasters into believing the invading army was far bigger and more powerful than it really was. They achieved this with a range of deceits which included inflatable tanks, cardboard soldiers, fake artillery and sound effects to give the illusion of troop movements.

Recruitment for the Ghost Army reflected its unconventional mission. Kelly was among friends in his unit: its numbers were drawn heavily from advertising agencies, art schools, film studios and theatres. Together these creative thinkers played a key role in Operation Fortitude, the Allied strategy to convince German intelligence that the coming invasion would be at Pas de Calais, not the Normandy beaches.[2]

What do we think we do for our clients? (hint: it's not making ads)

The Ghost Army's story is interesting not only because of its inclusion of a large number of men who would have been our peers, but because it stands as a stellar example of the way in which we work best, that is, not to create *per se*, but to create to solve a problem for our clients; to out-think and out-manoeuvre the competition.

That the Allied high command had the foresight to use admen, artists and designers to achieve this strategic advantage 66 years ago demonstrates the power that creative-thinkers have always had to come up with surprising ways to achieve this aim.

This paper argues that the best way to out-think the competition is to come up with ideas that surprise and delight audiences. And these surprises don't have to be particularly big or powerful – they simply need to be timely, as the following anecdote hopefully demonstrates.

The joy of small surprises

Big Trouble in Little China was on Channel 4 last night.[3] I've seen it before; twice, I think. While I'm pretty sure I enjoyed it first time round, it's not a film I'd ever consider adding to my LoveFilm list; nor would I ever watch it on YouTube or download it, even if Virgin Media were dangling it for free. Yet, last night, when I could and should have been writing elements of this paper, I spent 115 minutes watching it again, enjoying it immensely.

My wife would argue this is a characteristic piece of procrastination on my part in the face of a pressing deadline; that I probably would have been on the Xbox if I hadn't been watching TV.[4] But I don't think watching the film was two hours of displacement activity. I think something different was happening: as the continuity announcer flagged up the imminent broadcast of the Kurt Russell vehicle, I experienced a small, but genuine sense of delight and surprise at what felt like a random discovery, just when I needed some distraction. There's no other word for this kind of surprise than serendipity – finding something useful you weren't looking for.[5, 6]

Serendipity is simply useful, delightful surprise, which, I think is exactly what we should be attempting to create on behalf of brands. We all need surprises in our lives and the best are usually those which have some utility, be it emotional – anything as nebulous as a warm feeling to an experience you'll want to pass on – or practical: real utility that makes life easier.

But surprise is on the wane and serendipity is being removed from our lives by a combination of human nature, well-intended but ill-conceived technology, well-meant research and diluted expertise.

This paper will show how this is a threat, but also an opportunity both for brands and for the people who
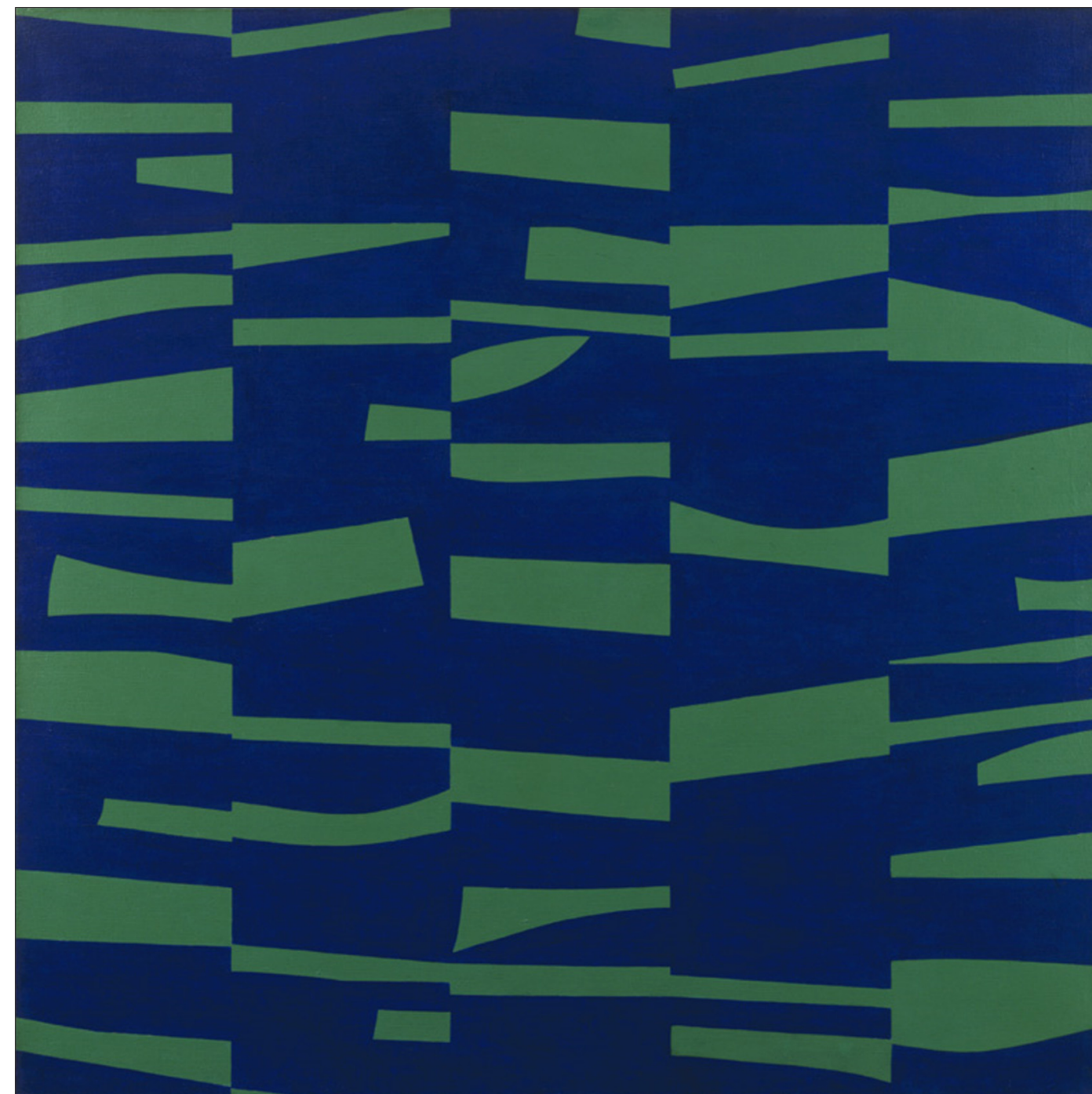
Ellsworth Kelly, The *Meschers*, 1951. Museum of Modern Art, New York

1 moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=3048 Like many artists conscripted during the Second World War, Kelly began his military career working in a unit which specialised in camouflage, an experience upon which his post-war work drew heavily
2 Antony Beevor, *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy*, Viking, 2009
3 10 May, 2010, 11.05pm
4 To be fair, it's not as if I don't have previous here
5 The English essayist and man of letters, Horace Walpole, coined the term serendipity in 1754 in a letter to an acquaintance about a chance discovery he had made. "This discovery [...] is almost of that kind which I call serendipity, a very expressive word, which as I have nothing better to tell you, I shall endeavor to explain to you: you will understand it better by the derivation than by the definition. I once read a silly fairy tale, called The Three Princes of Serendip: As their highnesses travelled, they were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of." Horace Walpole, January 28, 1754, as quoted in James H. Austin, *Chase, Chance and Creativity: the Lucky Art of Novelty*, MIT press, 2003
6 According to a BBC survey, serendipity is Britain's favourite word, although a note of caution here: the survey was held in 2000 and 'Quidditch' came second, demonstrating the power for contemporaneity to sway research findings. Source: news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/930319.stm

work with them. It's a call to arms: the 7,000-word, long copy recruitment ad for those who believe the ability to create delightful surprise is the most powerful tool, tactic and strategy we've ever had and that now, more than ever, is the time to regroup behind it.

The music of chance

The historian Robert Friedel outlines three different types of serendipity in his 2001 essay, *Serendipity is No Accident*.[7]

Columbian serendipity is the most simple: discovery by sheer luck. Looking for one thing, but finding something else and recognising its value. Columbus was seeking a Western passage to the Indies when he found the Americas, but he was wise enough to capitalise on his fortune. Similarly, the DuPont chemist who inadvertently discovered Teflon wasn't looking to create a non-stick coating, but his employers were quick to market what he discovered.[8]

Archimedean serendipity is slightly different. Archimedes was looking to solve the problem of how to measure the weight of non-uniform solids, but he didn't take a bath with the idea of cracking that problem in mind. His 'eureka' moment was one of pure serendipity.

In a recent New Yorker article, the journalist Malcolm Gladwell recounts a similar story about a US pharmaceutical company's surprise cancer drug discovery, comparing it to Alexander Fleming's discovery of penicillin: "Fleming was looking for something to fight bacteria, but didn't think the answer would be provided by the mold that grew on a Petri dish he accidentally left out on his bench."[9]

Finally, there is Galilean serendipity. When Galileo first pointed his telescope at the heavens, he was unclear about exactly what he was going to see; what he discovered went far beyond what he imagined. He had a structure and intent, but no fully-formed conception of what this would produce. That said, his wisdom to create the setting within which the surprise could happen was no mean feat.

The human condition: safety vs surprise

Human beings are painfully contradictory. We crave stability and security, yet rebel against the perceived negativity of safety by seeking out the surprising and spontaneous[10] to spare us from monotony. The need[11] for surprise is as basic a human need as the certainty we'll have a roof over our heads and food in our stomachs.

Surprise and chance are essential to our species' survival – they are the forces that help us adapt to our environment by the mutation of genomes and natural selection.[12] And they are the forces that make us a creative species: one capable of finding new ways to express ourselves and new ways to explain the world around us.

The behavioural psychologist Geoffrey Miller argues that our openness towards and desire for surprise and spontaneity in ideas and actions are examples of traits which, subconsciously, we believe are attractive to the opposite sex. They are characteristics which, if we display them properly – either through our words and actions or, increasingly, through the brands we choose to define ourselves by – will give our genes a better chance of being passed on to future generations.[13]

Brands, too, need that element of creative surprise, both in the planning and execution of their strategies. Just as our propensity for spontaneity boosts the likelihood of our genetic survival, so does a brand's.

The death of surprise

As physicists will tell you, moment by moment our universe slides towards chaos. Yet the irony of this is a decline in the randomness we experience in our everyday lives.

To some extent, this is a positive: the chances of being struck down by *force majeure* grow ever smaller: our natural predators are few; we have successfully eradicated many of the diseases that

source: xkcd.com/137
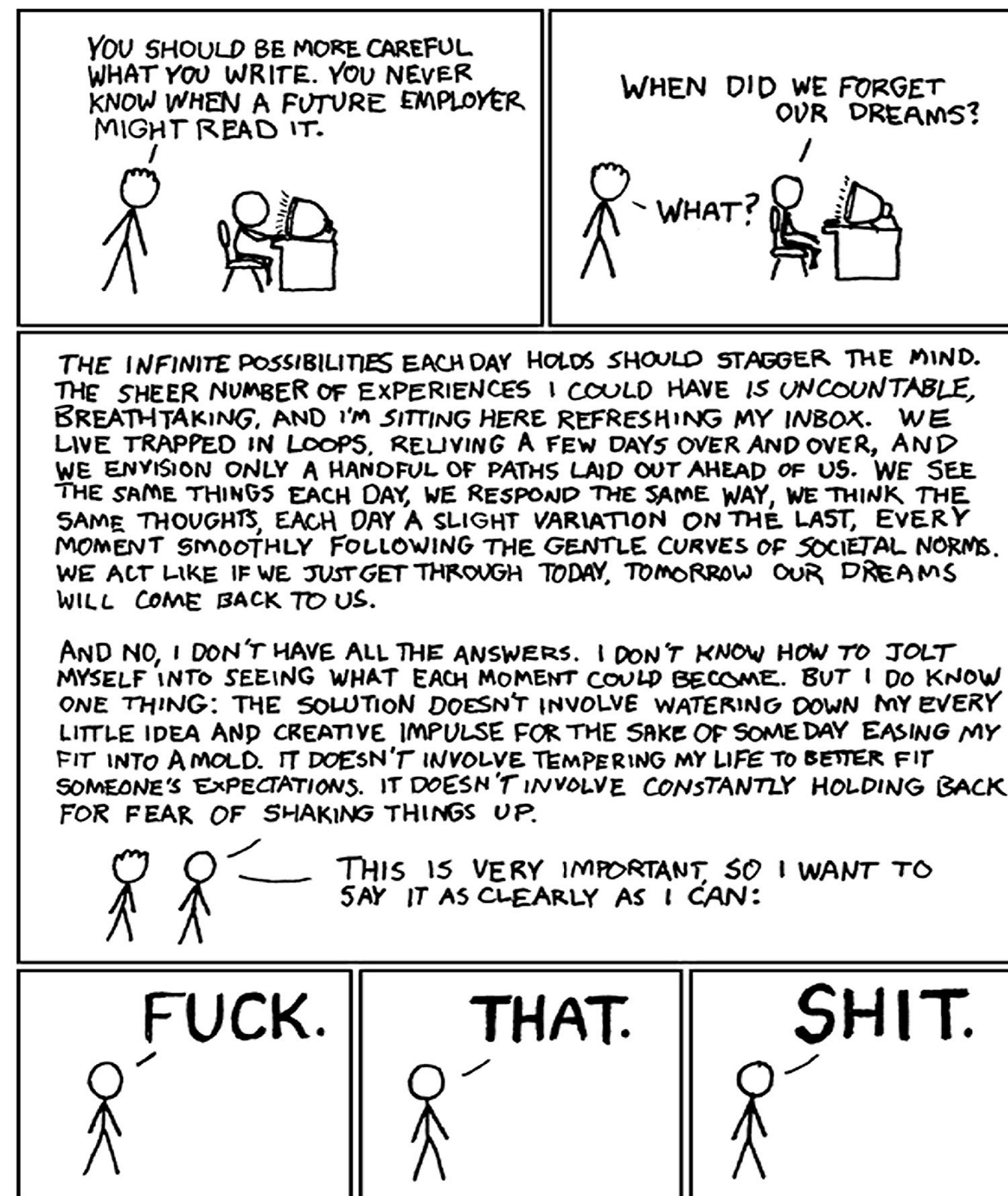
7 Robert Friedel, 'Serendipity is No Accident', *The Kenyon Review*, spring 2001
8 In 1938 a chemist called Roy Plunkett embarked on an experiment to find a replacement for freon in order to produce a more efficient refrigeration process. He accidentally produced a solid that turned out to be polymerised tetrafluoroethylene. He saw that the material had some interesting properties, and the DuPont labs were well equipped to explore these further. Thus, Teflon was born. Source: recounted in Robert Friedel, 'Serendipity is No Accident', *The Kenyon Review*, spring 2001
9 Malcolm Gladwell, 'The Treatment – why is it so difficult to develop drugs for cancer?' *The New Yorker*, 17 May 2010
10 Safety and security are among the most basic human needs, as identified by psychologist Abraham Maslow in his hierarchy of needs, but spontaneity is right at the top of his pyramid, a central cog in the engine of self-actualisation
11 The teak-toned and polarising self-help guru Tony Robbins has a talk on ted.com in which he talks at length about fundamental human needs. If you can get past the Jock-styling and abundant self-regard, he actually has quite an intelligent argument. See: ted.com/index.php/talks/tony_robbins_asks_why_we_do_what_we_do.html
12 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press, 2006
13 Geoffrey Miller, *Spent: Sex, Evolution and Consumer Behaviour*, Viking Books, 2009. The book where Naomi Klein's *No Logo* meets Richard Dawkins's *The Selfish Gene*. An essential read

blighted our ancestors; and our ability to predict (if not prevent) events which might cause natural disasters improves annually.

But our technological advances have come at a cost. Our attempts to mitigate the effects of randomness and strip out risk are robbing life of its richness. This isn't a case of romanticising an age of galloping consumption or 10% infant mortality – it's the propensity for life to delight, shock and surprise on a daily basis. Granted, there are benefits: we need never see a duff film again; never stay in a hotel room we haven't seen; never meet a potential lover who might disagree with our worldview; never buy a book we might not like; never get lost; never even have to cover an inch of unnecessary tube platform,[14] but I'm not convinced this is a wholly positive trend, either for people or brands. It creates a level of expectation which is almost impossible to meet and strips out the opportunity for chance and surprise.

Data, data everywhere

The writer John Battelle first coined the phrase "the database of intentions" in a blog in 2003[15] to describe the aggregated totality of "every search, every result list ever tendered, and every path taken as a result."[16] Battelle argues that this information is a proxy for the massed intentions of humankind – a vast database of desires, wants and needs that can be exploited in countless ways, and can tell us "extraordinary things about who we are and what we want."[17]

This database is growing exponentially. Our personal digital data – the virtual vapour trail we leave behind whenever we visit a site, send an email, receive a text or check an update on Twitter or Facebook – will blossom and bloom as we move to integrate the online world ever more with our offline selves.

Businesses and brands are only now waking up to the opportunities afforded by analysing this vast data mine. And granted, this information is a brilliant resource; the algorithms which interpret it are wonderful tools for unlocking powerful insights.[18]

However, an over-reliance on computational analysis of the data stream only serves to increase the erosion of surprise. Amazon and LoveFilm effectively limit our choices to artists, writers and directors which their algorithms predict we'll like based on what we liked in the past and what people who are like us like. This is not the same as what we might like in the future. Subjected to this feedback loop, taste and opinion begin to homogenise and the opportunity to chance across something and feel the emotional power of that discovery, even if it's only something as small as a new band, is reduced.[19]

Technologists will argue that we have social networks like Facebook to direct us to these chance discoveries, but this isn't true chance or serendipity, it's filtered group-think, and, as we'll see, comes from people we've selected because they share our tastes. And while applications like Stumbleupon, LastFM or Pandora[20] attempt to recreate a sense of discovery, because they're based on user-defined parameters, they are only really telling people what they want to hear, keeping them in a rut. They're fallible, too, as anyone who has had an insulting LoveFilm recommendation will attest.[21]

Stepford lives

Before we blame it all on the internet, we should take some responsibility ourselves. As cognitive and behavioural psychologists continue to build a better understanding of human nature, the façade that we're rational creatures who, given the facts, can make high-quality judgements of what the best course of action is rapidly crumbles.[22] That we're able to make decisions at all is no mean feat given the huge number of biases that psychologists and behavioural economists have identified us employing.[23]

Confirmation – or, 'myside'[24] – bias is a common form of selective thinking whereby we tend to notice and look out for events or information which reinforce our beliefs rather than challenge them.[25] For instance, the propensity for believers in mediums to focus on the hits and ignore the misses in a psychic

reading, or for investors to believe that stocks remain good bet in the face of signs of an impending financial meltdown.

Brands rely on this, (among other biases). In a consumer market with millions of SKUs, brands act as heuristics: the mental shortcuts we use to navigate a world of too much choice.[27] Hence our propensity to 'sleepwalk shop',[28] buying the same grocery basket week in, week out, or doing the same Starbucks run every morning. Gwilym Davies, the reigning world champion barista is challenging this with a beautifully elegant bit of serendipity marketing – a coffee disloyalty card (below). The idea is simple: build support for independent, quality-focused coffee shops with the promise of a free coffee from his establishment, Prufrock, by encouraging people to try other cafés.

When the confirmation bias combines with the human herd instinct,[29] in which birds of a feather flock together and emulate each other, the result is broadly homogenous groups with widely shared beliefs.[30] Technology will continue to amplify this tendency for homophily, with online social networking making it ever easier to follow and interact those people whose worldviews chime with our own and ignore those who might challenge us.

Those challenges are vitally important for the formation of new ideas – the sand in the oyster which

14 The debatably inessential iPhone Tube Exits app, which tells you which carriage to board to arrive by your exit or interchange, shaving seconds off your commute
15 battellemedia.com/archives/2003/11/the_database_of_intentions
16 John Battelle, *The Search: How Google and Its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed Our Culture*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2006
17 battellemedia.com/archives/2010/03/the_database_of_intentions_is_far_larger_than_i_thought
18 Matt Sadler, 'Data is our future, welcome to the age of infomagination', *Campaign*, 2 April 2010
19 Damon Darlin, 'Serendipity, lost in the digital deluge', *The New York Times*, 1 August 2009
20 stumbleupon.com, last.fm, pandora.com
21 In 2006, Walmart was accused of racism when its recommendation engine paired *Planet of the Apes* with a documentary about Martin Luther King. Source: Lev Grossman, 'If you liked this', *Time*, 14 June 2010. Even more controversially, LoveFilm optimistically offered me *Glee* the other day
22 Dan Ariely, *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces that Shape Our Decisions*, Harper Collins, 2009
23 Wikipedia lists more than 100 cognitive biases, covering decision-making, beliefs, sociability and memory. There are undoubtedly more.

24 Jonathan Baron, *Thinking and Deciding*, Cambridge University Press, 2000
25 Dan Ariely, 2009
26 Jason Zweig, 'How to Ignore the Yes Man in you Head', *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 November 2009
27 Alex Dunsdon, 'Beware The Age Of Conversation, Embrace The Age Of Osmosis', *Campaign*, 10 April 2009. In 1994, Americans could choose from c. 500,000 consumer products, today Amazon.com lists more than 24 million. Source: Sheena Iyengar, *The Art of Choosing*, Little Brown, 2010
28 The power of sleepwalk shopping was brilliantly demonstrated in AMV/BBDO's 2008 IPA Effectiveness Awards paper for its 'Try Something New Today' campaign for Sainsbury's. AMV placed a man in a gorilla suit in the store, then asked customers whether they had noticed anything odd about their shopping visit that day. The vast majority of respondents had failed to spot the very obvious plant: they were effectively shopping on auto-pilot. Source: Sainsbury's: How an idea helped make Sainsbury's great again - IPA Effectiveness Awards Case Study 2008, *Advertising Works 17*, IPA, 2008
29 Mark Earls, *Herd: How to Change Mass Behaviour by Harnessing Our True Nature*, John Wiley & Sons, 2007
30 As the economist Umair Haque writes, "to be 'friends with 1,000 people who are also obsessed with vintage 1960s glasses isn't friendship — it's just a single, solitary shared interest." blogs.hbr.org/haque/2010/03/the_social_media_bubble.html

seeds the pearl. The computer scientist and web pioneer Jaron Lanier believes that the 'strangeness' in human interaction is being "leached away by the mush-making process"[31] of online social networks. Writing in *You Are Not A Gadget*, his treatise on Web2.0, he argues passionately for more chance, randomness and surprise, slamming Facebook for the way it gives us "multiple-choice identities" and laying into Wikipedia for "erasing point of view in its entirety."[32]

Facebook will take multiple-choice identity to a new level with the recent announcement of its Open Graph initiative, which will install social plug-ins – a 'like button' – on partner sites and will aggregate the content they produce on individuals' Facebook pages. For instance, hitting the button on the Amazon-owned Internet Movie Database will automatically add the film to the Facebook user's 'Favourite Movies' section.[33] As @themanwhofell commented eloquently the other night:[34]

> The awful/wonderful thing about the web is that it compresses the sublety and wonder of life into tiny nuggets of digestible information.
> 1:54 AM May 23rd via Snaptu
>
> And much as I rail against those restrictions, I recognise that they increasingly define my life.
> 1:55 AM May 23rd via Snaptu
>
> It makes me question who is the "real" me. I assume it's the physical me but that often just seems like a pale imitation of the internet me.
> 1:59 AM May 23rd via Snaptu
>
> Of course, an internet life is perfect because it allows for infinite revision of thoughts/persona.
> 2:23 AM May 23rd via TweetDeck
>
> But it is also an empty existence, bereft of spontaneity, joy or surprise. It is an endlessly vain soliloquy. Lovely.
> 2:24 AM May 23rd via TweetDeck

Information overload
It may seem counter-intuitive, but the explosion in consumer choice, too, is encouraging us to lead more predictable lives. Our reaction to the deluge of information which washes over us daily is to stick with what we know. YouGov research reveals the average UK internet user regularly visits just six websites.[35]

On demand television services and PVRs mean we watch only what we want to watch – the tendency to sit down in front of the television and watch whatever happens to be on is becoming obsolete. Gargantuan iTunes collections and all-you-can-eat music services like Spotify are replacing the radio as the way to listen to and discover music. With them, the opportunity to be truly surprised is vanishing.

The role of brands in removing surprise
As marketers, we're exacerbating these trends. The combination of a growing reliance on data combined with our belief that confirmation bias is the best way to cement brand preference is calcifying choices and opinions. Data is purely rational; it works to the theory that there is one, best, possible outcome. It helps brands deliver what their customers want, when they want it.

Data-based marketing takes chance out of the equation: the success story of digital marketing isn't a triumph of potentially risky creativity in an interactive space, it's ruthless efficiency: paid search that gives consumers exactly what they want, when the algorithm predicts they'll want it, or, rather, hooks them up with whichever relevant brand has paid the most to talk to them.

It's not an idea from the realms of science fiction to imagine that algorithm growing more powerful in the future and data becoming the principal currency of the communications world, so that the history of every consumer's needs and wants and the places where they experienced them combine with an knowledge of all the branded messaging they have ever seen to tell a marketer exactly what will work with whom, where, and when.

Granted, this kind of technology will furnish us with a powerful weapon in the argument for effectiveness, but it will rapidly become very predictable and, to the detriment of the brand. Could it ever really deliver the kind of confusion, delight and surprise elicited by a chance discovery of a real Coca-Cola happiness vending machine, like the

one created to tie in seamlessly with the *Happiness Factory* TV campaign?[36] Without human expertise to interpret data, we'll rapidly end up with the kind of direct-response communication which speaks personally to its target – transactional information that reduces the role of the brand to little more than a stamp of origin in what would rapidly turn into a commodity market.

The irony of this is that this isn't really what people want and it's not the way that they consume, at least, not all the time. The growing reliance on Google's search algorithm (or whatever adaptation thereof

1% Google searches which go beyond the first page

comes next) to deliver business results means our industry slides ever close to the old direct marketing model in which creativity was always relegated to a poor fourth division spot behind media, timing and relevance. To me, this is the dystopian future imagined in films like *Minority Report* and *I-Robot*, not the future of effective, engaging, entertaining, surprising brand communication that we're capable of. It's a world of safety and utility where brands try to be all things to all people – nice, but never surprising. You need look no further than the 2010 British General Election[37] to see how much of a danger to a brand that kind of approach courts.

The Sunblest™ election
The 2010 General Election was supposed to be the most exciting, inclusive and important in a generation. Schooled in the intricacies of Barack Obama's pioneering micro-campaign model and powered by the always-on networked society, the various political campaigns were supposed to engage voters with a degree of personal relevance and potency the

31 Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not A Gadget: A Manifesto*, Allen Lane, 2010 25 Dan Ariely, 2009
32 Ibid
33 news.cnet.com/8301-13577_3-20003053-36.html
34 circa 02.00hrs, 23 May 2010. Themanwhofell is one of the people I follow on Twitter. Very funny, but be warned, he does tweet quite a lot. See twitter.com/themanwhofell
35 archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/e-government/directgov/

36 The machine starts by vending free bottles of Coke, then steps up a gear, delivering sandwiches and huge metre-long pizzas by the end of the stunt. See: adweek.blogs.com/adfreak/2010/01/magical-coke-machine-dispenses-happiness.html for a link to the film
37 At the time of writing, there's only been one, so if the Conservative-LibDem coalition has fallen apart over the summer, it's the May election that I'm talking about here

like of which the electorate had never experienced before. The reality was a bland campaign that was initially buoyed by the novelty of prime-ministerial debates, but which soon descended into cynicism and apathy. What went wrong? Focus groups.

This is not an attack on research *per se*, rather the manner in which the three main political parties used it. The BBH chairman Jim Carroll describes the 2010 election as the "Sunblest Election"; the election in which marketing "created three soft, medium sliced, plastic-packaged loaves. Designed to please, guaranteed not to let you down. Perfectly pleasant on their own terms, but curiously unsatisfactory."[38]

The mistake that the three main parties made was to attempt to give everybody exactly what research told them they wanted. They allowed focus groups to remove the hard, unpalatable edges of their messages. Can it come as any surprise that parties which talked exclusively to undecided voters in key marginal seats ended up with policies that merely reflected mainstream opinion? And, consequently, that voters had trouble distinguishing between the three brands on offer? All three allowed themselves to be 'mysided' by the same research, ending up with vanilla policies. The only question that remains is how well the three brands will survive the current term of office; the obituaries are already being written for the Liberal Democrats.[39]

The message is clear – stand for something; be different, or be subsumed. It recalls two famous Bill Bernbach quotes: "In advertising, not to be different is virtually suicidal," and "We don't ask research to do what it was never meant to do, and that is to get an idea."[40] Today, surprise is the way to do it.

Difference has always been essential to a brand's success, although the manner in which brands are 'different' has changed as they have evolved.

John Grant identifies three ages of branding.[41] The first is the age of the trademark – a time when the brand's difference was the level of trust imbued in it. In commodity markets, the first brands were products upon which consumers could rely. Difference here was a matter of efficacy: better, quicker, stronger.

Brands on the brain

This was followed by the age of aspiration, in which manufacturers acknowledged the need to evolve from being mere goods-producing processes to entities dedicated to creating and satisfying consumers;[42] an effect they achieved by reframing their brands to reflect buyers' post-war, affluence-fuelled wishes and desires; their points of difference being the audiences they aimed at and the degree to which they achieved this.

The third age – the tail end of which we find ourselves in now – is what Grant calls the era of "new marketing". A time in which brands differentiate themselves by what they stand for. Brands have become concepts to live by, "freestanding ideas that take hold and spread"[43] – in essence, little more than virus-like memes. It's our job to manage that spread by facilitating engagement with brands.

To paraphrase the M&C Saatchi planner Alex Dunsdon, we're hopelessly optimistic about the kinds and levels of engagement we expect our audiences to have with brands.[44] The vast majority of people don't actively seek a relationship with the brands they use; we have to stage the vast majority of connections with brands.

To say or to do?

The ongoing debate as to whether it is enough today for a brand merely to talk to people, or whether it should be offering some form of utility by doing something for them[45] to forge these connections is, I believe, asking the wrong question. It's not a case of whether we should be doing or saying – there is a role for both. It's more a question of what we should be doing and saying.

All the evidence points towards engineering the things we do and say so that we maximise emotional engagement – the concept of a brand as an idea that 'takes hold and spreads' is fine, but rational, persuasional messages aren't necessarily the best way of achieving this. There is strong evidence that our brains process advertising messages with a low degree of cognitive involvement.[46] The ideas we create don't necessarily need to be rationally persuasive.

Bruce Hall neatly sidesteps the debate and opens it to a far wider floor than those with vested interests in the effectiveness of television advertising by demonstrating that what's more important than the manner in which a message is processed is whether it stimulates an emotional response in the recipient.[47] In essence: behavioural changes – from awareness through opinion to, (potentially) purchase intent – flow from the emotional engagement with the brand.

This is where surprise is so important. A number of recent studies at both a product and communications level link surprise to a strong emotional response.[48] Emotions rule over logic when it comes to forming brand preferences.[49]

Not only is the ability to surprise and delight crucial to forming positive emotive bonds between audiences and brands, but a recent Belgian study demonstrates a strong increase in word of mouth to positively and negatively surprising brand encounters.[50] We have to make sure we're creating more of the former and mitigating more of the latter if we want our brands to take hold and spread.

Sony's much-celebrated *Balls* commercial for its Bravia range was a beautiful, emotionally-engaging audio-visual surprise; the sheer amount of interest it generated and extent to which it became a 'shared' resource is a clear indication of the level of emotional engagement it achieved and a demonstration that surprise doesn't have to be practically useful to be serendipitous. For an example of practical surprise , Carling's recent 'Cold Beer Amnesty', which toured

38 bbh-labs.com/wind-tunnel-politics
39 independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/party-reaction-liberal-democrats-fear-deal-will-provoke-exodus-1972266.html
40 ddb.com/bernbach.html
41 John Grant, *New Marketing Manifesto: The 12 Rules For Building Successful Brands In The 21st Century*, Texere Publishing, 2000
42 Theodore Levitt, 'Marketing Myopia', *Harvard Business Review*, September/October 1975
43 John Grant, 2000
44 Alex Dunsdon, 2009
45 The argument for action over words is elegantly made by John Owen in his essay 'Ideas that Do', *Campaign*, 26 June 2009

46 Feldwick & Heath, 50 Years Using the Wrong Model, *Research*, 2007 and Robert Heath, 'The Hidden Power of Advertising', Admap Monograph 7, *Admap*, 2001
47 Bruce Hall, 'Is Cognitive Processing the Right Dimension?' *Admap*, January 2003. Hall writes: "Emotional engagement (...) is a prerequisite for behavioural change. Cognitive processing of information is secondary to the underlying emotional and behavioural effects."
48 Joelle Vanhamme, 'The Link Between Surprise and Satisfaction', *The Journal of Marketing Management*, July 2000. For a more product-related read on the link, try Geke Ludden et al, Surprise & Emotion, Delft University of Technology, and Luis Macedo and Amilcar Cardoso, Using Surprise to Create Products That Get the Attention of Other Agents, ISEC, Portugal, 2001
49 Wendy Gordon, in *Brand New Brand Thinking*, Merry Baskin & Mark Earls, Kogan Page, 2002
50 Debaix & Vanhamme, 'Inducing word-of-mouth by eliciting surprise' The *Journal of Economic Psychology*, February 2003

Just as Secret Cinema is subverting the rules of film-going, **chatroulette**[4] is proving that online social networking doesn't have to be an exercise in tick-box functionality. The site is disarmingly simple: plug in a webcam, talk to a random stranger. And if you can get past the inevitable (and excessive) male nudity, there's a whole world of surprise and delight out there. Imagine you were one of the chatters who suddenly found themselves talking to the singer-songwriter Ben Folds (pictured) and his audience[5] when he decided to pay homage to another chatroulette/YouTube phenomenon, Merton.[6]
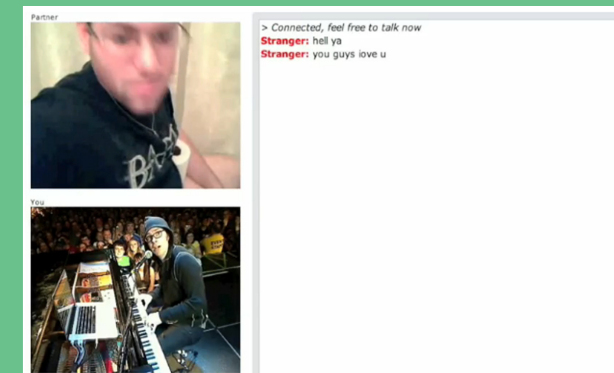
Brave brands are embracing this entirely random online world' with serendipitous campaigns of the Columbian type. **French Connection** dared men to charm women on the site, with the first to score a date winning a £250 voucher – a small price to pay for the huge amount of PR and word-of-mouth the stunt generated.[8] Proving that personalisation doesn't have to be predictable, **Burger King** put The King on the site[9] instead of the streets to hand out vouchers for a Steakhouse XT promotion with an entirely random, but entirely personal commercial; and the **Travelocity** roaming gnome has appeared encouraging users to take a trip.[10] It's hard to find any negative feedback on the his online adventures.

Creating useful surprise among an audience doesn't necessarily mean a brand forcing its customers to move out of their comfort zones or take a huge punt. Along with a number of online travel sites, **LateRooms.com** offers 'secret room' packages: customers can select a rough geographical area and specify the star-rating of the hotel, while the name and exact address of the establishment is only released to the user once payment has been made. Gekko.com offers 'surprise' rooms based on other hotels you've enjoyed in the past •

4 chatroulette.com Currently the site is experiencing around 1,000,000 visits a day
5 youtube.com/watch?v=LfamTmY5REw
6 youtube.com/watch?v=JTwJetox_tU
7 thetrendwatch.com/2010/05/14/the-5-brands-that-dared-to-play-chatroulette/
8 contagiousmagazine.com/2010/03/french_connection_chatroulette.php
9 Explains Jason Marks, the CP+B interactive creative director: "People are using chatroulette as another screen, another TV channel ... this is their own live, personal TV commercial they take part in. It was totally unfiltered, not like an ad buy. It was real-time interaction in a completely new way." (source: Noreen O'Leary, 'Why Some Marketers are Betting on Chatroulette', *BrandWeek*, 11 April 2010)
10 Brian Morrissey, 'Travelocity Takes a Spin on Chatroulette', *Adweek*, 1 April 2010

11 hipstery.com
12 The London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games
13 Paul Kelso, 'Olympics: Empty seats a concern for Games', *The Guardian*, August 12th, 2008
14 The 'official' Trafalgar Square karaoke film on Youtube has had close to 3,000,000 views; while the flashmob dance in Liverpool Street Station has had over 21,000,000. A recent sample of comments from the karaoke includes: "his is everything that Dr. Martin Luther King dreamed of", "John Lennon would be proud", and "This= one word: UTOPIA!"

the summer music festivals, offered to swap any can of warm beer for an ice-cold Carling. It's hard to think of anything more serendipitous and more emotionally engaging than a cold beer on a hot day.

Diminishing returns

The lessons here are simple: when we create serendipitous surprise we are more likely to build emotional engagement between audience and brand. The trouble is, the very forces which are reducing the amount of serendipity in people's lives are also reducing our very ability as communicators to create surprises.

Scratch below the gossamer veneer of agency brands and positioning statements and we're all the same. The vast majority of our creative teams come from High Wycombe, Watford or St Martins. And it's not just the creative department that's at fault. As the IPA chairman Rory Sutherland noted on his blog, there are far too many Oxford graduates in account management.[51] Demographically, we're too pure. Our sameness is risking our very future by limiting the opportunity for difference.

Our growing reliance on technology amplifies this homogeneity; first, there was MTV; now, YouTube is the premier resource for creative stimulation. The Euro RSCG chairman Gerry Moira blames the fact that "creative departments have slowly marginalised themselves, moving from original, conceptual thinking to obsessing about execution. There was a time when inventing ideas such as After Eight or Mr Kipling were all in a day's work for our creatives; now the rewards are there for 'best rip-off of a pop promo'."[52]

And, I believe, our insecurity is making us inseparable in our clients' eyes. We rightly have an ambition to be our clients' business partners, yet strive to achieve this by emulating and attempting to supplant partners they already have – management consultants, design agencies *et al* – while being stubbornly blind to the fact that we already *are* their partners by dint of the fact that we supply them with business-changing, creative ideas.

51 community.brandrepublic.com/blogs/rory_sutherlands_blog/archive/2009/08/30/the-ipa-oxbridge-and-lap-dancers.aspx. Sutherland writes: "One common lament you would commonly hear at the IPA over the last few years concerned the lack of diversity in advertising agencies: 'The whole industry is still dominated by white Oxbridge graduates.' (…) it simply isn't true to say there are too many Oxbridge graduates in advertising. There are hardly any – do a survey if you like –Cambridge graduates in agencies anywhere. There are, however, far too many Oxford graduates."
52 Quoted in Andrew Cracknell, 'Do agencies undervalue creativity?' *Campaign*, 25 February 2005

THE SURPRISE MANIFESTO

We're losing our ability to create surprise and serendipity. Yet the steps to reclaiming those powerful tools are within all agencies' grasp. Like Columbus, we need the capability to spot the 'right' wrong answers when we come across them; like Archimedes, we need to learn to switch off and let the solutions come to us; and like Galileo, we need to set up the right structures to find truly surprising ideas. What follows are a series of simple steps to help achieve this, both for our clients and, in turn, their customers.

1. Always take the indirect route

If you'd asked a general in the First World War what he thought about the Ghost Army's diversionary tactics the answer would have been succinct: a waste manpower that could have been better deployed directly against the enemy.

But as the story demonstrates, oblique, iterative approaches to problems – both in the way we formulate a response and how that response tackles the issue – are often the best,[53] especially in non-mechanistic systems like human psychology. If direct approaches were the best, we would still be fighting trench warfare or, to bring it back to brands, listing rational product benefits and competing solely on price rather than attempting to seduce people with an emotional reward for developing a preference for a particular brand. An agency dedicated to the creation of surprise would use oblique, iterative approaches both strategically and creatively for its brands.

Be proud to bill 10% of agency time for non-brand related work: or, if that's too unpalatable a concept to sell to clients, build a business model that only needs to bill 90% of the agency's time, allowing half a day a week for staff to do something – anything – else. Encourage staff to share those discoveries in regular knowledge-sharing sessions. Promote the spread of ideas as memes that mutate and evolve as they are passed between carriers.

Allow the space and time for people to find Ideas. Ideas respect neither time nor location and require difference and depend on the chance, random associations that occur when we're not directly

thinking about a problem to deliver us the answer.[54] Company rules such as two-week limits on holidays might work for accountancy firms, but they have no place in creative businesses. We should incentivise staff to take longer, more diverse holidays[55] if we want them to bring different ideas to the table.

Make a virtue out of the roles that chance and accident play in creativity. When we see great
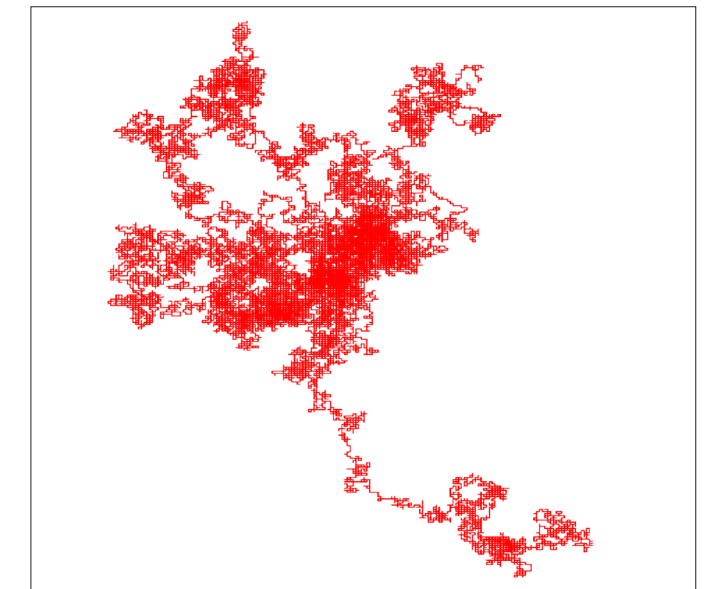
A computer-generated random walk: the direct route isn't necessarily the best, or most interesting (source: Google Images)

creativity – like that of Caravaggio or Mozart or Orson Welles or John Webster – we celebrate the ingenuity, cleverness and talent of its creator. Admitting there is a role for chance seems to diminish both the creative act and the creator's hand in it. But,

53 John Kay, *Obliquity: Why Our Goals Are Best Achieved Indirectly*, Profile Books, 2010
54 Steve Harrison, *How to Do Better Creative Work*, Prentice Hall Business, 2009
55 Ibid. Harrison recounts how his agency (Harrison Troughton Wunderman) paid those members of staff taking three weeks or more holiday in one burst double for all weeks taken over a fortnight, the thinking being that the more rested and disconnected from agency life they were upon their return, the better the quality of their work

as the copywriter and author Luke Sullivan describes the process, "without warning, an idea just shows up at your door one day, all nattied up like a Jehovah's Witness. You don't know where it comes from, it just shows up,"[56] just like it did for Archimedes. But this serendipity isn't random: When Horace Walpole first coined the term he spoke of a combination of "accident and sagacity".[57] Sagacity – the ability to apply insight and creative judgement – is just as important as the chance discovery. As Friedel writes, "The creative achievement lies not so much in creating the surprise but in seeing what it 'means'."[58]

2. Trust intuition born from expertise

This is where intuition and expertise come in to play. The other night I was at the D&AD president's lecture in which the outgoing D&AD chairman, Anthony Simonds-Gooding quizzed the legendary old guard from Collett Dickinson Pearce.[59]

Asked about presenting work to clients, Sir Frank Lowe explained why the agency only ever showed one execution. "It seemed unfair to charge our clients a large amount of money and then give them the responsibility to choose which work to run," he said puckishly. His approach recalls that famous line by the Sony founder, Akio Morita: "We don't ask consumers what they want. They don't know. Instead we apply our brain power to what they need, and will want, and make sure we're there, ready."[60] Morita just knew it would work.

Yet, as Malcolm Gladwell painstakingly illustrates in his bestseller *Blink*, we remain "innately suspicious of this kind of rapid cognition. We live in a world that assumes that the quality of a decision is directly related to the time and effort that went into making it (...) we believe we are always better off gathering as much information as possible and spending as much time as possible in deliberation."[61]

We need to **nurture this expertise and confidence**. In meetings with clients, we should make it a policy that we **always say what we think** and never simply say what we think the client wants to hear. If we develop the right kinds and mixtures of skillsets, we'll have all the know-how we need to create and curate powerful, differentiating ideas. We should **celebrate intuition**: our ability to come up with ideas without the need for long-winded research processes: "the memorable never emerged from a formula." [62, 63]

## 3. Hire and develop T-shaped people

If we want to come up with dramatically different ideas which leverage human insight and turn it into a competitive advantage for our clients, we have to **stop fishing the same small pond for our talent**. Ideas are only as good – and as different – as the people who have them. Our attempts thus far to do this have be tokenistic at best.

It goes without saying that the people we recruit should be bright, creative and digitally savvy. Where we need to push is for different perspectives: there are hundreds of professions with directly transferable skills. Political strategists, data visualisers, software designers, investigative journalists, behavioural economists, econometricians, semoiticians and, yes, data analysts: while information isn't is short supply, talented people who can interpret it and use it to create surprises are. We should be actively courting and recruiting these people because the best of them are classically T-shaped: a combination of expertise in a given discipline, with a broad knowledge of other areas.

T-shaped people are possessed of the curiosity which leads to an understanding of where their expertise sits in the wider business context; people who devour the rapidly evolving media convergence culture and who understand it from the inside, not people who look down upon it disconnectedly.

In part, cultural evolution is doing this job for us: the next generation of agency leaders are naturally T-shaped. But we can hurry the process.

We have to allow our talent to experiment
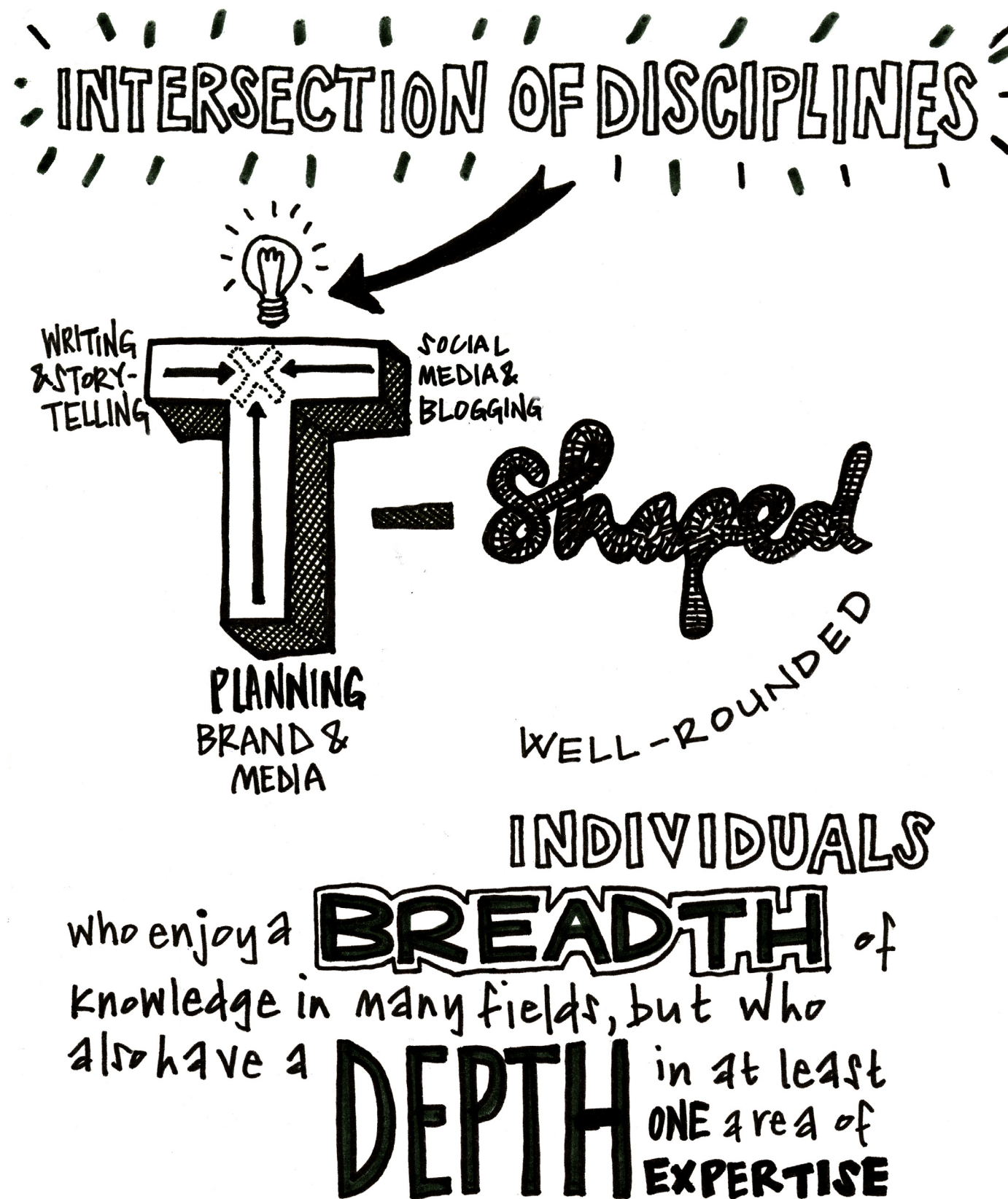
The T-shaped concept as it applies to a planner. Adapted from an illustration created by Anita Hart.
see: flickr.com/photos/anitakhart/

56 Luke Sullivan, Hey Whipple, Squeeze This, John Wiley & Sons, 2003
57 See note 5
58 Robert Friedel, 2001
59 Tony Brignull, Sir Frank Lowe, Sir Alan Parker, John Salmon and Alan Waldie, at the Institute of Education's Logan Hall, 19 May 2010
60 For a profile of this trailblazing businessman, see businessweek.com/magazine/content/04_30/b3893021_mz072.htm. Morita's quotation recalls another great industrialist, Henry Ford: "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses"
61 Malcolm Gladwell, Blink: *The Power of Thinking without Thinking*, Penguin, 2005
62 Another great, relevant Bill Bernbach line. Source: .ddb.com/bernbach.html
63 In a recent test at my agency, a creative director highlighted those moments in a 60s TV commercial which he instinctively felt would hit the highest emotional notes in the target audience. He drew a trace which was almost identical to the Link Test results

creatively; to learn through playing with new technology and ideas.[64]

Invest in new gadgets, allow people to play with them and get them to share their learnings and ideas. And **develop reverse-mentoring programmes**: the old guard can learn as much from new entrants to the industry as they can teach.

4. Be curators of ideas as well as creators

We have to become less protective of our ideas: we don't own them – if they're owned by anyone, it's by the people who spread and alter them, the people who turn a blueprint into the building blocks of our evolving culture. If we accept that our clients' businesses are in constant flux, then our ideas need to adapt and take oblique, indirect approaches to solve their problems.

We should cast ourselves as **agents of ideas, not ideas agencies**. This puts us in a curatorial role in which we nurture and shepherd ideas to make sure they are as potent and contagious as they can be. Such a role necessitates a far less partisan approach than we current adopt: it recognises that **an idea can come from any discipline** and that all that matters is that it is made as powerful as possible.

Taking this approach means cutting our ties with the traditional creative brief in favour of a looser process: **develop circular, open brief discussions** with key members of staff chosen because their because they are the best fit to solve the issue at hand. Crucially, this is not creativity by committee – the process respects discipline and expertise, but equally it acknowledges that the solution to a given problem is no one person's responsibility.

5. Less transmit, more receive

The great irony of communications companies like ours is the pathetic degree to which we actually communicate internally. We have created a culture in which it's better to say anything than remain reflective. Taking the indirect approach to ideas means we need to learn to listen a whole lot more. It

is only by listening that we can spot the interesting, serendipitous ideas that will create real surprise and delight among our audiences. **Listening can be an act of creation** – often the best help managers can give more junior staff is to listen and allow them to form their own ideas first. **Even in a hierarchy, people are equal as thinkers**.[65]
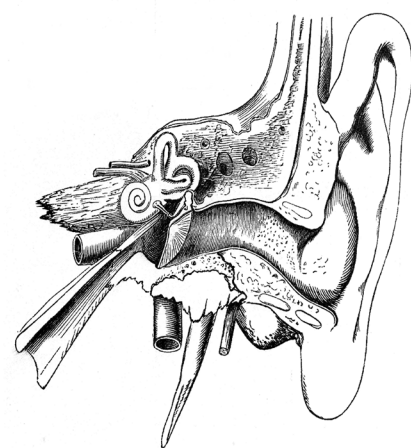

Fig 1. The human ear. Creative organ

We also need to **listen to our audiences** in a completely different way. One of the simplest and best ways to introduce a random element into the creative process is to take a radically different approach to research. As the May 2010 election demonstrated, using focus groups as a corroborative device doesn't work and leads only to sameness.

We should take a **co-creation approach to research**. This involves members of the target audience in the initial development of the brand platform idea, alongside key agency staff and, crucially, members of the client organisation. Better recruitment procedures are crucial here if we're to make the most out of these new research methodologies. Too often we recruit for homogeneity, when reality is diverse. We need to be surrounded by people from a wide range of identity groups: the greater the diversity and the more welcoming we are to diverse points of view, the greater the chance of cutting-edge, surprising, ideas.[66]

This is *not* a crowd-sourcing approach – **crowds don't have the answers**, at least, not the truly surprising ones. The oft-quoted example of the group of villagers who correctly guessed the weight of an ox when the average of their predictions was calculated[67] might seem magical, but the key word there is *average*. We neither want nor need average creative ideas.

6. Think in terms of brand platforms, not just propositions

John Kay writes of businesses that their "objectives are typically imprecise and multi-faceted, and change as we work towards them,"[68] which is why the oblique approach is often the best. Given the imprecise nature of these goals, the notion of a fixed strategy, brand proposition and guidelines is a nonsense. I would go so far as to say that the very concept of a campaign is outdated now; certainly one which doesn't allow for adaptation and evolution.

This doesn't mean we should shift to being merely tactical. While I think the days of fixed strategic propositions for brands are gone, there is still a need to plan for the future. The iterative, adaptive strategies we should be creating and curating should find their creative expression in a brand platform: **create a loose set of rules, codes or behaviours by which brands engage with their audiences**; bending and adapting to cope with the ever-shifting cultural sands. Such codes allow all the brand's agencies to create work which delivers on strategy and brand personality, yet retain the freedom to use channels and culture differences to their best advantage.

A stellar example is the work Crispin Porter + Bogusky has achieved for Burger King over the last six years: a wealth of surprising, delightful ideas all rooted to a core thought. From computer games through groundbreaking sites like *Subservient Chicken* to the recent 'dump a Facebook friend', BK eau de cologne and *Whopper Virgins* campaign. The work is less a series of riffs on the 'Have it Your

Way' theme, more a string of ideas rooted in a meaty truth: flame-grilled food tastes great; Burger King is the only fast-food outlet to sell it.

A Mongolian Whopper Virgin loses his cherry

7. Embrace projects, not retainers

Brand platforms, oblique strategies, and rules of engagement don't respect the traditional, managed account process, which rewards the agency for maintaining the status quo, not pushing the brand as far as it can go.

If an agency is to devote itself completely to creating surprise for its brands, it needs to **adopt a project-based remuneration system** that recognises that while there will naturally be a certain amount of guaranteed work over a period of time, the nature of that work will shift and flex as the brand adapts to culture in an evolutionary manner.

Under this approach, agencies would be paid a 'living wage' retainer, with a contract that allows them, and other of the client's partner agencies to **pitch the ideas they generate** via steps one to six for a bigger share of the marketing budget on an ongoing basis. It's an approach that would guarantee only the best ideas reach fruition; one which would ensure that surprise and serendipity for the brand's audience was at the heart of the marketing strategy. One that really puts ideas first. And that's an agency banner I think we'd all be proud to work under. •

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64 I taught myself to use Adobe InDesign to design and produce this paper – a skill I'll no doubt use on future client presentations and reports
65 Nancy Kline, *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind*, Cassell, 2009

66 Nancy Kline, 2009
67 For a more detailed account of the phenomenon, see James Surowiecki, T*he Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies and Nations*, Doubleday, 2004
68 John Kay, 2010