

EVEN “BAD” CLIENTS DESERVE QUALITY ADVERTISING: USING THE *TEMPLATES* CREATIVE IDEATION TECHNIQUE TO OVERCOME THE LIMITATIONS OF CLIENT QUALITY

This paper examines how ideation techniques like the *Templates* method (Goldenberg, Mazursky and Solomon 1999) can overcome the limitations of poor client quality and low intrinsic motivation so to produce highly creative outcomes. We present a 2 X 4 experiment manipulating client quality and ideation techniques respectively, involving 207 working creatives in major agencies in South Africa and Nigeria. Each creative was asked to develop two ads in response to a hypothetical brief. Creatives’ self-reports were analysed using ANOVA and showed not all ideation techniques work in all client situations. The Unification template overcomes motivational limitations in situations of a poor quality client. Alternatively, the Metaphor template works well on average, little known client. The Extreme consequences template does not work well in either situation.

INTRODUCTION

Unfortunately, some marketing clients are invariably better than others. Advertising professionals, researchers and educators recognize this and not surprisingly, converge in their identification of the elements of client quality. In the industry classic, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, legendary practitioner, David Ogilvy, enumerated fifteen points on “how to be a good client” (Ogilvy and Atherton 1963, p. 19). Based on empirical research findings, Koslow, Sasser and Riordan (2006) also highlighted three elements of campaign development in which the client’s role is crucial. These elements are: 1) setting direction, 2) resource allocation and 3) evaluation. A cursory look at these elements reveals that they are an abridged version of Ogilvy’s time-honoured points. In addition, Lopez and Lee (2005) shared

their experiences in using real-world client-based projects (CBP) to teach marketing in general and West (2011) with teaching advertising in particular. All the points they raised in their constructs of a “good” and “bad” client reiterate similar points.

Poor clients introduce challenges in producing quality creative work and a key one may be that they have an unintentionally negative influence on the agency social environment (Amabile 1996; Sullivan 2008), one of the main factors in predicting highly creative work (Sasser and Koslow 2008). For example, if a “bad” client suppresses the agency’s passion for the work, then lower quality work tends to follow (Sasser and Koslow 2012).

Despite the challenges introduced by a less than ideal client, marketing managers still pay professional fees for the services of their agencies and therefore, reserve the right to demand quality campaigns (Spake et al. 1999)—regardless of what some commentators may think these clients deserve. Moreover, agencies are always in keen competition between themselves for business from present and prospective clients (Grabher 2001; Jung and Seldon 1995). These pressures put agencies in an undesirable situation and they need to find ways to be more creative even when clients are “bad” and social environments “poor”.

To deal with “bad” clients, we propose that use of creative thinking techniques can offset the poor motivation “bad” clients impose. Specifically, we use the *Templates* method, advocated by Goldenberg, Mazursky and Solomon (1999), and explore the use of *Unification, Metaphor* and *Extreme Consequences*.

To demonstrate *Templates*’ usefulness, an experiment is conducted on 207 professional creatives working for major international agency networks, about half of whom hail from one of the most creative advertising markets on the planet, South Africa (The Gunn Report 2017). The remainder of the subjects come from major agencies in Nigeria, which is less represented in international competitions, but still known for being the home of Nollywood, the world’s third largest film industry (Haynes 2007). Together, a South African

and Nigerian sample also provides critical way-points to understanding advertising in emerging markets like sub-Saharan Africa (Oyedele and Minor 2013).

Our study asks professional advertising creatives to develop work for a hypothetical client that is either unknown or described negatively. Yet both conditions draw from the same informative brief containing a strong insight. A second treatment is creative templates. Three different creative templates are used along with a control group which did not specify using a template. Results suggest that one template worked well when the client was described in poor terms, and a different one did better when the client was unknown. The results suggest implications for improving the creative development process.

THEORY

Of all the factors that determine creative outcome—social environment, motivation, creativity-relevant skills and domain-relevant skills—only the last two are the exclusive competencies of creative agencies (Koslow 2015; O’Connor et al. 2016), and their application constitutes the creative process. Although the other two factors of creativity—social environment and motivation—are only indirectly involved in the creative process, these social psychology factors still influence creatives (Amabile 1999) and shape creative outcome (Woodman and Schoenfeldt 1990). The first of these two factors, the social environment, will be reviewed initially.

Creativity, the Social Environment and Client Quality

Virtually all theories of creativity agree on the influence of social environment on creative performance: componential model of creativity (Amabile 1983, 1996); investment theory of creativity (Sternberg and Lubart 1991); interactionist model of creative behaviour (Woodman and Schoenfeldt 1990); ecological theory of creativity (Harrington 1990); chance

- configuration theory of creativity (Simonton 1989) ; evolving systems model of creativity (Gruber and Davis 1988); social systems model of creativity (Csikszentmihalyi 1988; Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi and Gardner 1994). Early studies on the effect of social environment on creativity started with children in schools and families, and private individuals like writers, poets and artists in non-organizational settings (Brown and Gaynor 1967; Goetz 1981; Osborn 1963; Raina 1968; Torrance 1964, 1965; Torrance, Baruch and Torrance 1976), and these samples generalize poorly to organizational settings (Verbeke et al. 2008), which also generalize poorly to advertising professionals (Kilgour and Koslow 2009).

Presently, research efforts are increasingly focused on social environment variables of creativity in the business environment (Amabile, Goldfarb and Brackfield 2009; Amabile et al. 1996; Choi 2004; Ford 1999; Liao et al. 2010; Sagiv et al. 2010; Shalley, Zhou and Oldham 2004; Stokols, Clitheroe and Zmuidzinas 2002; Taggar 2002). Most of these studies dwell on variables that are internal to the organization: support and autonomy (Mathisen and Einarsen 2004) collaborations (Bullinger, Auernhammer and Gomeringer 2004); group interactions (Rickards, Chen and Moger 2001); organizational structure (Artz et al. 2010); organizational climate (Hunter et al. 2007); leadership (Howell and Boies 2004; Mumford and Licuanan 2004). Only a few studies have looked at an influence outside the organisation of creative activity, the immediate external social environment (Harrington, Block and Block 1987; Madjar, Oldham and Pratt 2002; Wang et al. 2013). Even the ones that addressed the external social environment have overlooked the clients that commission creative work as an important social factor (Koestner, Walker and Fichman 1999; Ray and Miller 1994; Walberg, Rasher and Parkerson 1980).

In advertising, limited work has been done on the effect of social environment on creative performance (cf., Koslow, Sasser and Riordan 2006; Sasser and Koslow 2012a, 2012b; Van den Bergh and Stuhlfaut 2006). As with the general business world, the little

work done in advertising have again focused in part on the internal business environment (Reid 2014; Sasser and Koslow 2012b; Waller, Shao and Bao 2010). However, the influence of clients, as with motivation, domain skill and creativity skills, is too crucial a variable to overlook in creative outcome in the advertising environment (Sasser and Koslow 2012a; Koslow, Sasser and Riordan 2006; Van den Bergh and Stuhlfaut 2006; Wang et al. 2013).

Marketers are clients to advertising agencies. The advertising client is usually considered an active co-creator in campaign development (Van den Bergh and Stuhlfaut 2006) and thus has a special role in its agency's social environment because the role influences the quality of service it receives from advertising agencies (Koslow, Sasser and Riordan 2006; O'Connor et al. 2016; Reid 2014; Sasser and Koslow 2012b; Waller, Shao and Bao 2010;). How well a client understands and performs its roles in the campaign development process determines whether advertising agencies, especially creatives, will perceive it as a good or "bad" quality client.

Although the influence of clients is certainly under-researched, the influence clients have on their agency seems powerful. As Koslow, Sasser and Riordan (2006) measure empirically, half the explainable variance an agency's creative output is fully explained by a few aspects of clients. Thus, Ogilvy's advice to be a "good" client rings true. Putting together the agreement between advertising professionals, researchers and educators, this study submits a definition:

Client quality: An overall perception of how well a client performs its role in setting goals, allocating resources, evaluating performance and rewarding creative work before, during and after campaign development.

Any client who falls to the negative side of one or more criteria in this definition is termed “bad” clients. Those on the high end would be termed “good” clients. Yet the social environment produced by the client’s ability to fulfil their role is hardly the only factors that influences creativity. Although a “bad” client may stem the motivation creatives have to do good work, some other factor may need to compensate, and within the componential model (Amabile 1996), one factor—creativity relevant processes—may prove useful.

To produce good creative work for “bad” clients, one possibility is that creative thinking tools could be employed. Goldenberg, Mazurky and Solomon (1999)’s *Templates* method of creative thinking may be used to compensate for low motivation. These repeatable structures in ads appear to consistently surprise consumers (Goldenberg and Mazurky 2008), and they are surprisingly straightforward to apply (Goldenberg et al. 2009). The problem is that creative thinking techniques only appear to work for individuals who are not highly creative already. Kilgour and Koslow (2009) showed that professional creatives did both less original and less strategic work when asked to use a random word creative thinking technique. It is reasonable to assume that a well-motivated, highly-trained professional creative can outperform creative thinking technique in many cases. If they are not well-motivated, then it becomes an empirical question whether creative thinking techniques can be effective in substituting for the passion that usually drives highly creative work.

METHOD

A 2 x 4 between-subject experiment manipulated client quality and ideation techniques. Client quality, the first independent variable, had on two levels: unknown client and “bad” client, with the unknown client serving as the control condition. The second independent variable, ideation technique, had four levels; three ideation techniques from the creative templates (Unification, Metaphor and Extreme consequence) and one from random

search, which also served as control. The study involved 207 creatives who worked on exactly the same brief except that half of the creatives had an extra information about client quality on their brief while the other half had none. There were at least 20 subjects per cell, and each subject created a print ad based on one idea and a television ad created from another idea. The brief was for a hypothetical utility van ready for launch.

Industry creatives from international agencies in South Africa and Nigeria were engaged, to ensure applicability of results in developed and developing markets. The automotive category was chosen because it is prevalent in both markets, creatives have good exposure to it and products in that category usually have a well-defined selling point. Subjects were referred to instructions given on the cover page of the response booklet. Further explanations were given to subjects about ideation techniques.

Subjects were instructed to spend the first ten minutes writing down a list of ideas on one page in the booklet. Then they had the remaining thirty minutes to develop two of their best ideas into full advertisements by spending up to fifteen minutes on each execution. All subjects developed two advertisements for the same brief. Post-experiment subjects completed a self-assessment questionnaire.

The client quality manipulation was between an unknown client and “bad” client. Half the subjects received a normal brief in which nothing was said about client quality. This was the control group. The other half received the same brief but with an additional message that used the elements of client quality to create statements about the client. These statements were negative versions of the elements in the definition of client quality. This is a projective technique, a provocative method to make subjects respond to the brief in such a manner that reflects their attitude towards the “bad” client, the likes of whom they most likely know or have already experienced at work. Manipulation details are in the Appendix.

For ideation techniques, subjects were randomly given the ideation technique to use. The technique for each subject was clearly defined in the instructions on the cover page of the response booklet. Ideation templates from ‘conceptual formula models’ were *Unification*, *Extreme consequence* and *Metaphor*; while the control group was given free rein to explore.

RESULTS

Two constructs, originality and strategy, were measured using two scales from Koslow, Sasser and Riordan (2003). Each of the 207 subjects produced two advertisements, so the total sample for the factor analysis is 414 across all these advertisements. Two factors were confirmed by both the scree-plot and eigenvalues-greater-than-1 rules, accounting for 65% of the total variance. Using VARIMAX rotation, the items “original” “unexpected” “novel” and “different” all load on one factor while the items “on strategy”, “a good fit with the client’s strategy”, “an appropriate strategy for the client”, and “built on good strategy” load on the other. The expected loadings were all .70 or greater, and the largest off-loading was .28. The two measures were formed by summing the items and then they were centered and scaled to a mean of zero and standard deviation of 1. The two measures were also correlated at .43. Cronbach’s alphas were .84 and .80 for originality and strategy respectively

Originality and strategy were modeled using Generalized Linear Model (GLM). The model for intrinsic task motivation used 207 observations, one per respondent. The models for originality, strategy and creativity all uses 414 observations, or two advertisements per respondent. These are listed in the Table. The model for intrinsic task motivation uses country as covariate. The other three models use a mean level for each subject (nested within treatment) because there were two observations for each subject. The means of each treatment is shown in Figures 1 & 2.

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For originality, the Table and Figure 1 show that there was a marginally significant interaction effect between client quality and technique ($p = .054$). As Figure 2 shows, when the client is unknown, all ideation technique conditions produce statistically equal originality. However, when the client is described as poor, the level of originality change, with the largest effects concerning unification and metaphor. When clients are “bad” unification improves originality over the baseline, no-template condition, but that difference did not meet the standard cut-off for significance ($p = .14$). For similar clients, metaphor reduces originality compared to baseline, and this difference is marginally significant ($p = .056$). Yet, in the “bad” client condition, unification clearly out performed metaphor ($p = .005$). In no condition does any technique outperform the no-template baseline, but metaphor does particularly poorly in the “bad” client condition ($p = .015$).

For strategy, the Table details a significant interaction effect between client quality and technique ($p = 0.005$). Figure 2 provides more detail. Comparing extreme consequence with the baseline, no-template condition, there were no differences—all were almost identical—but there are large swings for both unification and metaphor. Metaphor outperformed extreme consequences and the no-template baseline ($p = .049$ and $p = .033$ respectively) when clients were unknown. But when clients were “bad” the advantage metaphor had dissipated. Unification does poorly for an unknown client, but is only statistically different from metaphor ($p = .012$). Yet when clients are “bad”, unification’s performance is much improved compared to an unknown client with unification ($p = .012$). If one combines the conditions of metaphor, extreme consequences and the no-template baseline, the level of strategy across the three conditions is lower than that of unification ($p = .064$) when clients are “bad”.

To emphasize the effects observed for originality and strategy, some patterns are emerging. When focused on originality, no ideation technique could outperform originality of

the baseline, no-template condition. However, there are techniques that can improve strategy. Metaphor does particularly well in the unknown client conditions. However, unification may do better for “bad” clients.

DISCUSSION

We confirm that the characteristics of each ideation technique interacts with the influence of client quality. While metaphor dwells on similarity of content, unification thrives on the opposition of forms. This makes it somewhat opposite to metaphor. The results seem to conform to this perspective. For both clients, the pattern appears fairly the same for both techniques in all dependent variables; when metaphor is down, unification is up and vice versa. If an ideation technique can be graded as simple, moderate or complex even within the same technique (van Mulken, van Hooft and Nederstigt 2014), then there is bound to be differences in degrees of complexity between techniques. Techniques developed from efforts at pushing the boundaries of creativity and ideation techniques that are more suited to story-telling, like extreme consequence, tend to be more complex in nature. This may account for the similarity in the performance of extreme consequence and the control technique.

As demotivating a “bad” client may be, creatives were still able to produce good creative work for them, certainly as good of work as for unknown clients—at least on average. Although we investigated whether ideation techniques could help overcome the social environment challenges “bad” clients introduce, techniques worked differently in different situations. Even “bad” clients deserve good work, and the right ideation technique may help.

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TABLE
GLM RESULTS PREDICTING FOUR DEPENDANT VARIABLES

	Originality			Strategy		
	Mean square	<i>p</i> -value	Partial η^2	Mean square	<i>p</i> -value	Partial η^2
Subjects (nested within treatments)	1.358	<.0001	.671	1.539	<.0001	.753
Country						
Client quality	0.020	.859	0	0.0143	.864	0
Ideation techniques	1.461	.080	.032	0.440	.436	.013
Client quality X Ideation techniques	1.656	.054	.036	2.131	.005	.060
Number of observations		414			414	
<i>R</i> ²		.679			.758	

FIGURE 1
ORIGINALITY BY CLIENT QUALITY AND IDEATION TECHNIQUE

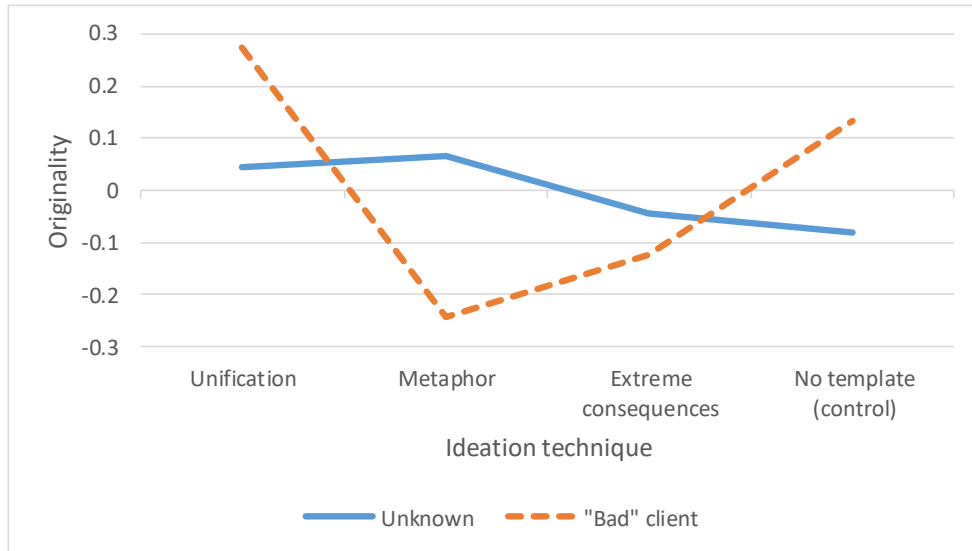
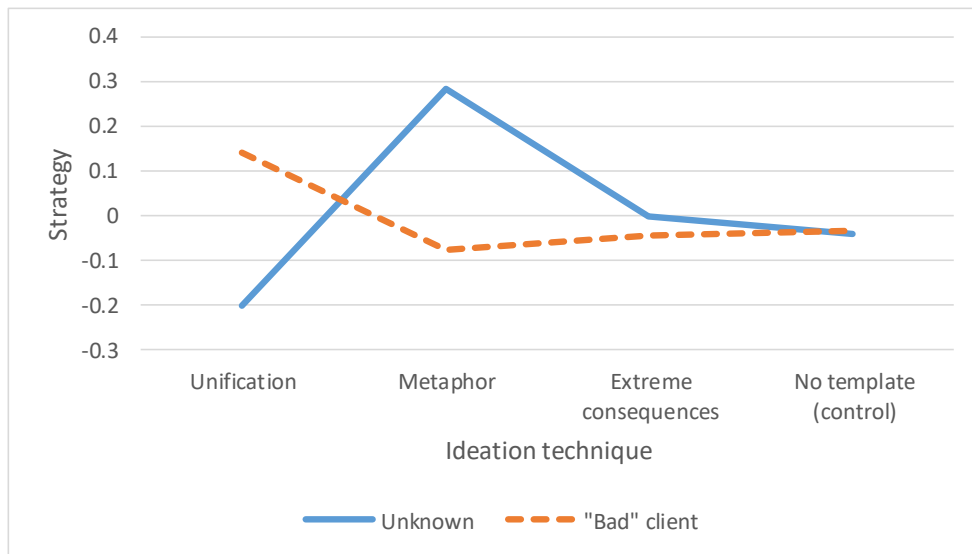


FIGURE 2
STRATEGY BY CLIENT QUALITY AND IDEATION TECHNIQUE



APPENDIX
BRIEF USED IN EXPERIMENT AND CLIENT QUALITY MANIPULATION

[Brief, used for all subjects]

Advertising Objectives:

The advertising needs to persuade shoppers of competing work utility vehicles to include our brand on their shopping list.

Target Audience:

This new utility vehicle will be targeted to tradesmen and farmers. The target is a blue-collar worker male, 25 – 45 years of age.

Insight:

For tradesmen and farmers their vehicle is a point of pride, like scars that prove ones toughness.

Proposition:

No harder working utility.

Reasons to Believe:

- 10% more power than competitors
- 15% larger scratch resistant tray top
- Rust resistant under body
- All-wheel drive

[Client quality manipulation, included in half the sample]

Attention!

A fellow creative who had previously worked on this account told you that this client never knows what he wants in a campaign; never gives enough information to work with; passes a campaign through many levels of approval in his office; and considers himself a better expert on advertising than the agency. The same thing could happen here.