

How agencies can deliver creative innovation that matters

By [Karen Ballenden](#), issued by [TBWA](#)

26 Jul 2022

Successful agencies create a world to which people want to belong



Karen Ballenden

Creative innovation is not about having an “Aha” moment, or a solo endeavor, especially for brands with a wide footprint, and that need to resonate with a large audience.

Being intentional about creating advertisements, television commercials, billboard, or any branded content, plays a vital role not just in extending a brand but also in informing and inspiring current and potential customers. It’s a deliberate process for the brand and for any agency tasked with creative work for a brand. There is no one person that has a flash of inspiration and produces a campaign, platform or design system – it takes a lot of people a lot of hours, over a long period of time to create great work.

For agencies that need to deliver creative thinking and campaigns on behalf of a multinational, dealing with many people in many different countries (both from the client and within the agency), it can take longer and require more collaboration around different thinking and creative styles.

Even for an agency collective like TBWA\ South Africa, which specialises in platform and system design for big brands, creative innovation is a journey: the result of trial and error, missteps and mistakes.

This was especially the case when working on MTN’s recent brand refresh. TBWA\ was responsible for landing the historic rebrand across the continent, in 18 markets.

Much like MTN’s creative platform, “What Are We Doing Today?” revolves around goals, drive and teamwork, so too did the process that went into the design of the platform.

It took collaborative problem-solving among just over 100 people with different expertise and points of view. As a collective, TBWA\ had to unleash the talents and passions of many people, and then harness them into a body of work that was useful to MTN.

Through the process, it became clear that innovative agencies are communities that have three capabilities: creative abrasion, creative agility and creative resolution.

Creative abrasion

Creative abrasion is about being able to create a marketplace of ideas through debate and discourse. The aim should be to amplify differences, not minimise them. Creative abrasion is not about brainstorming, where people often suspend their judgment of other’s ideas; it often means having very heated arguments that, in the end, work to create a portfolio of alternative ideas. But these arguments should always be constructive.

Team members in innovative agencies need to inquire – they need to actively listen, while advocating for their point of view, because innovation won’t happen unless there is both diversity and conflict.

Creative agility

Creative agility is about being able to test and refine any portfolio of ideas through quickly pursuing the idea, testing it out, then reflecting and adjusting where necessary. It's about discovery-driven learning where an agency acts, as opposed to plans, its way to the future. It's about pushing for design-thinking, and working with a combination of scientific method and artistic process.

Agencies should see this as a series of experiments, and not a series of pilots. Experiments are usually about learning. When there is a negative outcome, it's a learning curve. Pilots are often about being right. When they don't work, someone or something is to blame.

Creative resolution

Creative resolution is about decision-making in a way that can combine even opposing ideas to reconfigure them into new combinations that produce a solution that is useful.

Creative teams should never go-along-to-get-along. They should never compromise. And should never let one group or one individual dominate (even if it's the boss or an expert). Decision-making should be a patient and inclusive process that allows for both-and solutions to arise, and not simply either-or solutions.

No creative team will be successful across regions, no matter the brand they're working on, without these capabilities.

Creative agencies should also remember:

- **Collaborate. Collaborate. Collaborate.** Collaboration improves the way teams work together and solve problems. Collaboration and a sense of community leads to creative innovation, efficient processes, increased success, and ultimately, improved communication. Only through listening to and learning from team members, can innovation flow.
- **The process is never simple.** Even well-thought-out plans can become messy. Throughout the strategic and creative development, concepts can (and do) evolve. Some solutions are arrived at quickly, some take months – which means that work doesn't flow in the order in which it was planning, and suppliers and client needs to be managed on delays and deadlines. It all depends on how vexing the challenges are. Take everything one step at a time.
- **Don't fall in love with solutions.** When stress-tested in other markets, solutions might not resonate, and may then need to be let go.
- **The job is not done until the job is done.** Whatever challenges you face, dig deep and keep going until the best solutions are found for the brand you serve.
- **When unsure, collaborate again.** With teams. With the client. Collaboration is an incremental process, before it becomes a breakthrough.
- **Creative innovation takes a collective.** A collective that can innovate time and again is possible, but to do this, agencies must recast their understanding of what leadership is about. Leading creative collaboration is about creating the space where people are willing and able to do the hard work of creative problem-solving.
- **Talented people don't want to follow – they want to co-create the future.** To achieve this, agencies need to unlearn their conventional notions of leadership. It's not about creating a vision and expecting others to follow it. When trying to do something that's truly new, no one has the answer. No one knows the direction to go in, or even how to figure out how to get there.

To the TBWA collective in Africa, success in creative collaboration means creating a world to which people want to belong.

A world where the community is living at the frontier; where everyone is a disruptor; everyone has a voice; where everyone – no matter their level or role – can voice their thoughts and feelings about ideas or creative executions, and is heard.

That's the only way to deliver creative innovation that matters.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Ballenden is the group lead at TBWA\South Africa.

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