Science and Creativity

By Todd Powers

The immediate challenge with answering the question, "Can science lift the success rate of creativity?" comes from the realization that there is no consistent, objective measure of creativity. We have no way of observing two different pieces of art, of literature, of inventions or of advertising, and declaring that "This one is more creative than that one." At least not in the same way we can say that "This car can go faster than that car," or "This light is brighter than that light." Creativity is in the eye of the beholder, and as such is not uniformly judged.

This is not to say, however, that science cannot lift, or improve upon, creative success. It just means that we have to agree upon the measure of "success" being lifted.

I am reminded of a conversation I had while moderating a focus group discussion on advertising. My client was interested in having ads that were "inspiring." And so, near the end of the session, I asked my group of well-meaning research participants if they could tell me what it meant to be truly inspired. After some thought, one fellow offered this comment: "Well, I'm not sure how to describe what inspiring means, but I'll tell you this – if I have been motivated to act differently or think differently, then I know I have been inspired."

Ah, there you go. If you read an op-ed piece on political corruption, and as a result, you now think differently about corruption, or you even behave differently in the way that you vote on political candidates, then you have been inspired by the op-ed narrative.

At IBM, we used this approach to measure the "success" of our creative execution in advertising we developed and executed. The approach was simple enough. First, we had to agree on what constituted success in our advertising efforts. In one instance, we were trying to make ads that would encourage people to think that IBM was helping to "Build a smarter planet." We also wanted people to spend more money buying IBM products and services, of course.

Then, we measured the impact of the advertising against these metrics. This was accomplished using classic survey methods. We interviewed IT managers (the targets of our advertising), and asked them to rate IBM and various competitor companies on all sorts of things, including the degree to which each company helped make our world smarter. At the conclusion of the survey, we showed our respondents collages of images taken from different ads that had been "de-branded." That is, all the images had company-identifying logos and such removed. And we asked the survey participants if they recognized the images they saw. In this manner, we could classify our participants into two groups: a) those who were not exposed or did not recognize the images, and b) those who were exposed, and who could remember seeing the images.

Now it was a simple matter to go back and compare the ratings that these two groups of respondents gave us on ratings of IBM. Did those who were "exposed" to the creative executions rate the company higher than the "unexposed" on our key metrics? If so, then the creative was more successful. (Yes, this requires that the creative be effective enough to induce viewers to store images in their long-term memory well enough that they can be retrieved with cues, but let's just acknowledge that this is part of the job of "successful creative.")

But we took this one step further. We had our survey supplier send us the Duns numbers of the companies where our survey respondents worked. (We had used Dun and Bradstreet lists to draw our sample respondents, so we had the Duns numbers. Our survey vendor could send us the list of Duns numbers without violating any privacy or confidentiality agreements, since they did not share survey responses with us.) We then merged that list of Duns numbers with our Corporate Ledger data, and determined how much revenue each of our respondent companies had contributed over the course of the advertising campaign. When we sent the revenue data back to our survey vendor, they could easily tell us if those "exposed" to the creative had spent more money with IBM than the "unexposed."

And so, we had devised a means for survey science to measure the degree to which the advertising had changed the ways that people had thought about, or acted toward, IBM. We had very scalable measures of the degree to which our advertising creative was successful. This allowed us to select the ads which performed best, and run them more often. It also helped to teach us about the things that moved the needle, so that we could improve the creative execution over time.

So . . . I would argue that science can, indeed, lift the success rate of creativity. But only if we can agree on what is meant by creative success.