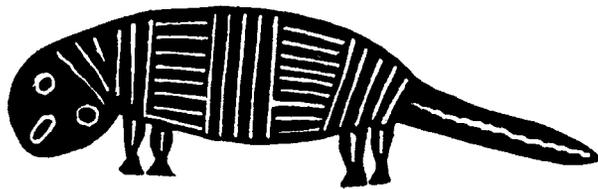


You May Not Know Where You're Going Until You've Got There

(Which is why The Best Brief may be The Brand)

By Jeremy Bullmore



There's a story that may or may not be true. But even if it isn't, it contains an important truth.

Just over two thousand years ago, King Hiero II, tyrant of Syracuse, delivered a quantity of gold to his resident goldsmith with instructions that it be turned into a votive crown to be used in a temple. Months later, when the crown was duly delivered, Hiero was distrustful. He suspected the goldsmith of having adulterated the gold with substantial quantities of silver, while keeping the rest of the gold for his own purposes. So he turned to Archimedes, his in-house consultant, and charged him with the task of establishing the truth.

Archimedes, of course, knew the specific weight of gold but in order to determine whether the crown was indeed of pure gold, he needed one other piece of information: he needed to ascertain the crown's volume.

Approached logically, this presented no problem. He could simply melt the crown down and form it into a brick – in which configuration its volume could readily be determined. “Good news, Your Majesty. It *was* pure gold. Sorry about the crown, though.”

Wisely, Archimedes rejected this solution and instead bent his exceptional mind to the challenge of how to measure the volume of a complicated solid while protecting its original form.

The problem preoccupied him. At some level of awareness, it never left his mind. Meanwhile, Hiero was beginning to let his impatience show.

For all his adult life, Archimedes had been accustomed to take a bath. So on many hundreds of occasions, he would have observed that, as he lowered his body into the bath, the water level rose; and as he began to leave the bath, the water level fell. And so it did on this particular occasion. But this occasion was different; not because of circumstances but because of his preoccupation: absolutely everything he observed or encountered was potentially relevant to that insistent problem. And so, in a flash moment of discovery, he linked the rise and fall of his bathwater with his pressing need to establish the volume of his patron's intricate crown. No wonder he sprang from his bath and into the street while crying, “Eureka!” He knew, with an intuitive certainty, that he'd discovered a way to measure the volume of complicated solids; but he still didn't know how he knew and he still didn't know why he knew.

For reasons that would seem to be more to do with appearances than veracity, those who openly admit their debt to intuition are frequently frowned upon. It seems somehow a bit flaky, regrettably unscientific. Scientists, certainly, even when they're aware of how they came to think of things, often go to great lengths to keep that knowledge to themselves. Sir Peter Medawar, himself a Nobel-winning scientist, once wrote: "Scientific papers in the form in which they are communicated to learned journals are notorious for misrepresenting the processes of thought that led to whatever discoveries they describe."

Once Archimedes had worked out, after the event, the nature of his discovery, and decided to submit it in the form of a paper to a learned journal, this, in part, is how it might have read:

"I approached this problem rationally. Since volume by definition implies space occupied, I reasoned that space occupied within a liquid allowed for the measurement of the volume of that liquid both before and after the immersion of a solid. It follows that the difference between the two, which I shall call 'displacement', must precisely equal the volume of the solid immersed. Thereafter, the only requirement was the choice of a vessel of the requisite size and of a shape that was readily susceptible to conventional linear measurement."

In the search for the validation of an idea, in the putting of hypotheses to the test, all that is excellent, utterly necessary stuff. But as an explanation of how that idea came about in the first place, it's utterly false. And because it's false, it misleads others and discourages brakes-off speculation. In business, particularly in marketing, we seem to be at least as reluctant as scientists to come clean about our processes of thought.

Sir Peter Medawar's perceptive comment about papers submitted to learned journals could just as well have been made about marketing case-histories. To reach a conclusion or a recommendation as a result of logical, step-by-step, inductive thought is seen to be highly responsible – whereas to allow that you had the inspiration first and tested it empirically only afterwards is to risk being accused of post-rationalisation. And in a business meeting, to accuse someone of post-rationalisation is tantamount to accusing them of cheating.

An unashamed understanding of how good thoughts often happen helps explain one of the undiscussed paradoxes of brand strategy.

Brands, by their very nature, are slippery, elusive entities; in part physical, in part the virtual creation of their

users. Responsible brand managers and agency account planners strive valiantly to pin down the essence of a brand – in lengthy documents, in PowerPoint® presentations and in imaginative visual mood boards.

Yet even the best of briefs never leads in a direct and relentless line to the creation of a brand. A brief acts as the springboard for some intuitive speculations about the possible nature of a brand; one or more of which may lead to an inspired representation of that brand; which in turn should trigger an immediate recognition that, *Yes! That's the brand!*

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Back in the 1950s, in New York, two advertising agencies would have been struggling to understand and express the nature of two very different brands: the VW Beetle and the Hathaway Shirt. Only when *Think Small* and the Hathaway man with the eye patch appeared, apparently from nowhere, was a full understanding of those brands instantly and fully available for everyone to share. In the end, paradoxically, when you get it right, the only perfect brief is the brand itself. When you get it right, a new member of the brand team should have only to look at its advertising – or its packaging – to know most of what they need to know about that brand. (But by all means show them the documentation afterwards.)

We don't talk about all this much because it sounds extremely imprecise, unprofessional and unbusinesslike. Yet if we start by being honest with ourselves, we should happily concede that just about everything we've ever done of real originality and merit has contained some element of apparent accident – whose use and value became explicable apparent only after its unexpected emergence.

And we should take courage from the honesty of others. Even mathematicians, it seems, embrace intuition. Cédric Villani, age 41, is the holder of a Fields medal, often described as the highest honour a mathematician can receive. He won his medal "For his proofs of nonlinear Landau damping and convergence to equilibrium for the Boltzmann equation." And he has this to say: "There are

What we think

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two key steps that a mathematician uses. He uses intuition to guess the right problem and the right solution and then logic to prove it.”

What Villani's quotation usefully reminds us is that there are two distinct phases in any creative process and they need to be kept scrupulously apart. There is *discovery* – and there is *proof* or *justification*. Discovery can be as joyous and undisciplined as the wildest of games, and probably should be. But the act of discovery can never be its own justification. “This is a very good idea because I thought of it” will always and entirely properly fail to win budget approval.

 *Discovery can be as joyous and undisciplined as the wildest of games, and probably should be* 

Post-rationalisation (or more respectably, ‘retrospective sense-making’) is absolutely essential. Retrospectively justifying a brand idea will never be as easy or as clear-cut as retrospectively justifying a method of accurately measuring the volume of a complicated solid. But the same rigour needs to be applied, the same challenges need to be welcomed: and the same open acknowledgment of the intermediate role of intuition needs to be made. That way, good ideas will be shown to be good – and so are much more likely to be adopted and multiply. 

