

WHY BUSINESS MANAGEMENT IS TO THE ARTIST AS ORNITHOLOGY IS TO THE BIRDS



Arts and enterprise consultant Alison Branagan debates the key issues that business advisers should be aware of when counselling creative people in business start-up and planning.

Barnett Newman (1905-1970) once said 'Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds'. The same is true for creatives about understanding the theoretical side of business and the practical skills they need to acquire to succeed in making creativity profitable.

From my own experience of being a sculptor and developing enterprise courses for artists, I am aware that creatives possess varying skills that can help or hinder them in preparation for business. Visual artists, musicians and writers for example are often used to working in isolation whereas actors and dancers for instance have been trained to work with others to produce performances. Teamwork is a key factor when developing business opportunities. It is often artists and musicians who fail to fulfil the potential of ventures because they lack an understanding of interpersonal skills, which can lead to disorganised professional relationships.

Practitioners from the creative industries have often studied at institutions for many years, but it is usually the case they received little guidance about how to make money from their 'products'. Many don't view themselves as a business and have become used to showing their work unpaid or acting in productions for no fee. Worse still, business advisers must be aware that many artists still harbour 'the discovery myth', that someone will manage their affairs for them. It's important that artists understand how their products relate to a market or can be tailored towards one. Business advisers must become more active in understanding about the creative sector their mentee is trying to prosper in.

Designers have more awareness of the buyer, as they often manufacture functioning objects and are used to working to a brief. There are many types of creatives; some are motivated to make work for poetic aspirations, others are more commercially focused. Purists usually make little money from their art, but if they can be encouraged to examine their skills gaps, then they can generate income from working in arts education or administrative positions as freelancers. The more commercially minded can be encouraged to market what they do at a targeted audience or broaden out their products for wider appeal.

Other factors that hinder creative people are a poor understanding of presentation skills, new technologies – their application, and legal issues. Failure to understand copyright issues, and use of non-disclosure agreements leads to it becoming likely that artists will experience their ideas being stolen and losing out commercially. Importantly it is currently estimated that 47% of creative people are dyslexic. This means that understanding accounting can be really difficult, not because creatives are just a bit 'lazy' but that they are



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processing data out of the correct sequence, which leads to genuine confusion about using spreadsheets, for example.

How do we overcome some of these barriers? To enthuse your creative clients about enterprise, look to some of their strengths. Artists are extremely good at solving problems imaginatively; they have often achieved many outcomes on a low or no budget basis. They have good ideas all the time; they often enjoy developing branding and marketing material. As business is often a creative process itself, which should be emphasised, you can relate this to the fact that artists are familiar with exploring fields of research and developing projects often with unexpected end results. If counsellors can encourage the thought that enterprise, like a creative practice, can be explored and developed in a similar way, then here lies the key to assisting your clients in pursuing an entrepreneurial outlook.



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