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WHAT IS TRANSFORMATIONAL THINKING AND HOW SHOULD WE USE IT?

Summary

I'm a 23-year-old advertising planner, but sometimes I wish I was 3.

When I first read this essay question, I ran a mile. "Transformational thinking" sounded ambiguous, daunting, and overwhelmingly indefinable. I turned to the APG website for reassurance, and stumbled upon this "If transformational thinking sounds scary, it shouldn't." Turns out I'm not alone. "Transformational thinking" is widely recognised to be an impenetrable concept. But why?

Transformational thinking can be simply described as thinking that creates change. It comes in all shapes and sizes, spanning centuries, countries, and genres. But, only by looking at examples side by side did I realise what they all have in common. Thinking like a three-year-old child.

I have a hypothesis; transformational thinking isn't learnt, it's unlearnt.

If we embraced our inner three-year-olds, more of our thinking would be transformational. In the next 1325 words I will break transformational thinking into five elements, bring them to life using examples (and a little inspiration from my three-year-old niece), and finish each section with a lesson for how we should use it.

The first facet of transformational thinking: **it starts and ends with "Why?"**

Young children ask, on average, three hundred questions a day¹. The most efficient way of exposing all the things you don't know is spending ten minutes with a three-year-old. When you're three there's no such thing as a stupid question. But by the time we finish secondary school we ask a meagre ten questions a day. We live in a society that rewards answers. Very little value is placed on asking a good question. So most of us stop.

Those that keep asking are the transformational thinkers. A fundamental element of transformational thinking is relentless curiosity. At the root of most inventions is not a complex formula. Instead, it's a question. In 1947 Edwin Land took a photograph of his daughter. She asked him why she couldn't see the photograph immediately. He pondered her question until he had the answer - the invention of the polaroid camera.

The lesson for advertising:

For us planners, asking why isn't new advice; we are well-drilled insight hunters. But our curiosity should not be reserved for brief writing. As an industry we could do with asking

¹Truth Dive: How many questions do children ask?

why a whole lot more. The context within which we operate is rapidly changing - consumers have more control, media opportunities are endless, and brands are personalising their offerings - but still we have a single minded proposition for the entire world. **In order to survive as an industry, we must question fundamental assumptions and define the value that we can add. It starts with asking why.**

The second facet of transformational thinking: **look up and out**

Once upon a time, a young girl was drawing in a classroom. Her teacher asked her, “What are you drawing?” And the girl said, “I’m drawing a picture of God.” “But nobody knows what God looks like” the teacher replied. And the girl said, “They will in a minute.”²

Children’s imagination is limitless. But as we get older, the daily grind reinforces a blinkered approach to the day-to-day. Imagination is seen as an activity for children, not for what it is; one of the greatest tools for transformational thinking in our arsenal.

Transformational thinking is the ability to look up and out, to create connections, to imagine. When two things are connected that did not previously belong together, a new idea is formed. Melinda Gates shared a powerful realisation³. The Gates Foundation work tirelessly to provide developing countries with condoms and vaccinations, but distribution and access is an uphill struggle. But somehow, there are cans of Coke on every corner. Only by looking up and out did Melinda Gates realise what NGO’s could learn from Coke.

The lesson for advertising:

As planners, we are exposed to different perspectives, brands, and business models every day. **We are in a prime position to produce transformational thinking, but to do that we must be imaginative, put things together that don’t fit, and question the business our brands are truly in.**

The third facet of transformational thinking: **needs come first**

Three-year-olds have an acute awareness of their own needs, and no shame in communicating what they are. Every action is a direct response to a need. An urgent poo or an extra helping of porridge are vital needs that come first. Over time we learn to suppress our needs and do what we think will make us look good.

The third element of transformational thinking is the power of putting consumer needs first.

Airbnb, Uber, and Monzo are pioneers with one thing in common: they are born from a consumer need and exist to solve that need. Most recently, Monzo has transformed banking. The pubs of London are filled with smug progressives flashing their coral cards,

² Ken Robinson: Do schools kill creativity?

³ Melinda Gates: What NGO’s can learn from Coke

effortlessly regurgitating the selling points to their mates as if they'd swallowed the brand book. I'm that girl. I've voluntarily reeled off Monzo's differentiating features to more people than I care to remember, and no, I'm not even a Monzo Investor (clearly not that progressive). But why does anyone care? Airbnb and Uber had the same effect, so perhaps it's down to their needs based approach. Brands that consumers feel are answering a personal need are catapulted into mainstream popularity. They barely need marketing departments. This is the power of transformational thinking.

The lesson for advertising:

As an industry, we pride ourselves on asking "Who cares?" but still we flog the products that people don't actually want or need by telling them they should care. **The most transformational work in the industry right now provides 'utility' to consumers. In a world where advertising is increasingly irrelevant, helping brands to address the needs of humanity has to be the answer.**

The fourth facet of transformational thinking: **sweat the small things**

Three-year-olds go from smiles to tantrum in 0.6 of a second. Why? They sweat the small things. Yesterday I witnessed my niece's world crumble around her. All because she wanted to wear a specific pair of tights. A pair of tights that no longer exists. But in that moment, nothing mattered more. Three-year-olds sweat the small stuff, but could they be onto something?

The fourth element of transformational thinking is understanding that small things make a big difference. When Sir Dave Brailsford became head of British Cycling in 2002, the team had almost no record of success: British cycling had won one gold medal in 76 years. Now, they are the most decorated team in the world. Sir Dave transformed the sport using marginal gains theory. His philosophy was one of continuous improvement; "Forget about perfection; focus on progression" 1% at a time.

The lesson for advertising:

Telling someone who works in advertising to sweat the small things is questionable advice, but there is a lesson. We are obsessed with size and singularity, "big ideas" and "single minded propositions" dominate our conversations and ambitions. But the downside is that it assumes that size and singularity are the most transformative factors. **If we focused on the detail, perhaps it would lead to a more effective approach. By utilising a tapestry of insights, we could connect with consumers in a nimbler and more relevant way.**

The fifth facet of transformational thinking: **fearlessness**

Every year I volunteer for a children's summer camp (FSC). For two-weeks children make fires, build shelters, and frolic around in rivers. Nothing makes you more aware of how fearless children are than being responsible for them. They have a magical ability to speak

their mind and embrace everything without fearing failure.

Whilst fearlessness might manifest itself as foolishness when we're young - jumping into freezing rivers and speaking to strangers have their pitfalls - as we grow older this innate bravery can give us transformational powers. J.K. Rowling's first Harry Potter novel was rejected twelve times before it was published. She was a broke single mum, but she didn't give up. Twenty years later, more than 450 million copies of the Harry Potter series have been sold. More children have read Harry Potter than the Bible.

The lesson for advertising is to be fearless in your integrity pursuing what you think is right – and not just for creative work. Independent's United bravely broke free from the shackles of social norms by introducing transparency around pay within the agency. No one's salary is secret. Transformational thinking is the result of passionate belief combined with fearless execution.

Conclusion

Transformational thinking isn't one thing, it's many things. It's the ability to start with "Why?", put needs first, look up and out, sweat the small things, and be fearless in the approach. None of these facets are learnt, in fact, we unlearn them. But we all have the capacity to respect our inner three-year-old and unlearn constricting behaviours. By understanding the facets of transformational thinking and how to use it, we are equipped to shape the future of the industry.

So go ahead, and think like a three-year-old.

1498 words.