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Can Creativity Be Crowdsourced?

New Tools and Technology Force Big Changes in the Ad Industry

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Much has been made of savvy marketers using "crowdsourcing" to connect their brands with customers, and plenty of pixels have been published on the success of crowdsourced programs like Dell's [IdeaStorm](#), Starbucks' [MyStarbucksIdea](#), [The Netflix Prize](#) and [Lego's invite-only community](#). But quite recently a much different discussion has emerged, as crowdsourcing is starting to change the very way we think about creativity, both online and off.

Crowdsourcing is relatively straightforward: It's the online distribution of certain tasks to crowds of experts and enthusiasts. But the effect of crowdsourcing on agencies as well as on the creative process itself is just starting to be felt.

We typically think of "creativity" as a singular effort with the Steve Jobs or Lee Clows of the world -- the solitary individual known as much for their personality as their work -- at the helm. But creativity has always been a social activity. Today's creative agencies are supposed to be hothouses of ideas with charismatic leaders and collaborative teams. Fostering a creative culture counts -- after all, Warhol's factory wasn't just a live/work loft. But what happens when the technology behind crowdsourcing makes creativity a social activity that knows no geographic bounds? Where does the creative produced by the collective take us? Do we visit wild new frontiers or does a herd mentality take hold?

Crowdsourced Creative Services

OpenAd.net: The most disruptive trend for the advertising industry is the crowdsourcing of creative ideas and design services. [OpenAd.net](#) is one of the most prominent examples. The service bills itself as

a global online marketplace for great advertising, marketing and design ideas. OpenAd.net provides marketers the ability to generate advertising ideas from a distributed network of more than 11,500 creatives from more than 125 countries. Major brands such as MTV, Virgin Atlantic and DaimlerChrysler have all sourced ad work from the company.

Crowdspring: [Crowdspring](#) is the most controversial of the companies now offering crowdsourced creative services. The company, which was just nominated for a Webby Award, boasts a network of more than 20,000 creatives from 140-plus countries who vie to provide logo, website and collateral design to primarily small and medium-size business clients. The end results are impressive, as the literally hundreds of submissions made by the designers "on spec" are displayed for the world to see and rate. For example, a recent logo project for "Fight Club" author Chuck Palahniuk generated nearly 275 submissions. A logo for BBH Labs has garnered nearly 1,200 submissions.

Crowdsourced Inspiration

FFFFound!: A more subtle, but perhaps more profound change in the industry, is the way creatives are drawing inspiration from each other. [FFFFound!](#), a now invitation-only graphic bookmarking service is leading the way. The site allows users to post and share their favorite images found on the web, and then dynamically recommends "inspirational" graphics based on a user's tastes and interests. It's a virtual treasure trove of visuals culled from the detritus of the internet.

PatternTap: [PatternTap](#) is one of the best community sites for interface designers looking for inspiration to solve common design problems, such as creating 404-not-found pages, navigation, footers, breadcrumbs, log-ins and more. There are literally hundreds of examples for creative minds to consume, remix and remake for their own projects.

COLOURlovers: This creative community site, just nominated for a Webby Award, is exclusively and ardently focused on sharing of colors and palettes. [COLOURlovers](#) boasts more than 1 million color names, hundreds of thousands of color palettes and patterns, plus comments and ratings. Interviews with top creative professionals are a bonus, as are blog posts with titles such as "The Art of Color: Rothko Meets Web 2.0."

And these are just a few examples. There are literally [hundreds more](#). It's not always easy to spot the beginnings of a seismic shift, but once a technology is unleashed and widely adopted, it's awfully hard to make it disappear. Just ask any music-industry executive or newspaper journalist.

That hasn't stopped a whole host of industry players from trying, however. The AIGA and several design luminaries, such as David Carson, have taken strong stands against the crowdsourcing of creative services and "spec work." There is even a new online organization called [NO!Spec](#) that is actively trying to educate designers on the perils of participating and performing services for free.

The larger ramifications, however, will be on the creative process itself. For the individual creative, it's one thing to remix or mash-up a media assets like a DJ or developer, where attribution may be obvious, but it's quite another to do it with conceptual ideas.

For agencies, crowdsourcing forces us to re-examine how great work gets produced and where the best talent resides. Can a crowdsourced creative campaign or website compare to something an edgy agency produces in Brooklyn or San Francisco's SoMa?

For marketers, crowdsourcing creative services poses both great risks and rewards. Do you risk sourcing one brilliant creative idea at the expense of building a trusted relationship with a partner who lives and helps evolve your brand, in many cases, for years at a time? Can both approaches coexist?

And finally, for the industry as a whole, will the creative produced by the collective yield startling results that are beautifully shaped by geographic and cultural differences? Or will a herd mentality begin to dominate and will everything start to look the same? Time will tell.

Regardless, the crowdsourcing of creativity is proving that a great idea can come from anyone, anywhere. The question then is not whether our industry needs to adjust, but how quickly.

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