



INSIGHT ARTICLE

Are You Really Needed?

An Intervention
by Blair Enns

I love you; I'm here to help. Sit in the circle.

My mission is to change the way creative services are bought and sold, the world over. To that end I work with marketing communication agencies, individually through training and consulting, and collectively through speaking and writing, to teach them how to Win Without Pitching. It's work that I love. It's financially lucrative; I enjoy helping people, particularly other business owners; I find the people and the creative industry fascinating; I get to travel and learn; and while this is a business first, I thrive on the sense of higher purpose that drives it.

But I have frustrations, too. My biggest frustration stems from the cumulative effect of seeing the same fundamental mistake repeated across many firms for more than six years now. It's time to speak up. This is my one-man intervention for owners of creative services firms.

The Problem of Passion

Let me begin by stating the problem, which is at the very root of the free pitching issue. It is this: too many designers start design firms for the wrong reason - their passion for design and their desire to design for a living.

While passion is a good thing, it's the wrong reason to start a business, particularly a business in a field that is as crowded as graphic design. (I use design as a surrogate for advertising and other creative services as well.) This passion is at the root of many poorly-run businesses and poor business practices like free pitching.

I want to pose some questions for you to consider before I begin to address them:

1. Why did you start your firm?
2. You're in the marketing business but are you a marketer?
3. Should you really be in business at all?

Fun and Money

I believe there are two reasons to go to work in the morning: fun and money. Now ask yourself, when you started your firm was your primary motivation fun or money? In a creative services firm it's almost always fun in the beginning. It's the thrill, the passion, the creating and the adrenaline rush of presenting. You might go years sacrificing money for fun, telling yourself and your employees that to do so is an investment in the future. You might take work that you shouldn't, because "it's good for the portfolio." You'll stay up all night crafting ideas that you might pitch for free in the morning because it's a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity". Then you'll do it again the next week.

And in the beginning it is fun. You're in business for yourself, eating what you kill. You're a professional artist and people are validating your artistry by actually paying for your work. You've got a cool office, a thin phone and great eyeglasses. Life is like a rock 'n roll tour bus: everyone is young and good looking and staying up late working on the latest project, sure that it will be a hit. There's a combined sense of creating something that's bigger than all of you. The music is always on, there's always beer in the fridge and sometimes there's even sex in the washroom.

And then, just like in all the rock n' roll movies, you wake up after awhile – somewhere before ten years if you're lucky, maybe as late as 25 years if you're not – and realize it's not fun anymore. You face the fact that there is no money. The people around you that were once part of the fun are now a burden, dragging you down creatively and financially. Now you want nothing more than to get off that bus before you end up looking like Keith Richards. You're tired of having fun and you realize that what you really want is to make money.

Dr. Don Shows the Way

Let me tell you about my dentist. I live in a village of one thousand people in the middle of nowhere. It's on the shore of a 50-mile long lake set between two mountain ranges in the interior of British Columbia somewhere between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean. It's a short nine-hour drive from Vancouver. This remote village is filled with people who have no business being here. In this place we all inevitably ask each other the question, what are you doing here? We're all doing the same thing – living a certain lifestyle trying to obtain a higher quality of life, but the question that immediately follows is how did you get here?

My dentist, the only one in town, is the best of the many I've had over the years. He's great at what he does and he clearly loves his work. When I asked him for his story – how did you get here – he told me, "Well, I fell in love with this place and wanted to live here, but there was no work. So I looked around and asked, 'what does this place need?' It didn't have a dentist so I went to dentistry school and then started this practice."

"You mean you weren't a dentist first – you weren't passionate about dentistry," I asked?

"No," he replied. "I was a computer engineer."

I was shocked. "It must have taken you awhile to retrain as a dentist?"

"Five years," he replied.

Five years.

Producers and Marketers

There are two fundamental perspectives on business: a product-based perspective, and a market-based perspective. Producers try to sell what they know how to build. Marketers build what they determine they can sell. There are many definitions of marketing, but the one that rings truest to me is this: "Identifying a need in the marketplace and matching a product or service to that need at a profit." This definition clearly describes an assessment of market need before the question of product or supply is even broached.

The world is filled with design firms that were founded by people who know how to, and have a passion for, design, regardless of the market's need for more graphic design services. It is these firms – the producers who produce what so many others produce – that cannot Win Without Pitching.

Making the transition from a pitch-based agency to a Win Without Pitching agency begins with a reversal of perspective – looking to the marketplace and posing the dentist's question: what's missing? The answer is not going to be another design firm, but it might be a design firm that knows the financial services industry, or a user interface design firm for mobile devices.

Power Shift

One of the reasons a client can ask a creative firm to solve their problem as proof of the firm's ability to solve their problem is the client has the power in the buy-sell relationship. The power is rooted in the availability of substitutes – the alternatives available to hiring the firm. Winning without pitching begins by altering the power structure in the buy-sell relationship through reducing the number of legitimate alternatives to the firm's offering.

This is the power of a market-based perspective. Marketers intentionally build businesses and brands for the expressed purpose of meeting unmet or poorly-met need. As a result, they deal from a position of strength which allows them to control the buy-sell process and command a price premium. Producers, on the other hand, love to produce, so they do so and hope they can find someone to purchase what they make. They find themselves at the opposite end of the power spectrum from marketers, dealing with price pressures and forces that increasingly commoditize their offerings.

In every speech I deliver there is a certain percentage of the audience that cannot even imagine what it's like to have the marketer's power in the buy-sell relationship. To them, winning without pitching seems impossible. These are the producers, and usually they are the most passionate about their craft.

Should Your Passion Be Your Business?

If you run a business then you should be doing so with the goal of making money. Yes, it's easier and far more meaningful when you are driven by a mission or a higher purpose but an unequivocal by-product of that commercially-framed purpose has to be profit. With no or little profit it does not make sense to frame your purpose as a commercial enterprise. Remember the last part of our definition of marketing: "...at a profit."

Are you making money? Do you subvert profitability for fun, consciously or otherwise? Do you, years into your enterprise, still only make what you might as someone else's employee – but with the added uncompensated risk of having your own employees? Do you rationalize a lack of financial reward by telling yourself how much fun you're having or how fulfilled you are creatively?

Passion for design is a wonderful thing, and properly harnessed it can be a competitive advantage. Passion alone is not enough reason to start a business. This passion to produce without regard for the market's needs has created a glut of undifferentiated advertising and design that is driving the global free pitching problem.

My dentist would tell you that his passion is hiking, fishing and other outdoor pursuits, and his commercially-framed purpose, some variation of helping people. He built a lucrative business of purpose that allows him to pursue his passion (that is why he loves what he does), but it was a business for which he made sure there was a need. I ask again, is there really a need for what you do? If your firm disappeared today, what meaningful consequences would your market suffer?

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