

STYLISTIC

Stylistic Thinking

You can't fake it...

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I believe everybody is creative.

Yet I hear the denial all the time:

“I’m not creative.”

“I don’t have a creative bone in my body.”

“That’s your department.”

Okay, I get it. People generally think ‘creativity’ means being able to draw or paint, or design something from nothing. But for me, that’s not what creativity is.

Creativity is abstract thought. Ideas. Thinking differently – like we all do, to a greater or lesser extent – but being intrigued by it. Perspective is creativity. Problem-solving and scrutinising the solution – that’s creativity, too. Doing something, however trivial, better than you or someone else did it last time. Again, creativity. We’re all doing it. It’s why we’re a hugely successful species.

Most business owners who’ve built an idea into an income and a reputation – they’re deeply creative. They just don’t see it, or don’t call it that. But they have to be.

When I was 23, I started a mobile car-valeting business. The Prince’s Youth Business Trust gave me a loan, and I set about building the brand. I knew what I wanted. I sketched logos. I thought about colours and how the van should look. I had strong instincts about all of it, but I couldn’t do any of it on my own. I needed someone to turn those sketches into a real logo – to realise them. Then I needed a printer for the leaflets, a decent livery for the van. The whole thing took shape because I got other people involved... people who knew what they were doing.

At its core, that's what a creative partnership is. Finding someone who can take what's in your head and help you see it objectively, clarify it, play with it, nurture it, and support its early life in the big wide world – or its metamorphosis. And quite often, while this can be the hardest part, it's the beginning of its truth and definition. It's out there. It exists!

I've been doing this for 22 years now. Running a design and marketing studio in Derbyshire, with 12 people across two studios. We've worked with startups in spare bedrooms, and companies turning over millions. One-man bands and blue-chip brands. And if there's one thing I've learned in all that time, it's that the work is only ever as good as the relationship behind it, and how sharing and co-developing a mere notion can turn into something great.

It's not an easy step to take, but if you trust the process that follows, it can be awesome.

I've watched businesses delay decisions for years, and suffer as a result.

One client, a company we've worked with for 20 years, was a market leader. 30 years strong, early web presence, every advantage. Doing just fine. We'd been telling them for years that they needed to invest in social media and search visibility. But the culture resisted. They were worried about negative reviews. Public scrutiny. Exposure. Criticism. So they waited.

Their competitors didn't.

By the time a director finally pushed the company to act, they were badly behind. We've recovered ground for them and the results are coming, but the work that would have been easy and cheap ten years ago became a serious investment, because they dragged their heels.

Another client, a fashion retailer with three shops, launched an ecommerce site early. Immediately successful. Huge turnover in the first few months.

But they had a stock management problem. Instead of investing in a proven EPOS system to fix it, they pulled the website entirely and directed everyone to the shops instead.

Then COVID hit.

No shop. Nothing online for the lockdown browsers. No search visibility, and competitors had filled the space they'd left. We rebuilt their site and fought to regain position, but the ground they'd lost was too much. They went out of business.

Not doing anything costs more than doing something. Anything, within reason. Just being there is better than effectively not existing to hundreds of thousands of potential customers. And a good creative partner won't just do the work when you ask for it – they'll tell you when something needs doing, even if you don't want to hear it.

The clients who get the best from us all have something in common.

It's not the budget, or even the idea.

It's the mindset.

They're open. They'll sit down and talk about where their business actually is, not the polished version they give their audience. The real picture. Team issues, infrastructure problems, where they want to get to but can't see how. They let it all out, because they know that the more we understand, the better we can help.

They're not coming to us saying 'we need a website'. They're saying 'we want to grow from £30million to £40million in five years – what does that look like?' Completely different conversation. It means we can look at the big picture rather than just one part of it. And they trust us to get on with the experience-based thinking, the strategies, the building blocks. And once we've done that, shared it, shaped it and agreed on the direction, they let us get on with it. They're involved when it matters, but they know that peering over our shoulders while we move things around on-screen won't help one bit.

You don't go to a doctor and tell them how to make you feel better. You don't tell a lawyer how best to approach your legal issue. But, for some reason, in the creative industries, the equivalent happens all the time. Perhaps because the tools are more accessible now, and it literally is just moving things around on a screen. Anyone can now do that with Adobe, or Canva, or whatever. Or watch a YouTube tutorial. So people assume they can do what we do, just because the tools are there.

In a sense, they can. I could research how to build a house. Learn to lay foundations. Plaster walls. Do the electrics. I might even finish it. But it would take years, and it would likely be dangerous, unpredictable, and a generally unpleasant place to spend time! I'd have to spend a lot of money on professional architects and tradespeople to fix the mistakes I made... when I could have trusted them and spent my time and money more wisely.

Essentially, creative work is the same. The tools are there for everyone. But knowing what actually works? That takes years.

When we were working out of a single room, the electrician fitting better lighting mentioned that his girlfriend's brother was looking for work experience. He was 14. Still at school. Shy to the point of shaking when he walked in. I didn't particularly want the hassle, but I said yes.

He spent a week with us, and he was good. Started doing small freelance bits while still at school. At sixteen, he came to me wanting a full-time job. I told him he should think about A-levels and university. He told me this is what he wanted to do.

So I took him on.

Over the years, we watched him grow. His confidence, his skills, his ability to speak to clients, his whole demeanour. He went from a shy 14-year-old to a capable, confident professional. He now works at GoDaddy, with an ambition to get to Spotify. I believe he will.

When he left, it hurt, like watching your children leave home. But that's what you do. You invest in people and then let them fly. Why wouldn't you? I believe the kind of business that turns a teenager into a professional will apply the same values and approach to your brand. Think bigger, imagine the future. Go for it. Own it. And when the time is right, release it into the wild.

The best briefs I've ever worked on

The first one wasn't just handed to me ready to get into. We built it together – sitting in a room, mapping out where they are, where they want to go, what's in the way, and what the opportunities are. Scribbling on whiteboards. Sharing references. Talking through ideas.

Not as a client instructing a supplier, but as the same team working towards the same goal.

The ideas that come out of that process aren't just ours or the client's. They come from the conversation, which is two-way. And because we shape them together, we believe in the same goal, and the way we'll achieve it.

The client was a fashion stylist who'd spent his career working with globally recognised names in music and entertainment, sent me an email with clear references. Brands he liked, images that reflected his thoughts, what he wanted and what he didn't. Then he said 'go for it'.

That kind of clarity and trust gets you excited. His client list was enormous, and we had to find a way to display it that felt clean and navigable. We came up with a Rolodex-style navigation system. Alphabetical. Minimal. Elegant. It was a direct response to a clear brief, and his trust in us.

For Pick Me Up, the graphic design festival at Somerset House, they gave us the commissioned artwork from one of the exhibiting artists and asked us to build a website around it. Strong creative material, clear parameters, and licence to think and explore. That's exciting and liberating. So we didn't just build what was asked for. We brought in a multi-vendor ecommerce system we'd already developed, and adapted it so every exhibiting artist could have their own portal and shop. The brief gave us licence to explore, go further and follow creative instinct.

Then there's Nottingham Trent University's Fashion Marketing and Media department. They were relocating from a beautiful Edwardian building to a more modern, '70s style one. They needed to rebrand the space and make it something students could be proud of. The brief was clear, but what made it exceptional was the clear feedback throughout. The lecturers had creative backgrounds. They understood the language. When we presented three concepts, they could tell us not just which one they preferred, but *why*. That meant we could refine with real confidence.

All three had something crucial in common: they all understood how creative work happens, and let it run. They told us clearly what they thought, stayed engaged throughout, and weren't hung up on process or looking to control direction.

Things change during a project. Fact.

Ideas come and go, details shift, people see how something needs to work differently once they see it in context. We expect that, and we're comfortable with it. No point whatsoever in being precious in creative collaboration.

But problems can arise when people change their minds about the fundamentals halfway through. Or if someone who hasn't been part of the creative process suddenly bursts in and judges things without context. That's not part of the process – it's a re-brief. It's starting over. And it costs everyone time and money. Sure, objectivity and fresh eyes can be helpful, but those eyes should have seen and understood the brief.

We recently did a promotional video for a client. Good brief. Detailed storyboard with camera shots, equipment... the full plan. The client loved it. Signed it off with real enthusiasm. We shot the footage, edited it, presented the first cut. They were pleased.

Then the director saw it. He'd likely signed off the storyboard while being distracted by other things, and had logged some vague expectation or interpretation in his mind of what the end result would be, and the end result didn't match it.

Three or four rounds of edits later, we had a completely different piece from the one everyone – including him – had agreed to build.

We'd done it right. The video matched the storyboard exactly. But people respond differently to something on paper compared to the finished thing. A storyboard is abstract. A video is real.

The lesson? Everyone who gets a say at the end needs to be in the room at the beginning.

'We're always on time and on budget.'

Any creative agency that says that is lying.

But we are most of the time.

Feedback is one of the things that trips up almost every project at some point.

Scrutinising creative work involves abstract words that can mean all sorts of things.

Warmth. Breathing room. Cleaner. More soul. Sharper.

It's the designer's role to make sure their interpretation of these words is correct, and to understand clearly what you're after. Most people haven't had to put things into words like that before, and that's completely fair. You're running a business, making complex decisions every day. But describing how something visual makes you feel is a different skill altogether.

The most common thing we hear is 'I'll know it when I see it'. And it's true – people do sense when something feels right and reflects their thoughts and feelings. The problem is, we need words before we can make pictures. You have to describe what you want, as best you can, before we can create it. And yes, putting a visual idea into words is hard.

So instead of 'I don't like it', try to tell us specifically what isn't working. Is it the colours? The layout? The feeling? Even 'it doesn't feel modern enough' or 'it feels a bit cold' gives us something to work with.

If you think it needs the elusive 'wow factor', at least show us what that means to you. Give examples, like a competitor's site, a brand you admire, or even a photograph that captures the mood. Showing is better than telling. Showing and discussing... even better. That gets us on the same page, and we have a far better sense of what to do.

Then, let us scurry off and work. Directive briefs are great. Feedback is great. But creative types like to lock in and create, and don't listen or talk much when they're in the zone.

Before you respond to any piece of creative work, ask yourself three things. What's working? What isn't? And, most importantly: *why do I feel that way?* That can sometimes be hard to articulate, but anything is better than 'I like it' or 'I don't'.

We'll meet you halfway, and we'll get where you want to be, together.

Time isn't money. Expertise is.

When I started out, designing a set of business cards might have taken me a full day. Maybe two. Learning, experimenting, trying different layouts, fonts, colours. Back and forth until something felt right.

If you gave me the same brief today, I could probably do the same thing in a couple of hours. Probably less. My decisions would be more intuitive, and sharper. The cards would be better.

So how do I charge you? If I charge for time, I lose, even though I've spent 22 years getting better and better at it.

That's the problem with charging by time. The better you get, the sharper your creative sense is, and the less time things take. But the value to the client is the same – if not higher – because the work is better and it's delivered faster. Time-based billing punishes experts. Sure, it helps clients to quantify and justify budgets, but it makes little sense in creative terms.

That's broken.

Anyway, nobody's retiring on the back of a great business card. But an ecommerce website, built properly, fast, well-structured, great user experience, optimised for search ... that can make you money for years. We've taken clients from £150,000 a year to £8million, within five years. Whether that took us three months or six months to build doesn't really matter. It's what it delivered that counts.

In short, the price should reflect what it's worth to your business, not how long it takes.

My team can't do bad work.

They just don't have it in them.

Even when the budget is tight, or we've only got a couple of days on something, they cannot bring themselves to lower the standard. The pride is built in. Every project gets the same care, attention and determination to make it work brilliantly and look great. Doing a half-arsed job is counter-intuitive.

That means underpriced (i.e. undervalued) work costs us money, because the team will over-deliver whether we're being paid for it or not. That's why we have minimum fees. Not to be difficult, but because below a certain threshold, we literally can't stop our team from giving more than the budget covers. We lose, by being as good as we are.

When a studio quotes you a price, it isn't just covering hours. It's covering the fact that the people doing the work will not cut corners, because it's pointless. We get that the accounts dept wants quantitative units for the ledger, but creativity is qualitative.

Not every client who leaves comes back.

But many do. for example:

One had been with us for years. They decided to move their website and digital work to their IT provider. Made sense financially, and maybe simplified things supplier-wise. One day, maybe a year or so later, the owner called me on my day off. Domain inaccessible. Website down. Everything needed transferring back.

I got it sorted that evening. Not because I wanted the client back, but because I could. Because I wanted them to be up and running again.

Another kept working with us on most things, but outsourced part of a development project overseas, to save money. It didn't go well. It took us about a year to untangle it, fix it, and get them back on track.

Both are still with us. Both will never go anywhere else. Not because we held it over them, but because they tried the alternative for perhaps the wrong reasons.

The best working relationships we have look like friendships. Because essentially, they are.

I know about their families, their challenges, the things that keep them going. They know about mine. That happens naturally when you're involved in someone's business for years. I don't fight it. It's one of the things that makes this work worth doing.

But the professionalism has to hold. You can care about someone personally and still tell them their idea won't work. I guess the personal angle can often make that easier, not harder.

A balanced work ethic

People sometimes arrive at a creative studio expecting a playground where you 'just freestyle, bounce some ideas around'. And yes, there is energy and humour, and real enjoyment in what we do. We see it in the number of people who want to work with us. We've even had clients who loved the culture so much they joined Stylistic.

But there's rigour, focus and graft at the core of this thing. The team also get their heads down and get the work done. I guess what I'm saying is, playfulness and natural personality isn't a substitute for professionalism. For me, it has to sit alongside it for people to be happy, and genuinely feel embraced for who they are as much as what they do. People who join us work that out quickly, and they love it.

Indirect routes to success.

Something that surprised me early on was how quickly clients started asking for advice that went beyond design or marketing. Business owners I looked up to would ask me what I thought they should do – not just about the thing they came to me for, but about the bigger picture. Direction, strategy, longer-term stuff.

I found I was good at it. I can help people identify opportunities. I can steer them towards better decisions. Often, they come up with the answer themselves, simply by talking about it and externalising their internal dialogue. They just needed someone to think it through with. That's become a big part of what we do. We don't charge for it separately. I think it's just part of being properly involved.

Creative people tend to get their heads down and work.

Because we love it, we can dive into it and go quiet. And when we go quiet, clients can start to worry.

‘Are they actually working on it?’

‘Have they forgotten?’

‘When am I going to see something?’

I know this because I feel exactly the same way when our own team is building something internally. Two or three days of silence, and I’m already thinking ‘what’s going on?’ If I feel that, our clients definitely feel it too.

Most of what goes into creative work is invisible. Thinking, researching, planning, coding, testing, refining. Important work that doesn’t look like anything yet.

So I’ll often pick up the phone or send a quick email to say, ‘we’re on it, here’s where we are, here’s what’s coming next.’ It takes five minutes, and puts people at ease.

If your creative partner goes quiet, ask. And if you’re the creative partner reading this, keep your client up to date.

‘A knowing’

There’s nearly always a tangible point in a long-term working relationship where something shifts. It stops being a working arrangement and becomes something else. ‘A knowing’, I call it.

We have clients we’ve worked with for over 20 years. In the early days, we had to learn everything. Their business, their market, how they think. Every project started with working all of that out.

Now we just know. We know the history of their brand because we built it. We know the people who’ve come and gone, because we’ve met them. We know what decisions worked and which ones didn’t. We’ve got everything. Every file, every version, every lesson from along the way.

All of that builds up over time. It means we can do things in year 10 that just wouldn’t have been possible in month three.

One of our clients recently turned 20. We didn't need a brief for their celebration piece. We had the assets, the history, the stories, the relationship. We could put together a timeline of their whole journey because we'd been on it with them. No new agency could walk in and do that.

In the first year, both sides are learning, feeling things out. Good work happens, but it takes more effort when everything is new. In the second year, most of that falls away. You stop having to explain things. You just know, and you know they know too. Trust is there because we've earned it, not because anyone promised it. The work gets faster and it gets better.

By year five, we're not an external agency. We're part of the team.

Perfection is the aim, not the claim

We're not perfect. Pretending we are would go against everything I've written here. But the drive is always there to do better, even when we're doing great.

Clients have let me go. I've let go of clients. Neither is easy. And every single time, there's been responsibility on both sides. Also, it's usually just a gap between one side's expectation and the other's understanding. That's normal.

I think we're pretty good, though. I believe in it, but I'm not the oracle. So if something doesn't feel right, say so straight away. Don't let it sit. Most problems have a simple fix when you catch them quickly. A difficult conversation in week two is straightforward. The same conversation in week twelve can be a lot harder.

You shouldn't need to psych yourself up to give your creative partner honest feedback. If you do, the relationship isn't right.

A good creative partner will sometimes say things you don't agree with. That's part of the job. You're paying for their judgement, and sometimes that means having your thinking challenged.

But it should never feel like you're being pushed around. You can question anything, ask why, and make the call that feels right for your business.

The best partnerships allow for creative or strategic disagreement. There's push and pull, debate, acceptance, compromise, breakthrough. If your creative partner can't take being questioned, that's a red flag. But equally, if you seem to be overriding them on everything, it's worth asking if you've picked the right partner, or if you're standing in their way.

Sometimes it just isn't the right fit. Different ways of working, different expectations, different values. It happens.

If you're going to leave, always be straight about why. Tell them what isn't working. Give them a chance to fix it. They might surprise you. And if they can't fix it, at least you'll know you handled it like an adult.

This industry is smaller than you think. Relationships matter. How you end things says as much about you as how you start them.

Without mistakes, you don't learn anything

There are 12 of us, and sometimes things don't go to plan. When that happens, we own it. We fix it quickly, and we don't make excuses.

We're not going to pretend every project has been perfect. That would be foolish on many levels, and it would make everything I've written here a waste of time.

We care about the businesses we work with. We'll work weekends if there's an emergency. We'll answer the phone on a day off. We'll do more than we need to, every time, because that's just how we're wired.

But that only works if it goes both ways.

Every business is different. Every partnership is different. There's no formula; no checklist.

But after 22 years of building this thing, there's a clear thread running through all of it:

Be open. Be honest. Respect the people you work with. Trust the process. When it's right, stick with it. When it isn't, figure out why and change up.

You can't fake authenticity.
But you can work with people
who don't try to.

