

# In defence of the often maligned creative

 By [Damon Stapleton](#)

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When I got into this business 20 years ago, creatives and creative departments were always called the crazy ones. We were portrayed as necessary yet unpredictable.



Image source © [Damon's Brain](#).

We were those long haired, leather jacket types. Apparently, we all had raucous parties, did lots of drugs and were always only seconds away from saying something inappropriate. This B-grade rock star description has stuck and has become the accepted view of creatives. In fact, it has become something many creatives live up to because they think that is their role.

That is one description.

Recently, another has emerged. It is that creatives and creative departments are an old-fashioned idea. Somehow, we have gone from being the crazy ones to being old school. Now, we are all creative and everybody has ideas. Just get a banjo player in, or a juggler, they are creative. Or maybe Chris from accounts. He does watercolours. I am sure he will give you loads of ideas.

Not all creativity is the same. There is this thing called relevance and experience. There are many that want to make out that we all have this innate creative ability in us. Short answer, bullsh!t. Especially, when you only have a couple of hours to crack a piece of work.

This is not something I am making up. It is a thread you can see through the countless articles and blogs about how advertising is changing. The fantastic AdContrarian Bob Hoffman recently spoke about this at an Irish advertising event. This is what he said.

*There's a mantra I hear in agencies back in the States. I don't know if you hear it here, too. But it goes like this. "We're all creative" or "Creative ideas can come from anywhere." In my opinion this is bullsh!t.*

*True creative talent is a rare and precious thing.*

*Have you ever wondered why there are so many sh!tty songs, and sh!tty TV shows, and sh!tty movies? I'll tell you why. Because it is really f\*\*king hard to do a good one.*

*The same is true with advertising. No one sits down to write a crappy ad. Mostly they just turn out crappy. Why? Because it's really f\*\*king hard to do a good one — and there are very few people who can do it.*

*If you really believe that we are all creative, then you have to believe that it's just a coincidence that Shakespeare wrote dozens of brilliant plays and Donald Trump didn't.*

"Once you label me you negate me," is a quote from Soren Kierkegaard that perfectly describes the issue. Creatives tend to be a little odd, perhaps not exactly mainstream. Somebody who might be a little awkward at a social gathering. Somebody who isn't like you. So, because they are not always understood, they get labelled. I guess categories and definitions make things easier.

I have a very different view of creatives. Do yourself a favour. Break into a decent advertising agency around 8 o'clock at night. Walk into the creative department. I guarantee you will find teams working. Come in on weekends and you will find the same thing. Creatives try very hard and work very hard, under a lot of pressure. Is that easy to replace? Great creatives care and will keep going until it's right. They care more than anybody else. What is that worth? What would advertising look like if they stopped caring?

Maybe you think I am full of it. OK, let's do a little experiment...

Let's pretend you are a creative. You are staring at a blank screen early one morning when a brief is handed to you. You have been asked to do a 15-second ad for a product. This particular product has 18 variants. You need to give each variant the same amount of time and there is a logo that has to be up for 3 seconds. So 12 seconds for 18 variants. That is less than a second per variant. What the f\*\*k do you do with that? Also, make sure it's contemporary, award-winning and fresh. Have fun with it. And it has to be done by the end of the day. And there are 5 other, very diverse briefs on your desk. And, there will be 5 more tomorrow and the day after that. Easy, right?

That scenario is not made up. It happened to me and I suspect it has happened to many other creatives. And that is just the tip of the iceberg.

Perhaps you think that is an old-fashioned scenario. Maybe you think things have moved on. Advertising is different now. It is another narrative that happens in our business. The new type of work that is happening. I have been hearing about this for a while now. Apparently, there is this work that creative and digital departments can't do. For this, you need other people. The problem is I just can't find it. Almost every piece of noteworthy work in the last 5 years has had a couple of creatives involved or a creative department behind it. Whatever their job title or description is.

A modern creative is like a Swiss army knife in human form. They are useful because they do so many different things and also know how to connect the pieces together. Very few people are good at this. More importantly, creatives have the one thing that makes all the machines work: Ideas. They have the illusive beginning of things. And most importantly, they know how to make them, either on their own or collaborating with others.

What a strange situation. A silly 'smoke and mirrors' game. Everybody goes on about old-fashioned creatives and creative departments and how all these other companies are the future. Labels signifying nothing. While this is happening, these new companies often hire creatives from these exact old-fashioned creative departments. To be clear, these are the same people. So, yesterday you were old fashioned, today you are cutting edge.

Are they the crazy ones? No, they just see our value.

A value that has nothing to do with what somebody is called, but with what they can do.

*"It ain't what they call you, it's what you answer to."* - WC Fields.

## ABOUT DAMON STAPLETON

Damon is regional chief creative officer for DDB in New Zealand and Australia. Before that, ECD at Saatchi and Saatchi Australia, before that, group ECD of TBWA Hunt Lascaris and global ECD of Standard Bank. He has won over 500 awards internationally, including a D&AD Black Pencil, Cannes Grand Prix, Grand Olios, ADC Black Cube and most effective ad in the world by Warc 100. Damon is now regional chief creative officer for DDB in New Zealand and Australia...

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