

*“Messing
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LEAN

COMMUNICATIONS

At communications agencies, the creative process is forever evolving. By borrowing a page from the tech industry playbook, it can get even faster, smarter, and more efficient. Welcome to the age of agile creativity.

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The goals of advertising might not have changed in the last 60 years – build a trusted and consistent brand image; shift people’s perceptions and behaviors; create work that surprises and delights – but the tools of the trade have exploded. Art and copy have a new partner, technology, and it’s revolutionizing every part of the communications business.

Whether it’s through increased access to super-fast broadband, the emergence of HTML5, or the development of more sophisticated APIs, technology is enabling creativity in ways that ad-men of the

past (and some of those in the present) couldn’t have imagined. It allows us to mine the insights and imagination of today’s consumers, transforming the traditional advertising monologue into a real-time, constantly evolving conversation online.

This may be game-changing, but it’s also insomnia-inducing. Many of the ad execs we’ve spoken to lie awake at night asking themselves, ‘How can I make great advertising in this new, consumer-driven, multi-channel, fast-paced context?’ At Google, we believe the answer can be found in the Silicon Valley playbook. ➤

THE AGE OF AGILE CREATIVITY

The technology industry teaches us that we need to be ready to fail fast. It's better to know what doesn't work quickly and cheaply rather than invest time and resources on concepts that won't deliver results. This has led many start-ups to adopt the mantra of 'lean thinking' alongside a more fluid innovation process. The core idea, as described in Eric Ries' book, *The Lean Startup*, is to set aside the traditional model – where a product is launched fully functional, backed by extensive market research – and adopt principles from lean manufacturing and agile software development. Ries calls the result a 'minimum viable product,' an early, low-cost, and functional version of the idea that allows rapid market entry and evolution of concept. It's a model that can also help marketers develop campaigns in the digital age. The pace of change in consumer dynamics and technology demands that every aspect of communications becomes more flexible, integrated, and efficient. Call it 'agile creativity.'

Winston Binch, Chief Digital Officer at Deutsch LA, captured these new realities when he wrote, 'Most advertising is still oriented around a 'launch and leave it' philosophy – an idea that is contrary to product development best practices. As marketers and agencies get deeper into platform and app development, it's important that our thinking and processes shift. We need to work, get things to market, and learn faster. Do it cheaper, leaner, and more collaboratively. Find ways to operationalize hacking and experimentation.'

Get it right, and agile creativity is a winning formula: Product and brand

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communications are not only easier and faster to execute, but more targeted and effective – ultimately leading to deeper brand connections and increased sales velocity. How do we do that? By taking on board three key lessons: Start fast, listen and learn, and work collaboratively.

DRAFT AN MVB

The agile creative process begins with a 'minimum viable brief' (MVB). This dynamic document covers only as much as it needs to, offering a skeleton framework of insight and inspiration. It esteems smaller building blocks in addition to the 'big idea,' allowing creatives and planners to get out of the gate quickly and iterate aggressively.

Like a traditional creative brief, it starts with a clear and concise articulation of a campaign's core objectives and success criteria. What's the goal? Who is the target audience? Why should they care? What does success look like? But rather than remain static, the MVB can change based on new insights and consumer reactions. It is less concerned with 'getting it right' than 'getting it real.'

Gathering data and insights online is a key part of developing and evolving the MVB. Traditional consumer-testing methodologies such as focus groups and large-scale longitudinal surveys can be valuable, but they're often expensive and time-consuming. Consider cheaper and more nimble approaches instead. From online behavioral and sentiment analysis, to robust insight tools like Radian6, EvoApp, Google Insights for Search, and YouTube Trends Dashboard, there is now a multitude of ways to glean consumer insights. ➡

LISTEN TO THE CROWD

Ideally, the MVB guides development of not just one concept or prototype, but a number of them. Digital tools let us quickly mock up ideas, then test assumptions and gauge audience reactions in real time.

Indeed, agile creativity allows for a change in strategy *even after launch*. Ask yourself: Who is actually listening? Do our insights match reality? What is gaining traction? Did we define success correctly? Were we too ambitious – or not ambitious enough? The next step is to zero in on what's working and pursue bigger bets based on what was successful. Adapt and respond.

There are a number of ways of realizing the MVB in practice. By looking at web traffic data, a luxury chocolate company discovered that while they expected their audience to be wealthy men, it actually skewed towards less affluent females. They were able to co-opt demand from consumers in their actual audience and more relevantly target this extended group.

At Google, we launched an experimental campaign on YouTube called 'Search On' before airing it to a broader audience on a different medium. After putting a few fully baked executions out there and seeing what people responded to, the popularity of one particular ad, *Parisian Love* – a contemporary romance told through search results – helped us choose it to run during the 2010 Super Bowl.

This type of decision used to be made in a relative vacuum; here it was guided by public feedback and real-world testing. And the process paid off; the week after the game, it ranked as the seventh most popular Super Bowl



Deeplocal built a prototype for the Nike Livestrong Chalkbot in one week – here is the finished product in action at the 2009 Tour de France

Photography by Deeplocal

ad on the web, with nearly three million views according to Visible Measures. And it had the fifth-most comments of any Super Bowl ad that year; 4,162 across more than 200 sites, meaning it spurred people to engage.

When the Nordstrom Innovation Lab wanted to make an iPad app to help customers pick a pair of sunglasses, they sent a software team in-store for a week. This agile 'flash-build' allowed them to get customer feedback as they worked, testing features in a real-time, real-world environment. By responding within minutes to user testing, the team was able to overcome potential roadblocks and identify what customers really wanted.

Insight tools can also be used to create feedback loops once a campaign or product is in-market. As we accumulate new data and insight, we can integrate it much more dynamically for dramatic campaign results.

PepsiCo is a case in point, going so far as to build a 'Mission Control Center' inside Gatorade's Chicago headquarters. This room, positioned in the middle of the marketing department, is outfitted with dashboards and data visualizations that track the brand in real time across the web. Speaking to *Mashable*, Gatorade's Senior Marketing Director Carla Hassan revealed how quickly the team is able to react to this data. After seeing that a commercial featuring a song by rap artist David Banner was being heavily discussed in social media, they got a full-length version of the song online within 24 hours. She added that PepsiCo increased engagement with its product education content (mostly video) by 250 percent and reduced its exit rate from 25 percent to nine percent by optimizing based on performance. ➡

PICK THE RIGHT PLAYERS

Agile creativity is like improvisational theater. Everyone needs to work together throughout – copywriters, art directors, brand planners, technologists, and developers. At an agency, this requires a small, flat structure, and a team empowered to launch and iterate with both fast internal approval and, more importantly, a client that's ready and willing to play along.

After the proverbial curtain goes up, teams are challenged to react to cues from the audience and unfurl a compelling narrative in real time. They have to be game for anything – thinking across scenarios, media, and platforms from the start. It involves constant experimentation and exploration. Building blocks may accrue to bigger, more transformative ideas. Messing up is part of the process.

For their 'digital experiment,' #30Days2Beta, Deutsch LA collapsed the time frame between concepting and execution, taking a single month to build a new web, tablet, and mobile platform while broadcasting a live video feed and tweeting as they worked. According to a post from Executive Creative Technology Director Trevor O'Brien, 'We had an initial concept that we started with and then we put a team together to bring it to life [with] UX, Design, Tech, and Production all in a room together for the duration of the project. It's a very collaborative approach with all of us commenting on different aspects of what each other is working on. And because of [our] proximity, we can be faster and make decisions as a team. Our belief is that great digital is a team sport, and that means getting all the right people together around a table and dedicating them to the project.'



Thanks to Deeplocal's tiny but diverse staff of artists, engineers, roboticists, and illustrators, they were able to build a prototype for the Nike Livestrong Chalkbot in just a single week. The result, a machine that wrote out online messages in chalk on the road of the Tour de France, won a Cannes Lions Grand Prix award in 2010.

Despite the ever-increasing need for flexibility, brand-building is still about consistency. In improv, actors tacitly agree upon the truth of a scene and stay consistent throughout. In marketing, we must establish our core values

up front and remain authentic, even if we uncover new insights about them as the project unfolds.

And of course, like any great improv show, a great ad campaign has to surprise and delight. That's always been true, but it's harder now than ever before. Today's fragmented, info-flooded, seen-it-all audiences are a tough crowd. But by starting fast, listening and learning, and working collaboratively, agencies are creating campaigns that win them over. And execs can finally sleep at night. Sure, everything may change in the morning – but that's the whole point ☺