CULTURE, CREATIVITY AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

2020 is the year "the world took stock of itself, when everyone was forced to look sideways at each other and recognise we each have vulnerabilities."

Diamond Abdulrahim
Strategist at Highsnobiety

In creative businesses diversity motivates minds and builds brands with brilliance, relevance and longevity. It's also an essential contributor to competitive advantage. Different backgrounds bring different perspectives to campaigns and create brand strategies around fresh insights into the cultural signals that reveal customers' needs and desires.

As this year of seismic change draws to a close, diversity — whether of culture, gender or social background — is an even more critical component of strategy. Cultural tectonic plates have been moved not only by the global Covid-19 pandemic, but also by the global recognition of the Black Lives Matter movement as a potent catalyst for redressing societal discrimination against People of Colour. In 2021 and beyond, brands will have to navigate new cultural and societal landscapes whose only common features are flux and change.

The questions this asks of brands and agencies — and why diversity is a large part of the answers — was vividly illustrated in The New P&L's latest round table discussion on 'Culture, Creativity and Competitive Advantage'. Moderated by guest host and cultural strategist and diversity consultant, **Leonie Annor-Owiredu**, three strategists explored a particularly wide range of topics, including the vibrant, constantly-evolving cultural landscape brands have to navigate, the importance of applying true diversity in strategic thinking, and whether creative agencies need restructuring to be more receptive to the insights and ideas genuine diversity inspires.

Different roads, same destination

Diversity characterises the routes that each of the three took to the strategic role. **Rob Scotland**, Head of Strategy at McCann London, recalled his time as a junior salesperson "*sitting at the back of the room during presentations, biting my tongue and thinking, 'I could do better'. Looking back, I had the ability to identify and evaluate, to regard marketing as a way to get something into the hands of people who could consume it in an authentic way.*"

Diamond Abdulrahim, strategist at media brand and in-house creative agency, Highsnobiety, came to strategy via various internships and prior to those, university, where she studied social anthropology. "*Strategy combines my academic discipline in the compelling context of thinking about people and what they need. I also relish the friction between being cynical about businesses and commercialism yet compassionate about people.*"

Gerard Crichlow, founder of WorkingVersion, puts his career down to "*the frustration of growing up in places where businesses wouldn't serve the communities I was living in. I saw things I hated and thought I could do better, and came into the business to improve things, push in new directions.*"

An enforced stocktaking in a world on pause

Dreadful and disruptive as the pandemic has been, participants agreed there are positives to take away. For Diamond Abdulrahim 2020 is the year *"the world took stock of itself, when everyone was forced to look sideways at each other and recognise we each have vulnerabilities."*

Rob Scotland spoke of being *"encouraged to be braver, personally and professionally"* to the events of 2020. He also attributed the global *"shift in racial reckoning"* of George Floyd's killing in part to the pandemic, which provided a hiatus in our normal lives that *"made sure we saw it."*

For Gerard Crichlow, a positive impact of the pandemic has been *"forcing some clients to fast-forward the innovations and different ways of thinking that they've talked about for a long time — for example, business transformation, thinking more collaboratively, and putting digital first."* He also welcomes the arrival of new business models, companies and agencies, seeing them as *"the other side of the coin to recognising your role in the world — the realisation that you can do anything."*

Twin themes

In the panel's discussion of the relationship between diversity, culture and creativity, two related themes emerged: first, that today's cultural landscape is so diverse and evolving so fast that only by incorporating all three into strategic planning and execution can brands and agencies successfully identify opportunities; and second, that doing this calls for strategists with new, non-traditional skill-sets.

As an example of this constant innovation and evolution, Gerard Crichlow cited how social media have enabled new routes to wealth. *"In a sense, it started with the Kardashians — they showed that influencers can create billion-dollar industries using Facebook and Instagram. Young kids no longer want to be basketball stars; they want to be YouTube stars. These billionaires haven't even gone to university, but*

"the democratisation of technology (has) enabled a whole generation to become polymaths. If you want to learn a language, take up photography, or make music, the software is open to you."
Rob Scotland
Head Of Strategy at McCann London

they're CEOs of their own companies, creating new types of content by using their fans and followers as a proxy for interests and topics and turning that proxy into a business."

Rob Scotland labelled this *"the democratisation of technology"* and observed how it *"enabled a whole generation to become polymaths. If you want to learn a language, take up photography, or make music, the software is open to you."* Diamond Abdulrahim agreed, noting the plethora of *"new platforms for content distribution and consumption that privilege the end-user. We all have more power than ever to create things, and also to mediate our identities through the content we consume."* Which is all very well, thinks Gerard Crichlow, except for the fact that not everyone should create: *"There's such an abundance of information that it's hard to differentiate what's important. Which is why we're seeing the role of curator becoming as important as that of creator. If you have taste, and the trust of communities and fans, you'll succeed. That's never changed — trust you can always bank on."*

What do we mean by 'culture'?

Leonie Annor-Owiredu sought a definition of 'culture', a word used so often that it can become devoid of meaning. For Rob Scotland culture is essentially *"a shared sense of beliefs that transcends geography, language, gender and ethnicity"*, while Diamond Abdulrahim thinks of it as *"a complete shared set of symbols and values that facilitate meaning between groups of people."* Gerard Crichlow believes it comes down to one word — caring. *"We all have to eat, but there are some people who really care about this one particular thing to a greater degree. So to identify aspects of culture I ask what people care most about."*

> *"Brands need to be more attuned to these kinds of signals, so that they can collaborate and provide these brilliant minds with things they don't have access to."*

Gerard Crichlow
Strategic Consultant at WorkingVersion

All agreed that culture is multi-faceted and non-static. Diamond Abdulrahim mused on possible answers to the question 'What's the culture of the UK?'. *"One answer might focus on demographics, one might be 'conservatism', and another might be 'the pub'. They're all valid answers, because what you're doing is classifying different information, whether it's political, social or historical. If you have a good command of what culture is, you can start unpicking different levels, seeing who's responsible for which bits. It literally is this really exciting mess and mass of things and meanings, which makes it an exciting area to work in as strategist."*

There was agreement, too, that cultural evolution isn't solely the preserve of youth. *"It's hard to look at culture through demographics alone,"* said Rob Scotland. *"It's more about shared values — a 16-year-old in one place and a 60-year-old in another can share the same values."* Diamond Abdulrahim suspected that *"in advertising, when we think of culture, we instantly go to youth audiences because we're chasing 'the new thing'. But this is a lapse in the holistic approach to what culture is and means."*

Gerard Crichlow believes that in seeking revenue opportunities businesses shouldn't just evaluate the size of an audience, but they should also factor in the *"size of the cultural opportunity. The 'grey' audience may not be as large as the youth audience, but it has more money. So think a different way, looking at the interests people have and sizing those. There are lots of revenue opportunities if you can clump together interests."*

Worlds within worlds

Time and again, the panel returned to the astonishing variety of cultures strategists need to monitor and, hopefully, understand in order to pick up early signals of emerging trends. Discussing how strategists engage with youth, both Diamond Abdulrahim and Gerard Crichlow argued that the 'infiltrate and extract' strategies frequently adopted by brands must evolve. Said Crichlow: *"If you go into the Minecraft game, you see young people creating their own worlds. So companies need to listen, observe and invite these people in. Brands need to be more attuned to these kinds of signals, so that they can collaborate and provide these brilliant minds with things they don't have access to."*

The need for collaboration, on multiple levels, between brands and audiences was another recurring theme in the discussion. Rob Scotland noted how, in contrast with *"the tightly-controlled, more limited media structures of our parents' lifetimes, we now have 'open source' models that allow anyone from anywhere to come in and improve a product or service"*. For Diamond Abdulrahim the re-emergence of online communities and 'fandoms' is a compelling area to watch: *"The big difference now is you have people, users and consumers as active participants in shaping the future of the brand."* Gerard Crichlow believes this *"intersection of communities, commerce and content really is the future. For the first time in history, our behaviour is changing not because we want it to but because technology is changing it. So we're seeing a new era of interactive collaboration, where the real opportunity is. We no longer want to just 'click and like' things, we want to engage with them in different ways, and technology allows this."*

Traditional frameworks unfit for purpose

The implications of this multi-faceted, lively, innovative cultural landscape for the brand strategist role are considerable. Rob Scotland articulated well the belief of all three that the traditional frameworks applied to strategic planning are no longer fit for purpose: *"I rate empathy and curiosity above intellect when it comes to navigating modern culture — the ability to feel and understand. Previously, you could be highly academic, with systems and models that were true because the media mix, the social controls, were*

different. Now we need a different set of skills, because some things translate across languages, geography and social class. If you don't know what those are, it's very hard to create strategy that works. On the other hand, brands that do it well will keep winning."

Diamond Abdulrahim agreed: "The way strategy is evolving there's less reliance on overly formalised frameworks. Lots of time it's intuition, or a hunch, or empathy that makes a difference. Of course, I respect the classic fundamentals of how to do things, but it's that lateral leap that adds value by making an emotive connection."

The power of the outsider perspective

Asked to illustrate how their diverse backgrounds add value to their strategic thinking, there was general agreement about the importance of what Gerard Crichlow called 'the outsider perspective', the application of which is nuanced. On the one hand, it describes the insights that come from just being an outside in a particular situation, as when Rob Scotland spend 13 years living in Copenhagen. *"I identified aspects of Danish behaviour that completely eluded the Danes themselves."* On the other hand, he argued that the real value lies in being able to adopt the outside perspective in your strategic thinking — for example, by putting yourself in the position of someone who is totally on the other side of the fence to you. He urged *"all strategists to embrace your outsider and the ability to step outside and feel new things."*

Picking up on the point, Diamond Abdulrahim described a complex process of *"being able to detach yourself and look at the problem with a bird's eye lens, free of your own biases and impulses to draw quick connections, yet at the same time not letting go of your unique vantage point. How you articulate this strategically is to have loads of humility at the point of your briefing, recognising that there are multiple ways into a problem — not just the biggest opportunity or easiest fix. Be deliberate and slow, although this is often at odds with traditional agency expectations."*

Ready for diversity?

The question of how ready the creative industry is to embrace the diversity it needs drew a mixed response from the panel. Diamond Abdulrahim observed that in all her agency experience as a Muslim she had *"never seen Eid or Ramadan on any planned activity for a national brand or client. They're always last-minute additions. If you're not thinking about these things in the ideas you pitch to clients, then maybe you're not embracing diversity in your own organisation. The two things work hand in hand. It's not just about getting non-white people through the door, it's about what the output looks like — and not just casting black or mixed-race people in adverts."*

For Gerard Crichlow, this poses wider questions about agency structures. *"Advertising is an ideas business, but it's also about the distribution of those ideas. This means asking yourself, if I have insights about Ramadan, how do I distribute my ideas to the decision-makers in the agency."* As an example, he recalled working in an agency and believing a campaign wasn't culturally representative of People of Colour in the US. *"I said, 'We can tell different stories. This is playing to a stereotype.' But when I explained my idea to the creative directors and the clients, they couldn't relate to it. They had no cultural context. So how to distribute the idea became a daisy-chain, and I had to be creative about helping people understand what they couldn't. So while I'm optimistic about generating insights based on diverse perspectives, I'm sceptical that the current agency and creative structures are necessarily set up to receive the distribution of ideas. It's something we need to work on."*

The future

Asked what the world of strategy will look like in the future, Rob Scotland pronounced himself *"excited, because I'm optimistic. Across the board, strategy is proving itself to give competitive advantage. We're entering the era of the strategist. The more we lean on data, machine learning and the understanding they promise, the more we realise results depend on what you put in. The more informed and culturally-*

fluent you are, the better. As yet, those people are relatively thin on the ground. We have people who can hype something, people who can study things, but the ones in the middle, who can see something as it emerges, capture the insights and turn them into strategy, they're really valuable."

"I hope in future strategy is less about decks and frameworks and more about a real interrogation of what is, and reimagining what could be," said Gerard Crichlow. *"To me, strategy is a set of decisions we have to make. If we grab inputs from different places, cultures and ideas, then we'll make decisions based on those inputs. While*

frameworks can be helpful, we shouldn't rely solely on fancy frameworks to help us understand, we don't need it to be glossy - we just need it to be sharp and creative."

Diamond Abdulrahim's hopes are for empathy and critical thinking to become *"the sole defining competencies for a strategist. Like Gerard, I also want less decks — instead, to pay real attention to people and to idea generation just for the sake of thinking about what can be possible. Something more scrappy and experimental — even playful."*

HOST:

Leonie Annor-Owiredu - Cultural Strategist & Diversity Consultant

GUESTS:
Gerard Crichlow - Strategic Consultant at WorkingVersion
Diamond Abdulrahim - Strategist at Highsnobiety
Rob Scotland - Head Of Strategy at McCann London

The New P&L® - Principles & Leadership in business Podcast Series and Institute

We believe business needs a 'New P&L': one that is focused as much on 'Principles and Leadership' as it is on 'Profit and Loss', because we know that if a business's Principles are right and aligned with its purpose, and its Leadership has clarity of vision and is strong, focused and empathetic, then it will be in profit and not in loss in so many ways.

Our aim is to challenge leaders, entrepreneurs and industry influencers to bring their most intelligent, inspiring and insightful observations and opinions to the conversations on principles & leadership in business.

We do our research thoroughly, ask the deeper questions and aim to give our audiences real tangible insights and examples they can use to help further focus their principles, enhance their leadership and work towards building more ethical, productive, collaborative and ultimately, successful and principled businesses – those that encourage great, inspirational leaders and high performing, motivated teams.

For more information go to **www.principlesandleadership.com**