



Be different in three steps

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THINKING DIFFERENT AND ACTUALLY BEING DIFFERENT? WILLIAM LEACH HAS AN INKLING.

Think Different. Dare to Be Different. Differentiate or Die. Classic parlance of the branding world.

However, it is easier to *think* different than to really *be* different.

Thinking different is what most of us do on our couple of away days or planning sessions a year. Great blue skies open up and we dream, soar, dare, imagine. We feel great, pumped, inspired, ready to take on the world. Then we get back to the office...

After initial good intentions, we fall into the same old routine and let "reality" take over: "Clients would never buy that", "We'd lose too much business", "Our structure is not right", "Our contract demands five-and-a-half suits on the business!" Little nails, being hammered relentlessly into the coffin.

But that's most of us. There are some agencies that stand out from the sea of sameness. Really stand out. For having integrity of purpose, an imaginative vision, for challenging traditional structures, for being remunerated differently, for having clients not just buy-in but become advocates, for having talent queuing up at their door, for living the dream.

What is it that makes these agencies different? Here are three common themes, illustrated with the thinking of the leaders of agencies that are "doing" different.

DECIDE WHAT YOU WANT TO BE

"Be who you are and say what you feel because those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind." – Dr Seuss

It's no good being different for the sake of it. You have to have a purpose. Know what you are taking a stand for or what you are fighting against. Challenge convention, but offer a very real alternative.

Naked initially challenged convention by separating thinking from implementation and focusing exclusively on the first. Naked founding partner Will Colin says: "We started the agency in a recession, and our new approach proved to be very attractive at a time when clients were discovering that the old way of doing things wasn't working so well anymore."

Carl Johnson, a founder of the

hugely successful Anomaly, which was included in *Fast Company's* 50 Most Innovative Companies in the World, says two things that make the company different are its entrepreneurial compensation scheme – "100% refusal to 'sell time'. We charge by value pricing or some direct link to business performance" – and owning its own brands. "This is *the* key to our intentions, our ambitions, our reason for being."

Paul Lavoie, founder of Taxi – started in Montreal in 1992, and ranked ninth in the world by *Creativity* magazine – articulates the company's purpose: "The Taxi credo is 'Doubt the conventional, create the exceptional'. Doubt is the operative word as it leads to thinking differently. However, doubt is not just for its own sake, it is always with the intention of finding a more relevant answer than established convention offers."

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SACRIFICE

"To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment." – Ralph Waldo Emerson

What you choose *not* to do is just as important as what you choose to do.

It's a hard call to eschew short-term revenues for long-term wins, but if you want to stay true to your purpose, you have to be able to resist the temptation to give in "just this once". It ain't a principle until it costs you something.

All the differentiated agencies we've spoken to have had to sacrifice client opportunities either

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because the agency is difficult to classify or because their differentiated offer doesn't fit with perceived client requirements.

In Anomaly's case, refusing to sell time could have put it on a collision course with clients but it hasn't "because underpinning it is a willingness to back ourselves" says Carl Johnson. "Clients can appreciate paying more for success

as long as they can pay less for failure. Foregoing short-term client revenue for potential longer-term venture returns is the business model we are following."

You have to be able to make the seemingly controversial choices or decisions and stick by them. Strawberry Frog chose to compete directly against the large holding companies, not a mean feat for a start-up. Strawberry Frog founder Scott Goodson says: "We do what huge clients need and want, we just do it differently. We have special expertise to deliver global campaigns smarter, more effectively and more efficiently than the holding companies."

Ten years on, Strawberry Frog is going from strength to strength.

By being prepared to give something up, you open yourself to new opportunities. "Different is usually a risk," says Happy Corp founder Doug Jaeger, "and with any risk comes significant reward – keep trying."

STAY OPEN

"Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is not to stop questioning." – Albert Einstein

To stand out from the crowd is not enough. Agencies have stood out for a few brief, shining moments but quickly faded away or degenerated into pastiche.

To be truly different, you have to stay the course, forge new paths, try new things and keep inventing.

But as Doug Jaeger says: "Being different is hard to maintain. As tactics succeed, many follow."

Richard Hytner, who leads "transformation" for Saatchi & Saatchi globally, explains another benefit: "The joy people feel working for a company that takes a position in the market and the difference that makes to their ability to be the best they can be."

Carl Johnson sums it up by saying what Anomaly has gained by being truly different is "constant stimulation as we learn everyday, and ever strengthening integrity in a messy sell-out-fearful ad world".

Leadership and conviction is what it all boils down to. The difference between good leaders and great leaders is the ability of the great to transform. They do that by having powerful beliefs and convictions, the courage to stand by them, the power to attract people and partners on the journey and the generosity to share success. ■

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