

# Brands that don't make an effort to express what they stand for risk losing customers

More and more brands are struggling to make data-backed decisions about the image they present to the world. As visual communications become more important in a digital world, it's important that big brands know how to respond. Today, we're speaking to Anastasia Leng, CEO and founder of Creative X, to discover how her company powers creative decision-making, as well as the challenges of being a female founder and why brands should take a strong stance on global concerns.

---

What did your professional background look like before CreativeX and what

# inspired the founding of the company?

Before starting CreativeX, I spent the foundational years of my career at Google. During my five-year tenure, I worked on every major monetisation product Google had, led entrepreneurial initiatives in EMEA, and was responsible for early-stage partnerships for Google Voice, Chrome, and Wallet.

After Google, I dove headfirst into tech entrepreneurship. In 2012, I co-founded an e-commerce company called Hatch.co – a curated marketplace featuring customisable products made by independent designers and professional makers. While building Hatch, I saw firsthand how difficult it was for our designers to make data-backed decisions about the imagery and video they were using to market their products – which led to the nugget of inspiration that catalysed the birth of CreativeX.

In 2015, I launched CreativeX. Fast-forward to today, CreativeX powers creative decision-making for some of the largest brands in the world, including Unilever, Mondelez, Heineken, ABI, and more. Our tools help advance creative expression through data by enabling marketers to measure the efficiency, consistency, and impact of their visual communication worldwide.

## What aspects of founding a company do you think are specific to you as a female founder?

I've never started or led a company as anything other than a woman, so it's tough to isolate general start-up challenges from what is unique to being a female founder. If you'd asked me this question 3 years ago, I would have said that I'd never had an experience that made me see my gender or sex as an impediment to business growth. However, a couple of years ago an investor decided not to continue with an investment in the company because I told them I was expecting my first child. They said they weren't convinced I would want to go back to work, even though I planned to only take 6 weeks of maternity leave, and 2 of those were over Christmas (a decision I continue to have mixed feelings about). Not all founders who also want to be parents are questioned over their commitment to their business, and it was the first time that I truly felt someone question my potential because of something I couldn't control.

As a result of this experience, I've noticed a gnawing sense of responsibility creeping in to make this business massively successful, not only for our team and our investors, but to give other women a precedent they can point to to

say this can be done. Like it or not, access to capital probably has a meaningful correlation with business success, and much of the decisions to invest are based on pattern recognition. If our company's success can make it even a little bit easier for the next group of women to start and grow their business, then all the rejection and grit that it took to get here would have been well worth it.

## What advice would you give to new and aspiring founders?

If technology is something that you love and are passionate about, tune out the self-doubt that suggests your idea isn't good enough. When I thought about starting a software company, I came up with dozens of reasons why I wasn't ready, or capable, or qualified. That I needed more skills, more experience, more time. But eventually, I took the leap and learned that if you're resilient and determined, you will find a way to make it work.

It'll never be a solo endeavour, and my best advice for founders regardless of what field they're going into is to be actively self-aware. Be honest with yourself about where you need help and ask for it. Surround yourself with people who are smarter than you so you don't stagnate your growth. Be candid about the things you don't know, and then pick the ones that are most important to you and actively fill those gaps, even if the process of doing so is painful in the short term.

## How has advertising and marketing changed and adapted in the last year? Is creative advertising perhaps even more important now?

From the Covid-19 response, to Black Lives Matter, and climate change, consumers now expect brands to take a stand and to have a point of view. Brands that don't make an effort to express what they stand for risk losing customers or being seen as irrelevant. Marketing teams are responding with creative content that weaves these issues alongside their brand narratives, and they're focusing on macro-societal issues like mental health, safety, equality, and sustainability. Imagery and video are the main delivery mechanisms for these nuanced and complicated messages, and marketers are increasingly infusing data and technology into their creative process to make sure they get it right and learn from every creative execution to help inform the next one.

# How has CreativeX helped its customers in the last twelve months?

Covid forced brands to innovate and do more with less, and many leading marketers have turned to automation and AI-enabled technologies to streamline and enhance how they approach content production and visual communication.

Our technology has enabled marketers at global brands to improve their creative quality and brand consistency, saving hundreds of millions of dollars in marketing spend on creative that was not meeting a brand's minimum standard of quality. We've launched tools that help brands progress their diversity agenda by helping them understand and diversify how people are shown across their creatives worldwide. Further, we've introduced a new metric – the Creative Quality Score – which provides brands with an objective measure of their content quality and a way of tying creative execution to media ROI.

# Have there been any new trends or adaptations made in marketing which you think are here to stay?

We're seeing a battle for data ownership. We're not only at an impasse because consumers are more and more skeptical of where and how their data is being used, but marketers have realised that data is their greatest asset and are beginning to in-house more and more of it, sometimes at the cost of alienating their agency partners. Agency margins have continued to shrink, and the phasing out of third-party cookies is adding an extra layer of uncertainty to not only how brands will replace that data, but whether this will bring their agency partners further away or closer.

# How do brands respond to wider contextual and global concerns?

When it comes to responding to wider global concerns, brands often miss the mark, but not for lack of trying. For climate change and DE&I initiatives, brands have made public commitments to reducing their carbon footprint and increase diverse casting. However, these commitments aren't reflected in the content they're putting out.

At CreativeX, we ran an analysis on 300K ads across 10 countries to see if brands who made public climate change commitments were talking about them. We found that fewer than 2% of those brands mentioned their climate change-related initiatives, which means that users often don't know about them and therefore are less likely to closely monitor whether those commitments are on track to being met.

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, we analyzed nearly 3,000 US ads and found that as Black representation increased, so did stereotyping — with Black actors often being cast in roles that emphasised their athletic prowess but not in speaking roles or in positions of leadership. Brands have an opportunity to use advertising to create cultural change and challenge social expectations, an opportunity that consumers seem to be rewarding, but few have figured out how to embrace this in a way that's authentic to their brand values and respectful to their community.

## What's next for CreativeX?

We're investing heavily into helping brands un-stereotype their ads. This started with giving marketers an objective view into their casting decisions but we're starting to go deeper by classifying each piece of content as regressive or progressive to help brands take objective stock of where they are in the DEI content journey.

We're also starting to think about content accessibility. Much of the content out there today is not accessible to those who are hearing or visually impaired, and we want to build technology that helps marketers create content experiences that are more inclusive. If you're interested in contributing to that goal, get in touch – we're always hiring!

*Anastasia Leng is the founder and CEO of Creative X*