

Foxes versus hedgehogs

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No, it's not the latest kids' animation, but the best way to understand how to connect brand and consumer. Andy Littlewood, Head of Knowledge at MediaCom US, explains

Not many things are linear in 2020; certainly not when it comes to the complex question of connecting brands with consumers. Fragmentation of the media landscape is being driven by the quickening pace of technology, which is shifting consumer behaviours faster than we have ever seen.

It took television 22 years to reach 50 million users, Facebook took four years and WeChat just a year. Scale is now instant and it's possible to introduce new technologies that reach a billion users almost overnight. So, how should brands react?

It pays to have a holistic approach to how things work, focusing on the way a system's constituent parts interrelate and how they work over time – otherwise known as systems thinking. In communications, this means understanding the evolution of the landscape and how new channels can form part of a broader communications system. Such systems thinking also gives us a choice in how we arrange our skills: do we group specialists to understand parts of the system, or look for generalists who can understand more of the system? Put another way, is it better to be a fox or a hedgehog?

Foxes and hedgehogs

The Greek poet Archilochus wrote: “The fox knows many things; the hedgehog one big thing.” This metaphor relates to the two creatures' lifestyles. Hedgehogs have a clear focus, are experts in their environment and follow a strict routine. Foxes, on the other hand, are more complex. They are explorers who forage and roam and adapt quickly to new environments. The fox never settles.

In business, we can think of hedgehogs as specialists – people with distinct knowledge and skills related to a single area. They follow a distinct passion and often establish and enhance practice in that area. Foxes, on the other hand, are generalists – people who know about more things, but in less depth. They build interdisciplinary knowledge and are the connectors of different types of thinking.

Each has its merits: most discoveries and original theories come from specialists; but outside of their circles of competence, their predictions and powers become weaker. In *Superforecasting*, a famous study by political science writer Philip Tetlock, the author analysed the quality of expert predictions.

Tracking 284 experts from a range of disciplines he recorded the outcomes from 28,000 predictions. The results were surprising. Tetlock found that predictions coming from generalist thinkers were more accurate. Experts who stuck only to their specialised areas and ignored interdisciplinary knowledge fared worse.

As a result, the smartest option is the middle ground: the generalising specialist (Hedgefox? Foxhog?). A person who has deep skills in one area, but who can apply knowledge from areas of expertise, too. These kinds of thinkers are also often called T-shaped people, reflecting their ability to dive deep in one area (the vertical bar of the T), while also covering a broad range of topics at a lower level (the horizontal bar across the top of the letter).

T-shaped people have made significant contributions throughout history. Leonardo da Vinci was a great artist, but much of his art was shaped by his meddling in science, music and other areas. Likewise, Shakespeare was once called “an absolute Johannes factotum”, or, in common language, a jack of all trades.

Applying generalist thinking

At MediaCom, we believe that great communications thinking happens at the intersection of technology, data and creativity. So, to generate more of this thinking, we create our own T-shaped people. We do this by making sure our teams of specialists and discipline experts are always learning and have a working knowledge of all areas of media, too. That’s true systems thinking.

While there are different paths to success, anyone can become a ‘generalising specialist’. In his recent best-seller, *Range*, for instance, David Epstein highlighted the story of Roger Federer. As a youngster, Federer displayed a casual interest in many sports: skiing, basketball and soccer, before finally focusing on tennis – at an age well behind his teenage peers. All of which has contributed to his unparalleled success.

As Epstein asserts, the key to success is a special type of practice that is purposeful and systematic. You don’t need to put in 10,000 hours, just apply a focused approach to learning. If you want to enjoy similar success, the deliberate practise of new skills will undoubtedly lead you to a fruitful career.

OPINION