

GRAHAM HODGE, CHRIS CLARKE LBi

THE BLENDED FUTURE

Predicting digital's future is nothing more than a gamble. Better to take the talent at hand and use the right people to deliver the right solution

So the geeks have inherited the earth. Or, at least, the place is being run on the technologies those geeks made and simplified so the rest of us can use them. And now we all seem obsessed with the next big thing. Whether it's the iPhone 5, PlayStation 4 or Facebook Deals, we love to speculate on tomorrow's shiny technical gew-gaw.

Because of this, the relationships between things are in constant flux. Our connections with each other, with government, with business and, of course, brands transform in real time, like clouds on a windy day. We all know capricious consumers (or people, let's call them people) expect more than ever before. They look behind promises, seeking out content and services that make those promises real. They expect constant innovation from brands, rewarding those that deliver and ignoring those that don't.

So most smart companies are keen to deliver innovative services and marketing to people, often fusing the two. Given the pressures to go with the tried-and-tested methods of the past, it's exciting to see the bottom-up pressure of the market forcing change and fostering experimentation.

The trouble is this: increased demand for innovation is extremely hard to deliver on because, in most companies, no-one truly owns the innovation agenda. In many cases, internal political paralysis prevents progress, meaning clients turn to agencies to find out and deliver what's next.

At LBi, we work with all sorts of organisations, from global brands to disruptive start-ups. Some are beginning to experiment with social media and content, others challenge us to take them to the edge of what's possible. What unifies them is an understanding at board level that digital excellence is central to preserving competitive advantage, now and in the future.

Some businesses still view technology and all that "internetty social mobile phoney MyTwitface stuff" as a secondary priority or a gimmick. Those that are succeeding are those that recognise innovation cuts across their business, transforms how they deliver value and has the potential to make them shit-loads of money.

This means any agency that's worth handing significant budget to needs a constantly evolving understanding of the possibilities technology enables. The trouble is, despite relentless "agency of the future" posturing, few are set up to deliver real innovation. Despite its world-class creative excellence, our ad industry has produced



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take that listening and do something with it, to look at the data produced and connect it to ideas in real time. It seems to us that connecting content and CRM is essential. So your culture has to cope with a blend of big creative thinkers, data nerds and techies. And they should all feel loved.

We've found this approach works well for us. We've recently won new tasks with SAB Miller, Comparethemarket.com, Coca-Cola and Sony Ericsson, where our role is to create content designed for the social space.

With Lloyds TSB, we have become the bank's partner for digital transformation. Our work has put us in the enviable position of being a catalyst and creator of state-of-the-art customer experiences for the UK's biggest bank. In essence, working with our clients to discover "what's next" in banking. While this has involved a fair amount of future-gazing, our approach has been geared more towards organising for change, based on the needs of the people who bank with Lloyds TSB, rather than gazing into a crystal-ball.

One trend that is sure to accelerate is the crossover of digital experiences into the real world. For Macy's in New York, we've helped energise a more youthful consumer, creating a socially enabled in-store experience called Magic Mirror. In London, we've connected a knitting machine to the internet to create the most effective campaign Macmillan Cancer Support has ever done. In Holland, social media listening led us to co-develop a perfume for a baby care brand after we found out teens liked the smell. None of this is possible if you don't keep changing your way of thinking. And it's impossible if you start the creative process with your media choice already made.

Betting on "what's next" is just that, a bet. You may as well just use our handy interactive fortune-teller to figure out what the winning approach will be. If that seems absurd, and it is, then focus your energy instead on blending the right talents who can deal with whatever might happen.

There will always be exciting new technologies, platforms, networks and skills to deal with as our industry continues to shape-shift like Proteus on Bensedrine. We think the challenge is less about forecasting "what's next", and more about organising yourself to cope with and even benefit from the crazy shit that's inevitably heading to a fan near you.

Graham Hodge is the director of branded content and creative services, and Chris Clarke is the chief creative officer at LBi

conservative cultures, resistant to change and nostalgic for the past.

Doing all this new stuff is difficult. It takes a special culture to get it right. We call it blending and it's central to everything we do. Blending allows us to take ideas from strategy and concept to launch and evaluation as quickly and effectively as possible –

regardless of the specifics of the business challenge. Blending ensures we function as strategic partners, helping clients decide what's next and holding their hands on the journey.

It's not a complicated process. It's about casting the right people and orchestrating their contributions so that the outcome takes a client further on their digital journey, delighting their customers on the way.

It just needs a relentless focus on collaboration without diluting the leadership and friction needed to ensure the right ideas rise to the surface. When you bring your clients into this process, you become a partner for change; an agency that can take companies to an exciting and profitable future.

It also means unifying some classically opposed forces in the agency landscape. In an age when brands must tell compelling stories to engage people in social networks, storytelling has never been more important. The UK ad industry is arguably the best in the world at this. It's just never had to listen back before. It's never had to then

Take-outs

How to cope with 'what's next':

- Work at pace, prototype quickly, learn from mistakes.
- Cast the right people and help them blend well together, feeling of equal value.
- Connect your storytelling to your data.
- Don't try to predict the future; organise yourself to adapt to it.

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