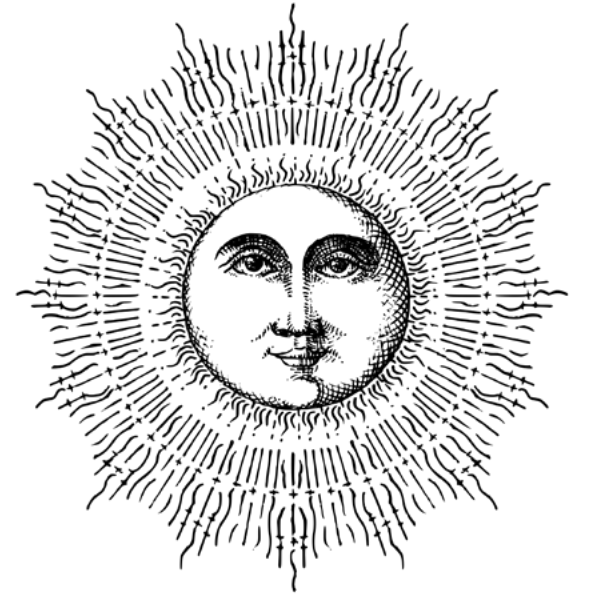




Beyond



CREATIVITY: THE ULTIMATE MEDIA MULTIPLIER

A playbook for brands ready to break free from conventional media thinking and realise the true potential of their investment

Introduction:

Media has a creativity problem, and it's costing brands a fortune.

For all the talk of precision and optimisation, we've built a system that quietly wastes money. Peter Field's Cost of Dull research with Adam Morgan and System1 found a dull campaign can cost brands millions more annually to match the performance of an exciting one – around **£10m** on average, and double that in tougher categories like retail and durables.

Even worse, **\$287bn** is being spent globally on “dull” media formats that lose attention before a message can land, according to Professor Karen Nelson-Field. That's around **33% of total advertising spend**.

Boring media plans aren't harmless. They're expensive. And right now, with the market more competitive than ever and clients under mounting pressure to deliver impact, that's a huge problem.

And yet, the industry keeps buying the same predictable plans. We've optimised ourselves into oblivion, trading imagination for repetition and impact for impressions. In the process, brands have become trapped by convention, locked into a system that rewards the familiar instead of the bold.

Media needs a jolt. More invention. More bravery. True value for money isn't cost per impression, it's using your spend to propel your brand into a league of its own.

What we need is more creativity in media – and by that, we don't mean the occasional media first. The opportunity is far bigger. We need to completely reframe how we think about media, and stretch our imaginations to find fresh, unexpected ways for a brand to show up.

“We absolutely need more creativity in media. We've become bogged down in data and efficiencies. Data has driven the conversation for so long that creativity has often been squeezed out. We need both, working together, and we need more diverse, varied thinking in our plans.”
Ben Gardiner, Chief Client Officer at creative OOH specialist Grand Visual

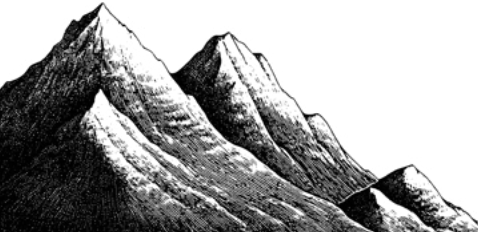
This matters to everyone. Smaller brands have to show up differently to push the boundaries of what money can buy. Bigger brands are spreading budgets thinner across a growing number of channels. The challenge is universal: how to reach people, and how to make an impact when you do.

“Smaller brands often have to think more creatively because they have fewer resources. Without scale, they have to rely on imagination to cut through. On the other hand, larger brands have the advantage of both scale and greater resources, which sometimes reduces the pressure to be inventive. But actually, when a business can combine scale with genuine creativity, it becomes a real powerhouse. It is a significant competitive advantage, particularly when efficiency demands and budget pressures are increasing.”

Shelley Macintyre, Interim CEO Brands and Licensing, BBC Studios

“The charity sector is crowded, with 168,000 in the UK alone. Within our own space, brand distinction is a real problem, especially when we're outspent 10 to one by other organisations in our cause area. So we're forced to think differently about how we show up. What unexpected places can we turn up in? Can we do things a bit smarter? That thinking has enabled us to punch above our weight.”

Carolyn Coupel, Director of Strategic Marketing, Alzheimer's Research UK



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Introduction: continued

The barriers holding brands back

There are plenty of reasons this hasn't happened yet. Some are structural. The divide between "creative" and "media" disciplines has left most brands treating them as separate worlds, when the most effective ideas are born where they overlap.

Others are psychological. Many marketers feel bound by rules about what a campaign should look like, what counts as media spend or how performance must be measured. Rules designed to protect the status quo more than they foster effectiveness.

Then there's the system itself. Most large agencies and holding groups have built their success on standardisation and the ability to replicate, automate and scale. Their real centre of gravity is their trading departments, as that's where the money is made. That model rewards predictability, not invention. It values efficiency over originality, and compliance over curiosity.

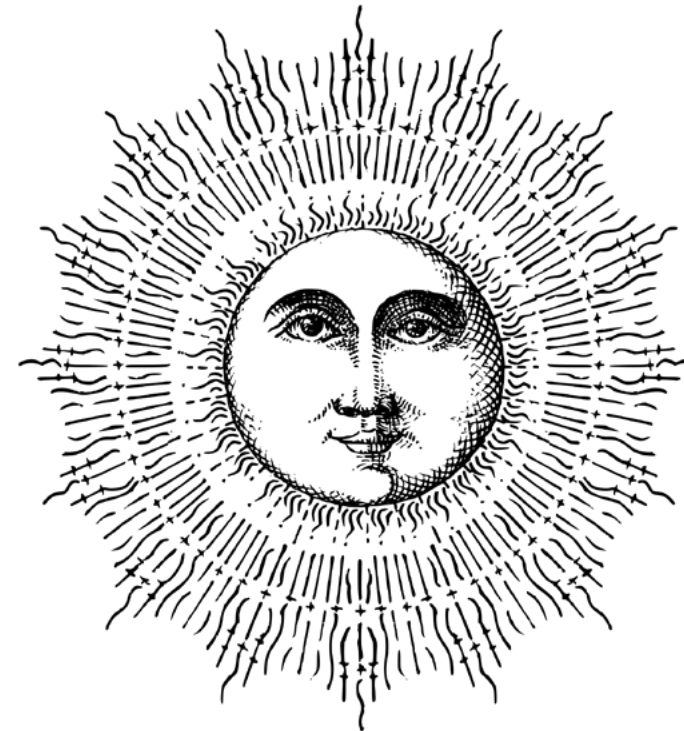
"A lack of bravery is a big thing that we see. Not just bravery to take a risk and say 'yes, I believe in this idea', but to take a financial risk and back it with budget. It can be a hard process for brands to take that leap."

**Ben Gardiner, Chief Client Officer
at creative OOH specialist
Grand Visual**

"The challenge with agencies is they have certain ways of working, born out of tried and tested models. It can sometimes be hard to get a media agency to think more creatively and try something new."

**Lauren Myers, Fractional CMO and former
CMO at Grown Alchemist**

A call for creative media thinking



Breaking out of that mindset doesn't mean abandoning rigour or measurement. It means redefining how we see media: as a creative discipline in its own right, capable of solving business problems in new ways.

Creative media thinking challenges the defaults. It expands the definition of what counts as a channel. It asks the uncomfortable questions that your media agency really doesn't want to hear. And ultimately, it's about setting brands free.

In the following pages, we set out seven principles of creativity in media. They're not a new framework or another set of buzzwords. They're a provocation: an invitation to see the world differently, and to make media a creative act once again.

7 principles to power-up your media

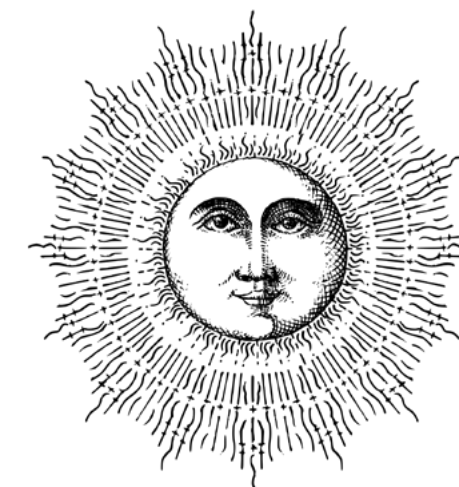
(And the uncomfortable questions your
media agency would rather you didn't ask)

Contents

1. Everything is media	5
2. People: the ultimate 1-to-1-to-many channel	7
3. Partnerships and passions for new people and places	9
4. Create your own media	10
5. Break a rule to break through	12
6. Experiential media can deliver more than reach & repeat	14
7. Sometimes, media just needs to give an idea wings	16

Beyond

1 Everything is media



The uncomfortable question:
are we considering everything our brand touches as media, or just the things we can buy?

Most of us have a very narrow view of what counts as 'media'. Billboards, TV spots, display ads, social campaigns – et cetera. All paid channels. All stalwarts of the standard media plan.

Those artificial walls we've erected form the biggest trap for brands, stopping them from deploying their budget to maximum effect. Don't think of media as a set menu; think of media as any space a brand can live in.

That mindset shift opens up two new ways of thinking. First, budgets no longer need to sit neatly inside traditional channels. Partnerships, experiences, packaging and cultural activity all follow the same principles of who, what, where and how much, so all should be considered when devising media strategy.

Second, media is everywhere. The objects, spaces and moments we move through each day can become powerful ways to connect. Coffee cups. Benches. Shop windows. Uniforms. Games, websites and apps. Even graffiti or art installations. When brands start to look at the world through this lens, creative possibilities multiply.

Media is an Innocent Smoothie bottle, when the brand tops them with woolly hats each year for Age UK. It's the post box Netflix covered in yarn to launch The Thursday Murder Club. It's the chimney of London's Truman Brewery, when Nissan stuck a big, red car on it to celebrate the launch of the Qashqai.

Seeing everything as media redefines the role of planning itself. It moves from deciding where to spend, to deciding how to be seen.



Ben Gardiner, Chief Client Officer at creative OOH specialist Grand Visual:

Out of home often gets unfairly simplified and reduced to posters and billboards, but the canvas is so much broader. We live in a world where almost anything can become a media format, and there are so many unexpected, exciting places brands can show up.

We need to think bigger than what's seen on a standard media plan. Classic formats are fantastic for reach, but creative OOH drives engagement and impact in a much more meaningful way. Brands need to tear up the rule book and start viewing everything as a potential canvas.

The principle in action

Shelter – ‘Invest in Social Housing’

OBJECTIVE:

Make social housing impossible for MPs to ignore ahead of the 2025 Spring Spending Review.

ACTIVATION:

We moved the debate from meeting rooms to the streets, where the issue truly lives. Handwritten public messages were delivered via coffee cups. Clean street graffiti marked the pavement around Parliament. Messages on beer mats and washroom posters targeted MPs in the pubs they visit. All part of a wider campaign featuring a short film, tube ads, a Metro wrap and geo-targeted mobile ads and political newsletters.

RESULTS:

Secured a record **£39bn** government commitment to social housing investment, all for under **£250k** in spend.



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② **People:** the ultimate 1-to-1-to-many channel

The uncomfortable question:

are we harnessing the power of people as a channel in their own right?

Trust in advertising remains low. It's improving, according to Credos, but only 39% of people say they trust it. Audiences are far more likely to believe what other people think than what brands tell them to think, whether via a Trustpilot review, a friend's recommendation, a cultural voice with influence, or the opinion of an online community.

To use people as media means a shift from reaching people to mobilising people for reach. We're not talking about paid influencer posts; it's about real people spreading the word and giving their stamp of approval.

Škoda's 2024 Reddit campaign did a brilliant job of this. The brand found a sub-Reddit of Octavia superfans and partnered with Reddit to turn those users into collaborators, inviting them to help co-design a limited-edition model called 'The Reddit Edit'. Their posts, quotes and reactions – "Bro this is sick. This is so sick bro" – were later woven into the wider campaign across digital, print and outdoor. In the end, retail orders more than trebled the target.

When people are the medium, the message carries itself. Find a community. Find a person. Create conversation capital.



**Sarah Baumann, Chief Operating Officer
at premium watchmaker Christopher Ward:**

Harnessing the power of people and community is probably the most important part of our media strategy. Nothing is more powerful than someone genuinely recommending your brand; no amount of media spend can compete with that. It's a principle of our business model not to pay celebrities or influencers, so when our YouTube reviews reach millions organically, we know the brand is doing something right and the impact is tangible.

The principle in action

Jam Shed x Dancing Granny

OBJECTIVE:

Bring Jam Shed's playful, unpretentious personality to life and connect with non-traditional wine drinkers.

ACTIVATION:

We leveraged the cultural power of a person who was winning a lot of love among our target audience: the 2024 London Marathon's Dancing Granny. Dressed in zebra-print, the gran went viral for cheering runners on while dancing to the song 'Pump up the Jam'. Within weeks, we released 'Pump up the Jam Shed', a two-and-a-half minute video featuring the Dancing Granny herself. Light production, surreal visuals and subtle branding transformed a viral clip into branded pop culture.

RESULTS:

Generated major earned media and cultural buzz on minimal spend.



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③ Partnerships and passions for new people and places

Partnerships have long been part of marketing, but they are rarely treated as part of media thinking. They live elsewhere, managed by different teams.

But break down that wall, and you might find that a partnership can do more for your brand than any traditional media approach. If you put in the work to take that partnership beyond just a logo on a shirt, it can become an active media channel that connects audiences, ideas and credibility.

Red Bull gets this. Its entire brand is built around partnerships with athletes, teams and sports organisations that feed its content ecosystem. It sponsors six Premier League clubs, owns an F1 team and has built a global identity that stretches far beyond the energy drinks category. In doing so, it has created a brand that dominates sport, culture and conversation, while spending comparatively little on traditional advertising. Plus, more than 12 billion cans were consumed in 2024.

A traditional media agency would never recommend a partnership like that. It sits outside their scope. Which is exactly why integrated thinking matters.

The uncomfortable question: could collaboration open doors for us that conventional media can't?



Lauren Myers, Fractional CMO and former CMO at beauty brand Grown Alchemist:

Skincare is a saturated market. At Grown Alchemist, we focused on cutting through in a different way. We thought hard about where our audience actually is, who they care about and what cultural moments or passion points we could tap into authentically.

Wellness is closely allied with beauty, so we partnered with Equinox, taking our brand into the locker rooms of its 300+ fitness clubs. But to really sweat the partnership for both brands, we also showed up almost anywhere Equinox went, beyond the locker rooms. We were there when new clubs opened, we were in the goodie bags of their Fashion Week parties, and we shared digital campaigns and PR moments. We even included E by Equinox members and key influencers during NPD conversations.

Partnerships don't necessarily have to cost a lot – it's about making those partnerships work harder to take you into new channels, spaces and communities that you couldn't buy even if you wanted to.

4 Create your own media

The uncomfortable question: what could we create that money can't buy?

The best media isn't always something you buy. Sometimes, it's something you create.

From the pink ribbons that made breast cancer awareness visible, to the rainbow laces that turned support for LGBTQ+ pride into a shared public statement, created media has the power to move culture. Even the Michelin Guide began as a piece of brand invention, produced by a tyre firm to encourage people to drive further. Over time, it became one of the most influential publications globally – and it's no coincidence that Michelin remains the world's biggest tyre company.

For Subway, we created the world's first grime track built from plant audio frequencies, a collaboration with artists P Money and Star.One. McDonald's outspends Subway by ten to one in traditional media, but this inventive route helped the brand connect with a younger audience in a space they're already passionate about.

When brands create media instead of just buying it, they don't have to chase attention. They command it. And those assets tend to grow in value over time.

So consider: what is your audience already doing, consuming or experiencing that you can participate in? What media are they missing that you can create? What behaviours can you tap into or amplify through new media?



Sarah Baumann, Chief Operating Officer at premium watchmaker Christopher Ward:

Christopher Ward has always been a challenger in the premium watch world, so we've had to take a more creative approach to media. Loupe is our free quarterly in-house magazine – now in its 40th edition – with features and interviews spanning art to sport alongside a sprinkling of watches and horological excitement. Its main purpose is to communicate who we are as a brand and build a community, and it's been an extremely valuable marketing tool.

This year, we launched a warts-and-all, full-length YouTube documentary about the making of our new watch, The Loco. It was a first for the watch industry (and a lot harder than pushing out a 60-second" ad across paid channels), but it was worth it. It connected with what our community wanted to see – the 'how' of watchmaking, not just the gorgeous result – and led to a bigger activation when we screened it at BAFTA. Now it has been picked up by a documentary channel and is being shown on long-haul BA flights.

That's the power of creating your own media: it takes on a life of its own. You just have to be open to where it can take you.

The principle in action

Shelter – ‘The Good Fire’

OBJECTIVE:

Help Shelter raise funds and awareness for those facing homelessness during the winter Covid pandemic lockdowns.

ACTIVATION:

With virtual fireplace videos becoming an online phenomenon as people sought comfort indoors, we created ‘The Good Fire’ – a YouTube fireplace that doubled as a fundraising channel. Every ad view generated donations, turning a familiar digital habit into a new form of media and a lasting revenue stream for Shelter.



RESULTS:

More than 27,500 hours of watch time in its first year alone, plus widespread national press coverage.

5 Break a rule to break through

The uncomfortable question:
which rules actually serve our brand,
and which just serve the system?

Every media channel and category has its own rules and lore. But to get noticed, sometimes you need to go against the convention. What sacred cows can be broken?

Sometimes that means using a channel in a way your competitors never would. Sometimes it means going against the grain of what is seen as acceptable, questioning the unwritten hierarchies that say a luxury perfume brand should never appear on a poster outside Lidl, or that certain spaces are off limits to certain brands.

Sometimes it means ignoring media 'best practice', as we did when we ran Alzheimer's Research UK's full two-minute film, 'Change the ending', across social media (more on the impact of this campaign on page 17).

It's true that rules are often there for a reason, but when the moment is right, bending them can be the difference between blending in and breaking through.



Carolyn Coupel, Director of Strategic Marketing, Alzheimer's Research UK:

Media rules are definitely there to be broken. You can rely on previous learnings to a certain extent, but conventional wisdom is constantly changing and evolving. If you stick to the rules today, you'll end up falling behind. Plus, why not? With digital especially, you've got a platform that is cheap and easy to test and learn with. Give something a go and see what happens. If it doesn't work, fine. If it does work, do it again!



Sarah Baumann, Chief Operating Officer at premium watchmaker Christopher Ward:

When it launched two decades ago, Christopher Ward was part of a new generation of modern brands challenging the norms of luxury. That spirit came through in how the brand was built, too. We did a lot of things early on that most start-ups or scale-ups would never do, like taking out full-page press ads in mainstream news titles and even going on TV during Covid when everyone else pulled out. It's about following where the audience and underpriced attention is. Equally, we've pushed for earned coverage in broadcast, which comes through in our social and editorial strategy. Christopher Ward has always made bold, confident decisions to punch above its weight, and that's really paid off.

The principle in action

Pilgrim's Choice – 'Megablock launch'

OBJECTIVE:

Launch Pilgrim's Choice's new block shape, which reduced plastic packaging by 40%, in a way that would stand out in a crowded category.

ACTIVATION:

We saw an opportunity to do something the cheese category never had before. Instead of a standard NPD launch, we treated it like a tech product drop. Christened the Megablock, the campaign mirrored a high-profile device reveal with teasers, dramatic unveilings and bold media across TV, digital and outdoor – making it feel more like the latest iPhone than the latest cheese. In breaking every category convention, we made people stop and take notice.



RESULTS:

A **nine-point increase** in brand awareness, **five-point rise** in consideration, **four-point rise** in purchase intent and a **110%** increase in ad awareness.

6 Experiential media can deliver more than reach & repeat

The uncomfortable question: what could we build if we treated media like theatre, not wallpaper?

The era of one-way communications is on its last legs. Media can't just interrupt like it once did – but thanks to new possibilities and, with some thought and imagination, it doesn't need to.

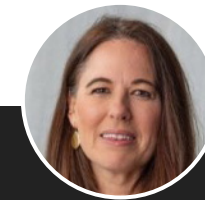
With Smart TV, contextual targeting, live data, augmented reality, NFC, geo-location and real-time playouts, media can now create experiences rather than just deliver messages. It can make people feel part of something in the moment.

British Airways' 'Look Up' is a beautiful example. A digital billboard in London featured a child who looked up and pointed whenever a plane flew overhead, prompting passers-by to do the same. Using data from an antenna mounted nearby, the system identified the aircraft and its destination before triggering the correct creative in real time.

Our interactive 3D billboard for Subway is another. By scanning a QR code, passers-by could interact with the campaign and virtually build their own dream Sub live on-screen – a global media first.



With an experience-first approach, the media is the message. But finding those opportunities demands imagination in the planning process. It's worth setting aside time specifically for "media as experience and innovation", alongside the usual media development stages.



Shelley Macintyre, Interim CEO Brands and Licensing, BBC Studios:

We need to think about audiences in a fan-led way. Not every brand has a huge fanbase, but every brand has people who genuinely care. You have to understand what they value and craft ideas that feel experiential and involving, rather than broadcast and top down. That old world has gone.

Earlier in my career, I worked on a campaign for fabric softener Comfort. The core idea was about avoiding the feeling of cardboard jeans, so we created a press ad using a stiff card insert. People could feel it and experience the story for themselves. We knew Comfort fans cared about preventing that cardboard jeans effect, and we turned that insight into an experience that reached a mass audience.

Today, with so much technology available, there are countless new opportunities to turn media into an impactful experience for fans and wider audiences alike.

The principle in action

Netflix - 'The Witcher Maze'

OBJECTIVE:

Go beyond promotion to immerse audiences in the world of The Witcher ahead of the series three launch.

ACTIVATION:

We created 'The Witcher Maze' at London's Outernet – a live, multi-sensory experience blending physical, digital and theatrical elements. Visitors stepped into a live narrative where actors interacted with the crowd and 360-degree screens surrounded them with scenes from the show. Motion sensors turned the story into something people could move through, rather than simply watch.

RESULTS:

Attracted **more than 6,000 visitors** in five days, generated huge social engagement, helped make The Witcher season three Netflix's number-one show of the summer and won three Campaign Experience Awards.

7 Sometimes, media just needs to give an idea wings

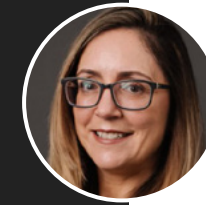
The uncomfortable question:

are we helping ideas fly
or weighing them down?

Not every idea needs to reinvent the wheel. Sometimes the smartest thing a media budget can do is give a great creative idea the freedom to fly.

When media and creative thinking are disconnected, even the strongest idea can end up trapped inside a weak format or a plan. Those guardrails hold the idea back, and can ultimately kill its impact.

Giving ideas wings means creating the right environment for them to thrive. It's about allowing creative teams access to media insight early enough for it to shape the work, not limit it. It's about knowing where an idea can live at its most powerful, whether that's the biggest and most visible space or the smallest and most personal.



**Carolynne Coupel, Director of Strategic Marketing,
Alzheimer's Research UK:**

As a charity, our budget constraints mean we need to focus heavily on earned media. To generate that, we have to focus on ideas that are different and creatively powerful – stories that haven't been told before, or not in ways that truly move and connect with people.

That's why, when working with Beyond on our 'Change the Ending' campaign, we invested the majority of our media spend behind our full two-minute film. The story needed that time to land its message with the right emotional impact.

Ultimately, the campaign earned a huge amount of media, including a full play-through on BBC Breakfast. It's a testament to the power of putting the idea first, letting it breathe, and giving it the wings it needs.

Beyond

The principle in action

Alzheimer's Research – 'Change the Ending'

OBJECTIVE:

Give Alzheimer's Research UK's 'Change the Ending' film the space it needed to move people and drive meaningful impact.

ACTIVATION:

When we read the script, we knew a 60" or 30" edit wouldn't do it full justice. The story needed time to breathe. Against conventional wisdom, our planners argued to invest the majority of the media budget behind the full 120" film. We bought long-form spots on linear TV, ran the complete film across social, and secured a rare ad break takeover during Channel 4 News – all to give a powerful idea the stage it deserved.



RESULTS:

The charity's fame score almost doubled, from **27 to 51**. Donations increased by **300%** year-on-year. Its Star Rating climbed by a full point on System1's five-point scale, and the campaign won a Thinkbox TV Planning Award.

How to get started



Creative media thinking is easy to admire, tough to master. So we asked the people who've done it what it really takes.

Stick to the strategy

Liberation from the straitjacket of conventional media planning isn't an excuse to run wild. Creative media thinking still depends on strategy. Great ideas come from a clear, tightly written brief, not from the vague ambition to "do something cool."

"Without a brief, you're rudderless. We're just throwing darts in the dark. You need to really get under the skin of the strategy and find those interesting opportunities."

Ben Gardiner, Chief Client Officer, Grand Visual

Redefine success

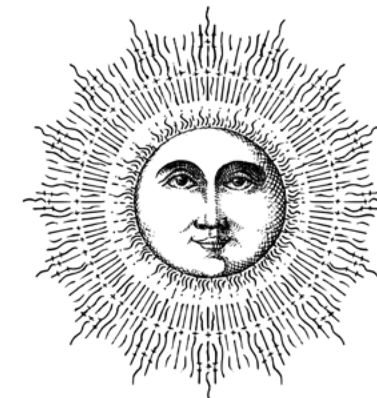
A creative approach to media can deliver all the usual metrics: sales, reach, ROI. But often, it produces results that go way beyond that. A great media strategy might open new doors, attract fresh distribution opportunities, generate press interest, inspire new brand partnerships and generate stronger social engagement. Results that truly power up the possibilities for brand growth.

"It's not all about the hard measures of acquisition and ROI. You have to think bigger than that."

**Sarah Baumann, Chief Operating Officer,
Christopher Ward.**

"CFOs want to hear about ROI, but when you're being creative and doing something new, sometimes ROI can't be guaranteed. My advice then would be to take a 70/20/10 approach: 70% of your spend goes on activity you know works, 20% goes on scaling newer ideas that have shown promising signs and 10% goes on testing completely new concepts. That helps create the space to get out of formulaic ways of thinking."

**Shelley Macintyre, Interim CEO Brands and Licensing,
BBC Studios**



Get rid of the egos

Creative media thrives on collaboration, not competition. The best work happens when agencies, brands and partners drop the elbows-out mentality and recognise that a good idea can come from anywhere – the media side or the creative side.

It's the brands, ultimately, who are responsible for facilitating that. Don't run separate meetings for creative and media. Bring everyone into the same conversation.

"As brands, we need to try to harness the power of our whole team instead of focusing on what people's job titles and remits are. Everyone's got cool ideas no matter what job they're in, and I've found the best ideas in places I wouldn't have naturally asked first. I've also seen teams destroy themselves by being too precious about what they're responsible for."

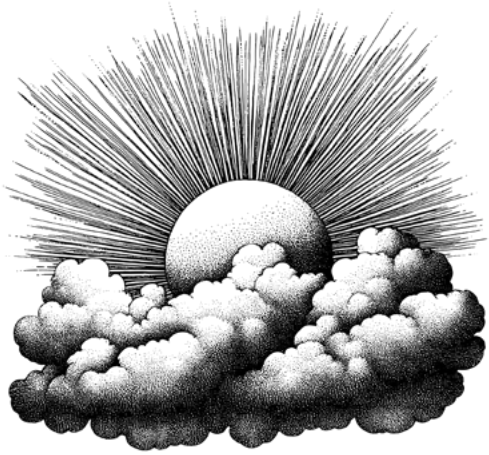
**Lauren Myers, Fractional CMO and former CMO
at Grown Alchemist**

"Good ideas can come from anywhere. One of our US sales teams sparked a brilliant idea for our children's show Bluey that led to an unexpected partnership with Bush's Beans, the biggest beans brand in the US. It became a commercial partnership that delivered revenue, created a PR-worthy concept and captured the imagination of Bluey fans far beyond a traditional media buy."

**Shelley Macintyre, Interim CEO Brands and Licensing,
BBC Studios**

Beyond





Creativity in media isn't a one-off stunt on top of your average media plan. It's about seeing the plan differently. Brands have the potential to make a far bigger impact if they can break free from the conventions holding them back and start using imagination to make their budgets work harder, stretch further and show up in unexpected ways.

That kind of thinking doesn't happen by accident. Media and creativity has to work together from the very beginning. That integrated model is what Beyond was built to deliver, and it's what allows us to unlock bigger, bolder ideas that make every pound of media spend work harder.

It's the driving force of our business: helping brands develop strategies and ideas that go beyond the norm and push the limits of what's possible.

If you want to know how we can power up your media thinking, we'd love to talk. And if you don't, go challenge your existing media agency.

To conclude...

Ask the tough, uncomfortable questions:

- 1.** Are we considering everything our brand touches as media, or just the things we can buy?
- 2.** Are we harnessing the power of people as a channel in their own right?
- 3.** Could collaboration open doors for us that conventional media can't?
- 4.** What could we create that money can't buy?
- 5.** Which media rules actually serve our brand and which just serve the system?
- 6.** What could we build if we treated media like theatre, not wallpaper?
- 7.** Are we helping ideas fly or weighing them down?

The answers to those questions are where creativity in media really begins.

Beyond

Want to set your brand free?

hello@thebeyondway.com

Beyond, 87 Weston Street, London, SE1 3RS

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