

The Care and Feeding of the Creative Mind

By Steve Maggio



Breakthrough creative. Everyone wants it. Few achieve it. If you're on the client side and want to get the most out of your creative partners, here are a few tips on how to play the muse to your creative team.

1 Provide useful background

In the “olden days” before the Internet, I used to ask all new clients for Annual Reports, articles, press releases, direct mail samples and other printed materials to get a feel for the mission, tone and voice of the organization. Today much of that background information is available online. It's generally a good thing, but only if the client website is updated frequently. Sometimes a web search can send a writer or artist in the wrong direction if your website features people, events and programs that are no longer relevant.

That's why I like to have the client provide a brief “what's hot?” document before beginning a new package. *Brief* is the key word here. We don't need ten press releases and every bit of information you have – that's information overload. Just give us a hot topic, like an emotional story of a person recently helped by your organization, a new program that's experiencing great results or a research breakthrough that donors will find compelling.

2 Have a plan

A written creative strategy is a good way to outline the audience, goals, copy points, deadlines and sacred cows in a given creative project. In fact, just the exercise of going through this step with your agency will help clarify the project in your mind and provide a basis for judging how well the creative execution fulfills your needs.

If you don't do a written creative strategy or brief, you should at least have a team meeting or conference call to describe what you're trying to accomplish. The worst thing to do would be to have your creative team start a project without clear direction.

Also keep in mind that there might be a hundred different “right ways” to write and design a successful piece – but ninety-nine of them might not be what you have in mind. Decide what you want and stick to it. Remember that it's very difficult for your creative team to hit a moving target. If you don't know what you want or fail to express it clearly – or if you change your mind frequently – you are guaranteed a long and frustrating editing process.

3 **Open your mind**

If you are not open to new ideas, you'll always get the same kind of creative – the kind that smells stale. Hold a Creative Audit with your account team to review all the work you've done in the recent past. Include a brainstorming session to explore new areas of interest.

During your brainstorming, try to avoid “idea killer” comments like: “we tried that ten years ago and it didn't work... we can't get good stories because our field people won't talk to us ... I don't think Harriet likes purple, so avoid that... and ... “how much does that cost?”

Think *big picture* and worry about the details later.

4 **Take a risk**

In order to find a creative breakthrough, one must be willing to go out on a limb to a certain extent. Of course you should test any new approach first, in order to minimize your risk, but don't be afraid to stretch every now and then. The willingness to test something out of the ordinary will give you a chance for extraordinary results – plus, it will give your creative team the spirit to keep striving for “something extra.”

Realize that most gains are modest ones, achieved through a continual process of testing and evaluating different approaches. But by taking calculated risks, you'll eventually find a new approach that blows everything else out of the water. It's exciting.

5 **Smell the roses**

Some people speak up only when things go wrong. Don't forget to crow about good results when it comes to year-end and you've made budget. And take time to celebrate all the little victories you win along the way. Give credit where credit is due. Creatives can be a different breed of cat – and often misunderstood. But believe me, they're like everyone else when it comes to someone saying “good job!” It feels good.

6 **Give constructive criticism**

You should never be afraid to tell your creative team when they're off-base. You're the customer and you should get what you want. However, be careful so as to not let your own personal biases affect the actual idea of “what your donors like.”

“What your donors like” should be based on the numbers. Past results should guide the creative team in the right direction. And when speaking about “your donors” remember that your donor file is not homogenized. It contains subgroups – made up of many different types of people and different segments respond to different creative approaches.

Be specific in your criticism. “This part works for me, this doesn't, because of X.” The worst thing to hear is, “I don't know what it is about this piece, but I don't like it.” Because, as we established in Step #2, there are at least ninety-eight other “right ways” to do it over again and still have you come back to say you don't like it.

7 Use good photos

“A picture is worth a thousand words,” right? Then why can’t we always use good photos to enhance our reply slips and other components? Most clients do not have ready access to great photos. Even if there are great photos on the website or in the annual report, sometimes they are difficult to acquire.

However, make the extra effort for a good visual. It’s a compelling way to get your point across. If you don’t have good photos in-house, consider investing in a half- or full-day photo shoot. You can probably get all the photos you need for the year in a single day. This is especially important if you don’t allow the use of stock photos.

If you will allow stock photos, there are several stock houses online these days, so good photography is more accessible than it was in the past. It’s also quite economical, as many good stock images are available “royalty-free.”

8 When in doubt, test it out

Sometimes, despite your best laid plans and strategic thinking, you and your team cannot come to an agreement on which creative approach is best. When this happens, test. It’s the best way to prove what kind of creative will perform.

Some of my clients test eight, ten or more different approaches in a single mailing. It depends upon the size of your file – and your budget.

If there were a magic formula for creative that worked for every cause and every donor file, our lives would be much easier. But I would be out of a job. The best we can do is work as a team to strategize, brainstorm and test to find the best ideas for each individual appeal and its audience. It’s time consuming – but it works!

Steve Maggio is president of DaVinci Direct,
a full-service direct response agency. Contact him at
steve@davinci-direct.com. 508-746-2555, ext. 11

