

The rise of creative tech

Maja Pawinska Sims, Weber Shandwick's Editor, EMEA, looks at the opportunities and challenges of the collision between emerging technology, data and creative brand communications.

What does innovation mean to you?

For some brand teams, the notion of innovation is still mainly about product development. Being first. Being better. New or improved products or services: how things look, and feel, and work, from their original incarnation to v2.0 and beyond.

But for a growing number of people in the creative industries, innovation now means much more than that. Innovation is about what happens in the space – or more accurately the collision – between technology, platforms, consumers and brands. Innovation is what enables the most creative, engaging and impactful brand communications.

Data and emerging technology are rapidly transforming the way brands – and their agencies – understand, reach and talk to their audiences. And they are doing so at a rate we've never seen before.

Three years ago, few PR or marcomms award winners mentioned data or technology as tools. Most creatives weren't even considering embedding them in campaigns to enhance results. Suddenly, that changed. Data – followed by big data, and now smart data – started popping up as an element of the best communications work in the world.

And it's not going away: at this year's Cannes International Festival of Creativity – always a reliable mirror of what matters to the industry – we'll see the launch of a brand new two-day festival and awards, Lions Innovation, to explore this new creative communications ecosystem.

The Holmes Report's In2 Summit and awards this year also focused exclusively on innovation. Speakers urged us to become "data junkies", and reminded us

that the amount of trackable data we have about brands, performance and how audiences are thinking is like nothing we've seen before.

Brands are hungry to find out more about emerging tech, and what it really means for them, as Weber Shandwick found on our recent Innovation and Tech Tasting tour of Cologne, Lausanne, London, Munich and Stockholm. Our Creative Technology Strategist Patrick Chaupham created an innovative tech playground for communications leaders from some of the world's most highly regarded brands.

Everyone has the same open-mouthed expression on their face when they put on the Oculus Rift for the first time. It's a real "wow" moment; a fully immersive sensory experience that verges on the emotional. And everyone who tried the virtual reality headset to experience the original content created for a global FMCG brand had the same question: what can we do with it?

They had the same question for other intriguing pieces of disruptive tech, from headbands that read brainwaves to assess emotional state and response, to tiny beacon sensors, to robotics, to cameras that take a photo every 30 seconds for a whole day, to wearables that take the quantified-self movement to new levels. It's fun, but what's in it for the brand?

And there are so many more questions: how can data and analytics power creative execution? How can innovation help brands and their agencies come up with better insights and better creative ideas? Can programmatic media really be creative?

Brands across the world are now thinking hard, and seriously, about all the possible applications of new technology for creative communications, from gathering data in ways that lead to better consumer insights, to accurate mobile targeting, to telling more compelling brand stories, to coming up with entirely new directions for the business such as selling direct from social media.

For every brand marketer who took part in the Tech Tasting, the "what" and the "how" of using emerging tech and data in a communications context was closely followed by the "why": Why would brands want or need to go down this route? And why is it important for brands to deploy emerging technologies?

The consensus: it all comes down to business objectives, and business growth. If brands can access all this consumer insight through the use of technology, why wouldn't they want to use it to shape markets, add real value, and grow the business?

The commercial implications of comms tech are huge: as brands discover what they can do with it, they are starting to imagine completely new ways of being in the world.

This isn't about gimmicks. Innovation in this space is beyond (though it might encompass) digital, social, analytics, adtech, or gadgets. It's definitely beyond traditional PR, and getting attention for a brand for its own sake. We're not talking about eyeballs and likes and click-throughs.

We're talking about the massive opportunities for using technology (and what it can tell us about consumers and how to best engage them) as a driver for brand strategy and tangible business growth.

This is exciting. Game-changing, even. But there's a disconnect. The tech guys – particularly start-ups – usually haven't worked in agencies or for brand comms teams. They don't understand the challenges for creatives and brand custodians. And why should they? They're just doing their job of coming up with all this cool stuff, which might not even have a market yet.

On the other side of the ravine, the brand teams can see the shiny kit glinting seductively, and want a piece of it, but may not fully grasp the scope of possibility it offers or exactly how to use it. Each side is speaking a completely different language.

So a whole new raft of talent has emerged to bridge this gap. To act as translators, if you like, between technology jargon and the idiom of communications. To increase understanding of how two formerly unconnected disciplines can come together to achieve something extraordinary.

Agencies and brands are now desperate to hire people with completely new job titles, like chief data officers, creative strategists, and creative technologists. People who can join the dots; who get how data and clever use of new technology can power creative execution.

More than that: we're seeing a paradigm shift in the role of the chief marketing officer. When quality, mass production and sales were drivers for growth, CEOs came from the ranks of heads of sales or production. After the crash, when every company was focused on cost efficiency and financial governance, the CFO became the heir-apparent. We are now entering the era where the next CEOs are going to come from a marketing background.

Why? Because CMOs, more than any other function in the business, have all the data, insight and understanding of what consumers want and where the market is heading. Thanks to data and technology, and support from the best agencies, they hold most of the cards needed to create value for consumers, and build winning brands. The CMO is now the hero.

There is a new reality in the influence business. Agency heads and in-house teams are having to adopt more liquid structures to accommodate the challenge. It's no longer unusual for agencies to have their own production studios, video content, web build and paid media capability, as well as analysts, planners and storytellers.

The shape of brand marcomms has changed forever. Agencies that are ahead of the technology curve have a role to play in educating their clients. Open-minded brand comms teams, in turn, have a role in educating the C-suite.

But there can be a big difference between what brands ask their communications agencies to do, and what agencies actually can do for the brand.

Agencies can do far more than maximise different channels and platforms. They are in the best position they have ever been: their technology, data and storytelling expertise, plus creativity, can build real value, and solve real business problems. The challenge is to bring those insights into the client company and be a trusted partner: an internal change agent.

There's another challenge for agencies: the leading search and social media companies are already well-placed to show brands exactly how to use emerging tech and data, and are adding creative services. PR agencies need to speak up to ensure they are not only part of this discourse, but are leading the comms tech conversation, as independent creative thinkers who understand culture, society and brands like no-one else.

Brave agencies can help brands formulate tech and data-based marketing activity that transforms business strategy and delivers real growth. In this new environment, agencies bring a new perspective: how brands can generate value that generates awareness, not the other way round as in traditional marcomms.

Starting now, anything that can be connected will be connected. That in itself isn't important – it's not about the technology per se, but about how it can enhance the consumer brand experience. It's about how the numbers help you tell the story. Communications agencies are in prime position to help brands with all facets of that challenge.

It seems like five minutes since the communications innovation buzz was about all companies becoming media companies. Now the focus is on all creative agencies – and all brands – becoming technology and software companies.

Assimilating innovation successfully requires a real shift in mindset for creatives and clients. It's critical that brands and their agencies understand what innovation means now, and how to effectively use the new tools of the trade, as they emerge and continue to disrupt.

For those in the communications industry with the right talent and skills, and the boldness and curiosity to take this exciting journey, there is a huge opportunity to master how the world of ones and zeros can enhance the world of words and pictures.

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Eight inspirational applications of tech innovation for brands



EIGHT INSPIRATIONAL APPLICATIONS OF TECH INNOVATION FOR BRANDS



1. iBeacons, tiny pieces of disposable tech, use the Bluetooth signals built into all mobile devices, with a range of up to 300ft. If you build an app to detect iBeacon content, you can provide consumers with tailored content. Retailers and FMCG manufacturers are excited about beacon technology: when shoppers in a supermarket go past the seasonal asparagus or a product with an offer on, they could receive relevant vouchers, information or recipe ideas on their mobile to receive a customised experience.
2. How about making people into beacons? If everyone at your conference or event has an iBeacon in their pass, they can see content specifically targeted at them as they pass screens outside meeting rooms, or connect with other like-minded delegates.
3. The applications of tech for the travel industry are huge. Who needs room keys when you can check in using your phone and a Bluetooth sensor opens your door for you? Oculus Rift could be used to fully experience the quality of the cruise, hotel or villa before you make a decision on an expensive or far-flung holiday.
4. Muse, the brain-sensing headband, was developed to read our emotional state through brainwaves and so help us create moments of calm in our stressful multi-screen lives. But what about using the headband to see how consumers really feel about different brands?
5. Narrative Clip, a small, light wearable camera that lasts eight hours and takes a photo every 30 seconds has an infinite number of applications for brand storytelling. For internal comms, this could be used for “life in a day” stories about different job roles.
6. The “connected home” is not new, but home appliances connected to the internet – from coffee machines to baby monitors to lighting and heating thermostats controlled by apps – offer brands a huge amount of data that can be mined for insights to improve the consumer experience. Amazon’s “April Fool” this year – when you run out of washing detergent, you push a button next to the washing machine and a delivery arrives – is actually perfectly possible. It’s just a beacon tied to your Amazon Prime account.
7. Manufacturers could use predictive data to assess when a product such as a power drill is likely to fail – when the user is likely to need support with sales, maintenance or special offers – based on how often it is used by individuals, from occasional domestic use to daily use by a contractor.
8. Brands are launching new Oculus Rift experiences every day: immersive virtual reality is only going to get more real. Luxury and sports car manufacturers, for instance, could use Oculus Rift to bring brand values such as quality and craftsmanship to life, taking consumers on a journey in that car, to experience the look, feel, sound and even the smell of the car.

