

Seeing a brand as a citizen

By [Gemma Taylor, creamglobal.com](#)

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LONDON, UK: Tyler Whisnand, creative director at Wieden+Kennedy/Portland takes to the Cream innovation hot-seat to discuss the power of brands in society.



What is your definition of good innovation?

Good innovation is something that is a meaningful improvement; something that can improve our lives, our understanding and help us move forward. Innovations for the sake of innovation, of course, are everywhere. But real innovation comes from discovering a better way to do or say something. This could be a contraption that houses all the music you love, iPod, or allows you to announce your feelings to your friends all at once at a given moment from any place on the planet, twitter.

How do you foster a culture of innovation within your team?

What's tricky is to properly empower them, guide them and provide direction when necessary. There should be an overall feeling that anything is possible, anything for the right reason. Again, innovation that has no meaning or relevance is merely showing off.

What is the biggest barrier to innovation?

Not taking responsibility for what could be possible. A lack of attachment to an idea or project or assignment leads to confusion and inaction. Responsibility for one's work, one's ideas, whether it's a team of three or two or 100, is a must for finding new ideas, concepts and innovative products.

What is the single most innovative piece of work that you have been involved in from the past 12 months?

One that is innovative in terms of communication, advertising, and society is the Levi's campaign. This is a company that has made blue jeans since the mid 19th century. In the beginning, Levi's primarily equipped miners and workers to build a new country and a new world. Over time, Levi's has remained true to its worker heritage and when it came time in the early 21st century to communicate a new line of work wear, we chose an interesting path. Instead of photographing models in the Levi's work wear, we decided to put the work-wear to work.

This took the form of collaboration with a town that is hard at work: Braddock, Pennsylvania. The town and its mayor, John Fetterman, are busily trying to redefine this town which at one time was a prosperous steel town. Over time, various socio-economic factors contributed to the town's decline. Levi's sought to help in the form of contributions to the town's community center, Carnegie Library, the first one built in the USA, and its urban farm. In addition, all the communication, advertising and product demonstration was shot in Braddock, with the people of Braddock.

What was innovative about this idea?

What is innovative about this idea is that we can see a brand as a citizen. A brand can take meaningful action with its products and communicate in a relevant manner. The innovation is in the Levi's product, its thinking and its action. This kind of action from Levi's is appropriate and timely. It works very well and hopeful the result is not only awareness for the Levi's work wear line, but also admiration and respect for what a company can do if they have the sensibility to consider their actions in an innovative way.

What other projects have taken this level of innovation?

The Nike Foundation asked us to help them find a name for a new action the brand would take in the countries at risk around the world. The insight was that if society could protect, empower and educate girls who were in their early teenage years, then a great deal of poverty and disease could be wiped out.

We worked hard to find a name for this effort and a way to communicate it. The result is the Girl Effect. We created the branding and the communication for this effort - quite unique, quite humbling. And now, the films and idea of the Girl Effect have been shared at events and summits around the world including the World Economic Forum in Davos and the Clinton Global Initiative in New York.

One film we made for the Girl Effect involved a girl named Anita who started her own honey company in India. She was empowered to study at an early age and managed to learn a trade and set up a business. She now employs several people in her village and is a hero of young women. Her story was told at Davos as an example of the Girl Effect and how its innovative plan can help with societies at risk.

What was the biggest challenge of the past 12 months?

Keeping people inspired by the potential of communication. It's not always a film or an internet gimmick or an art direction style that makes an innovative campaign.

Which other agencies and brands do you admire for their innovative approach to advertising?

I admire what Apple does, constantly. Not so much their advertising, but their products and the possibilities that exist there.

I also still quite admire Benetton and COLORS magazine, both of which I have had a chance to work on in the past. Benetton was ahead of most brands in terms of what a brand citizen can be and do.

I also look to Wendy Kopp and Teach for America as well as Davis Guggenheim and his new film, "Waiting for Superman." Their work is inspiring, compelling and truly innovative.

What will be the next big breakthroughs/trends in creative innovation?

Difficult to answer. We will probably be surprised by another Twitter or Facebook innovation. Or Google for that matter. But, you never know. Maybe a student in Bhutan will discover the answer to sustainable energy or a close-loop manufacturing thought for a worldwide brand that can be shared for free. If the world is truly more local, then creative ideas will come from the most unsuspected places.

How will sustainability affect the creative industry, in your lifetime?

Sustainability is a creative challenge from product to behaviour to communication. Sustainability will be the main part of a lot companies' business plans. No longer will responsibility only be in philanthropic work. Philanthropy, good ethics, meaningful projects and messages will be the only things good brands and good citizens undertake to be innovative and progressive. It's common sense all over again.

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