

Creative Strategy

Bringing creativity and business analysis together

I've been working with artists and creatives since 1984. I regularly run 'Creative Strategy' sessions which introduce a number of challenging concepts drawn from the world of business strategy, are designed to demystify the 'tools for thinking' that big businesses use and show how they can be used effectively by creatives to extend the way they think about their practice.

Sometimes it just doesn't feel right to interrupt the muse with thoughts of cashflow, costing and the tax man - however I firmly believe that it is possible for creatives to adopt 'business like' ways of working without compromising their artistic integrity.

Creatives are pretty good at the vision thing - but sometimes fail to set clear goals for themselves. The good news is that there are ways of thinking about the future that allow us to set creative goals and business goals in the same breath – so rather than blocking the creative flow, business goals make sense because they relate to the creative process rather than getting in the way.

All of the tools for thinking in this article are simple, straightforward, and can be used straight away - you may wish to arm yourself with a sketchpad and pencil and put them to work for yourself!

The 'Vision' Thing

Vision is a funny old word. For our purposes, it simply means being able to describe where you want to go. In business terms, Vision usually has two components – 'hard' or quantifiable goals, and 'soft' goals relating to creativity, attitudes and working relationships. Taking time to map out your vision makes everything else much easier to plan. Here are some examples of soft and hard goals:

'Soft' Vision: Things to do with creativity, attitudes and relationships:

- Improving your drawing skills
- Improving your client's experience of working with you
- Getting better at networking
- Utilising client feedback more effectively
- Talking to people more confidently about your work
- Writing better briefs

Hard: Things to do with setting targets that can be measured:

- Setting clear Income or Turnover targets
- Planning to visit exhibitions or trade shows to market your work
- Think about the number of enquiries you need to generate by means of your marketing – to get the number of jobs you want each year.

- Work towards getting a more realistic price for your work
- Creating a pack of information to give to satisfied customers – which they can pass on to friends – thus generating referrals through ‘word of mouth’.

Strategic Scope:

Strategic scope can be visualised as the pathway or road towards the fulfilment of the vision. Some of us operate on a single track, making one type of thing exceptionally well. Some may have three ‘lanes’ – maybe making small items for impulse buyers, working to commission, and doing part-time teaching. Some of us work on multi lane motorways, picking up and responding to every enquiry that comes in the door. All these approaches have their merits and drawbacks – the trick is to know if you are comfortable with your strategic scope. There are two things that should help determine the breadth of this – your values (the codes you live and work by) and your competencies (skills, knowledge and experience).

Your Values:

What are the values that underpin your work? For most of us, it is much easier to define what we won’t do, than what we will. For example:

- I feel strongly about working in an environmentally responsible way
- I am/am not prepared to live on the breadline in order to pursue my creative vision
- I will/will not make widgets for Nuclear power stations.
- Good design must be a factor in everything I make
- My work must/does not need to have ‘educational’ value

Strengths and Weaknesses (Competencies)

In order to play to your strengths you need have an accurate picture of your current skills and attributes, how you need to develop or upgrade them, and whether or not you need to acquire any new skills or competencies in order to ‘future proof’ your practice. There is little point in responding to enquiries if you don’t have the core skills to respond to them effectively. On the other hand, consummate skill might be wasted in churning out repeat orders for widgets that could be made more effectively by a machine. So – it makes sense to audit your competencies from time to time to check that they are matched to your strategic pathway. That way, you have the choice to limit your offer to things you are truly comfortable with, or make a choice to stretch yourself by acquiring new skills and expanding what you offer.

Checklist:

- What are my current skills and abilities?
- What do I need to upgrade?
- What completely new skills could I benefit from developing?

Strategic Horizon and Product Cycles

How often do you sit down and think about how you might need to modify your business in response to a changing marketplace? There are a couple of useful ideas to think about when thinking about this.

Strategic Horizon:

How far ahead do you need to be thinking? Different industries have very different external pressures in this respect. For example, the people who design the ring tones for mobile phones need to be able to respond incredibly quickly to a teen market that is hungry for the latest tone. Pharmaceutical companies on the other hand are bounded by years of lab work, tests, clinical trials and licensing procedures before they can get anything into the marketplace. The questions for you are:

How far ahead do I need to be thinking? How rapidly does the marketplace for my product evolve? Could a change in National or local Government affect me? Could a change in the law affect me? Could a change in infrastructure or supply chain affect my business?

In an industry where processes, until recently, have evolved slowly over millennia, where do you stand?

Product Cycles:

Related to the above, every type of thing that we created for the consumption of others has a clearly defined life cycle. Some types of thing simply fade away, some burn out quickly, and some - for better or worse, get resurrected now and again... Your product will also have a life cycle.

- Some are produced for a long time, evolving slowly – e.g. bicycles, wrought iron gates, portraits in oils...
- The demand for some lasts only a few decades – Cassette recorders, platform-soled shoes, space invader games....
- And some, a few months at most – the latest computer games, phone ring tones, government support for certain types of arts practice...

The question for you is this – do you need to have new types of product or service in development so that when the demand for one fades, you have something else to replace it...?

Clients, products and services – Ansoff's analysis

The last idea I want to introduce is this neat bit of analysis. We know what we make for our current customers – but do we think about other things they might actually use, and suggest them? Or – could we interest new customers in the things we make already? Or – just to be bold, can we sit down and think about new things that we can make for completely new customers? This is called Ansoff's analysis, and it's worth an hour or so copying the grid below

onto a large sheet of paper and having a bit of brainstorming session – and if you involve friends, colleagues and family, it will be even more fruitful.

		Customers/Clients	
		Existing	New
Product or Service	Existing		
	New		

Build your own Creative Strategy:

To get the most out of this article, take some time to think about and jot down your responses to the ideas I have introduced – Vision, Scope, Values and Competencies, Strategic Horizon and Product Cycles – and Ansoff's.

You'll see that the creative and business aspects of your enterprise are clearly linked within each bit of analysis. A few minutes spent on each will leave you with a much clearer picture of where you want to go.

Pete Mosley

About Pete Mosley:

Pete works mainly but not exclusively within Creative Industries, the Arts and the Charitable/Voluntary sectors. He helps people think about how best to develop themselves, their businesses and/or organisations. His portfolio is currently split between providing business support to artists and creative industries in Lincolnshire, and ongoing consultancy with arts and voluntary sector organisations across the Midlands. He provides packages of bespoke support designed with the exact needs of the client in mind.

See www.creativemusings.co.uk for details, case studies and resources.