



WHY CREATIVITY IN EVENTS MATTERS

A paradigm shift in event management delivery and execution has to happen explains UK-based event supremo, Richard Foulkes, or the sector may struggle with maintaining its relevance.

Richard Foulkes, a self-deprecating 50-something who has led brand communications programs for some of the world's largest companies, loves events and the people who create them.

In Brisbane recently for the MEA Evolve conference he teamed up with micenet contributor Nigel Collin for a session on creativity and later in the week on a fancy sounding workshop entitled "commodotising creativity".

The content on that second one was basically telling event planners that they weren't valuing how creative they were and they could do better.

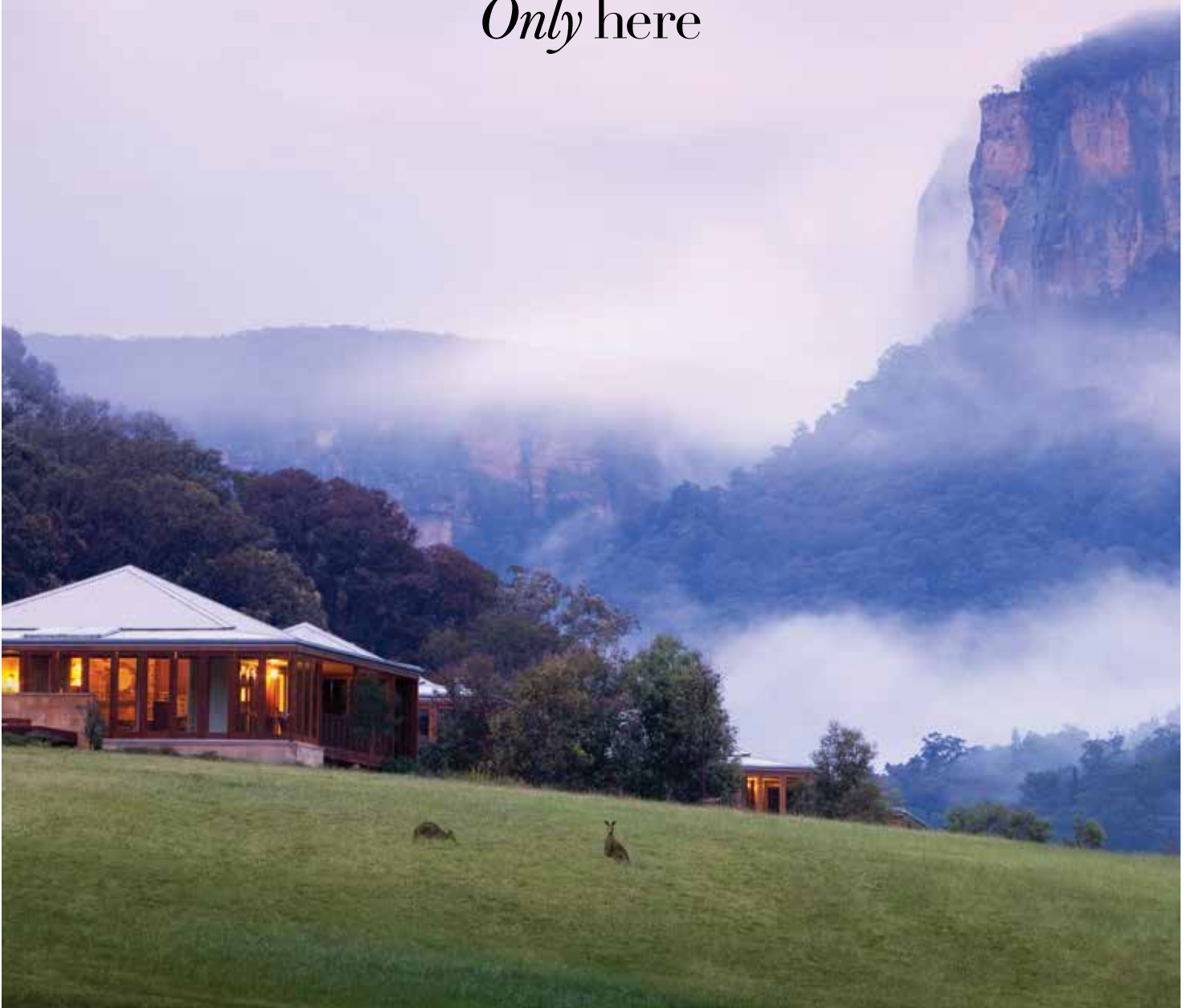
For someone who isn't used to a lot of public speaking, Richard appeared pretty at ease on stage. That was most probably due to the fact that after 30 years working on events he knew his stuff. I spoke to him in-between sessions over a beer (or two) on the sunny Brisbane Convention & Exhibition Centre outdoor space on Grey Street where he provided some extremely relevant insights into the world of events and the importance that creativity plays in them. He believes event production and creativity must go hand in glove. And, for successful agencies, they do.

"What I find fascinating is the buzz you get from creative people, and in this industry there are so many people who have passion and excitement, which is often the underpinning [elements] of creativity," he said.

"I worked with a company called Imagination for 30 years which is now one of the biggest independent creative agencies in the world. When I started it had creativity at its heart rather than production. Its ethos saw production as the fulfilment of creativity and strategy. It quickly became what was known as an event communication business. It went from 40 people when I joined in 1983 to a company today that has about 1600 around the world.

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"It was famed for working with automotive companies and was founded by a genius, a man who is still there aged well over 70.

Gary is one of those very rare people you meet in the world who has the combination of creative genius, empathy with people, and unusually, incredible financial acumen."

Imagination started and grew at a time when there was a merging of people trained in theatre creatively and in technical areas and those who worked in the rock and roll business. These were people who could quickly set up spaces for concerts, run the concert and then be all packed up by the following day.

This merger and the growth of companies wanting to showcase new products to a wider audience saw events and subsequently Imagination thrive. Enter the event creative agency who could deliver on the client's dreams and desires.

"Some people think the creative team is made up of the people who do the colours, the visuals, the graphics. A creative company understands how to work with everybody in the creative process, including people who may not consider themselves creative but are a critical part of the creative process," he said.

"A creative company does have people who do the colours and the graphics and that side of things, but the creative has to understand how it all works with the technical team and the planner. They all have to work together as one team. Not everybody in that team is necessarily 'a creative'. They're the creative fulfillers. And those people are critical and they can have ideas too. And that's why you get the successful creative agencies.

"There was one thing about Imagination that was and remains amazing is that you start with the creative and then you wrap around the supporting structures that enables that creativity to be fulfilled.

"A lot of other companies start with the bits around the edges and then try to bring the creative into that. And that's a completely different approach. This is what unfortunately you find with, shall we say, some conference organisers. They manage the conference beautifully. All the meetings happen, they're logistically slick, but actually, they don't really care what goes on in each session. The

session opens, that guy's got his slides all ready, and he turns up and does it. A creative company on the other hand would be starting with: 'Right, What do we need to say or achieve? Let's create all of the content first and then we work from there'.

"I remember years ago having a meeting with an event creative producer – a brilliant, amazing person – and we had a major disagreement. The event producer wanted to be involved in the selection of the venue for this big launch to happen. It was about a year out at that stage. We didn't know what the product was, we didn't know what the messages were, so how do you select a venue that is suitable for whatever it is you want to do?

"So then we got a bit closer to the event date and by this time all the 'on message' venues that you might've wanted to use weren't available. By this time we literally said to the logistics company: 'Just book a venue. Book a venue and once we know what that venue is we'll be able to paint a picture around it that fits with the messages'. So sometimes despite creativity at the heart you are faced with some logistical elements that force you in a direction, [and] they become the parameters you have to work with."

This, Richard explains, is the benefit of working with a creative agency. Given parameters to work within, the creative can design something that delivers on a client's message.

You need parameters to be creative

"When it comes to being creative, people say let's think outside the box but I say let's define the box and then think freely within it.

"I was [recently] looking at some of the works of the highly respected Santiago Calatrava an Italian architect who designs beautiful bridges, and you know what? He doesn't say I'm going to design a beautiful bridge. He goes in and asks: 'How wide's the river? What's the load going to be on it? Will it have ships going under it? Cars driving over it?' Whatever... He has to have knowledge of structural matters. Basically, he has to have a complete framework and understand the parameters (or the box he has to work in) before he can start thinking creatively, differently and designing a bridge that works and looks beautiful.

"When he knows all of the parameters then he can be free to think creatively."

So you're saying that it's best when you have some parameters? I ask.

"You have to. If a client says we want you to be really creative, that's hard. And it also generally leads to disappointment. You go in and show them what you've come up with and they go, 'Well that's not what I really wanted' or 'Well, we don't have enough money to do that'.

"You've got to set the parameters and in my experience creative teams and creative individuals need and want to have some guidelines in which to work.

"Creative people always ask "why?" and critically also "why not?". If people [in your team] have an idea, don't immediately say no, ask why not? Why can't we do it? Often you can end up with a variation that forms a new idea. Remember the seed of an idea can come from the junior who has just joined the company or somebody else you might not have expected. It might not be quite right but it can be the kernel of something great.

"Being creative isn't always about having great new ideas. Sometimes creativity is saying: 'Well why don't we do it like we did last year because that fulfilled it perfectly'. I think there's a kind of obsession with new and it doesn't always have to be new to be the best solution. Maybe that's just a part of our culture now. You have your phone for a month and then there's a new one out.

"One has to be careful with the word creativity. There's a natural assumption it's either someone painting something or stylising something or designing something. I think sometimes creativity is more a way you think. Some people just seem to have the ability to look at a problem with a creatively fresh eye."

Smaller agencies are getting it wrong

In his session on "commoditising creativity" Richard spoke about how many event agencies are devaluing their skills simply by the way they are charging their clients.

"In this industry what a lot of people do is they make all the money they need to make in the delivery of the event and they don't charge any money in the thinking behind it. That can cause all

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sorts of problems. Take a simple event. Usually the smaller event companies will mark-up goods that they need for the event up by 30 to 40 per cent or more. Then the client rings up and says: 'Oh, we've got an extra 100 people so we're going to need another 100 chairs. I saw the price you had on the chairs, they're \$5 each so an extra 100 is another \$500'.

"So all that costs you is another phone call to your supplier to say I need another 100 chairs. So one could argue that's great. You've made one phone call and you've made another 40 per cent of \$500. But the problem with that is that actually, you're going to have to reconfigure the room you've booked because if you add those 100 chairs then you're going to have to move things around which means that the stage set that you had is going to have to be a bit smaller. And what about registration, extra catering? la la la la la.

"Actually, the problem isn't the extra chairs. The problem is that you're going to have to spend another four days working everything out. If you make all your money in the delivery – or that's what your client thinks – and you don't make the money you should make in the thinking stage, you're undervaluing the bit that is the most important. You're undervaluing the bit that makes all the difference – the thinking about what you're going to do and why. The hard part isn't the delivery of the event, the hard part is the thinking about why you are doing the event and how you're going to deliver it.

"If you were to position the thinking part in the development phase as strategy then you could charge for that at what it's worth, considering it is the most valuable part of what you do and then you wouldn't need to make money from all the hidden mark-ups at the delivery phase of the event."

Onto our second beer – it's Brisbane remember and the sun's still pretty warm in March – I ask Richard whether this is a global phenomenon? Event agencies undervaluing their creative strengths?

"Yes I think it is," he replies.

"The reality is that a lot of people make their money in the production which basically means they're marking up or they're buying in and selling at a higher price. And in a world of

procurement coming in, if you're selling say lighting at a 50 per cent mark up, the procurement guy may go to the lighting company and check their price and say 'Well, how come they're 50 per cent cheaper? I'm going to buy it direct.' Now the event company has a problem.

"I was having a conversation with a procurement person a while ago and he was telling me that most of the [event] agencies his company works with work on a margin of 10 per cent. If that's the case then those agencies are likely going to go out of business very soon because you cannot run a business if you are really only making 10 per cent. I suspect that if they weren't making 30-40 per cent then they would be out of business in a month. So perhaps the agency was, you might say, flexing the truth.

"You take the bigger agencies, the Imaginations, the GPs, the Jack Morton's, they behave transparently. They say, 'These are our people and this is what they cost; if you want chairs or staging or something then this is who you talk to. If you want us to organise or pay for that for you then we might charge you a small fee for doing so'. "In the smaller event businesses it's not the case [and] I really don't think all of the buyers understand how it works.

"Using the example of the extra 100 people at the last minute. I don't believe that the smaller event companies are comfortable saying: 'That's fine, but it's going to cost you \$4000 for us to change everything for the additional people'. They might be comfortable in saying: 'Well, it's going to cost you an extra \$4000 because we have to order the extra chairs and we're going to have to change the stage, and we're going to have to...' whatever. And probably the client will go, 'Yep, no problem'.

"But I think it's changing. I was working with a British event company a few weeks ago and they said because of Brexit the European company they were working with was probably going to pay for the third party costs direct because they were in euros. So the British event company is thinking: 'Well that's okay but I was going to be marking all those things up, and now I've lost 70 per cent of what I was going to be making on this event. Now I've agreed to do this job so what do I do? Should I phone the suppliers in Europe and say, 'Hey can you mark up all your costs and then give us our money?' I said to them I think that's kind of getting a bit illegal.

"I think we've got challenges. And why wouldn't a big corporation look at those kinds of things? 'Over the year we do 100 events and we're going to need lighting and we're going to need sound and we're going to need AV, why don't we just have a couple of suppliers on our books for those to supply us all the hardware, and then we'll go to a creative agency and they can help us design our events and put them all together?'

"There's going to be some changes. Or maybe the model works. Maybe the corporations really don't care as long as they get the job done?

"I did do one project for a major corporation which I've never seen before and they said we want a completely open book. Our auditors will come in once a year and look at all the invoices, and we'll guarantee you a 26-and-a-half per cent margin. And that's like wow that's brave. They're basically saying, we're in it together and we'll pay you a margin that we're both happy with. I thought it was quite innovative.

"A lot of the way this industry talks about what it does is in terms of staging rather than thinking.

"If you're making all your money on the production then obviously you're going to be pushing for bigger sets, bigger lighting, bigger sound, when actually you could be saying to your client: 'You know what? This is supposed to be a collegiate meeting with your team, why don't you just have four chairs on a smaller stage and with limited lights and have a face to face. Oh, but with the cost savings we could do that other event you were struggling to get funding for.' Or 'Why don't we use the funds to create an opening film/training campaign/ live linkup that starts a dialogue with your teams around the world.' Same budget, different thinking. That's creative thinking. The production side of events can be commoditised. You can get a light anywhere. What you can't get are the ideas. The thinking is what's different. And people will pay for that."

Future proofing the industry

So with that solution reached – all event planners charge an upfront fee rather than marking up product at event delivery – I ask Richard the biggie; the one all futurist keynote speakers get

paid megabucks to talk about... what's the future of the events sector? Perhaps because he just has two beers under his belt – remembering that he's British – Richard is hesitant. He's not sure. Definitely he believes event agencies, particularly smaller ones, have to be braver when billing their clients. They have to start valuing the work they do well before the event has even opened. And charging for it accordingly. But what about events themselves?

"I'm not sure what the future holds in terms of how people will digest information. I deal with some younger people and they seem to have about 20 platforms that they get information from all at the same time. It's amazing. I'm not sure if I can keep up... And I'm not sure if they can either. I think they do all of it a bit. Maybe we're seeing a change in that focus. We are not designed to multi-task. We're not like computer processors. You have to miss stuff. Maybe that means the way that we communicate should be different.

"There's also the communication theory. You don't think too deeply after 15 minutes. Maybe that's the way our conferences and our launches need to be. Maybe that's a future trend – the way we communicate – fast, short pieces of information. Maybe the big future is change all that around. Maybe you launch three things at once: A car launch here [in one space], a Pepsi launch there [in another], and something else over there [in another space at the same venue].

"Or maybe it's just bollocks," he says with a grin.

I mention the TED Talks and he nods enthusiastically. "That's really powerful stuff. Some of them are just incredible. I couldn't possibly believe you could get so much information into such a short time. But having said that when you watch the TED Talks the ones you really like and inform you the most are the ones that make you laugh. I think that humour helps you remember things and keeps you connected and engaged for longer."

This interview has gone well over Richard's 15 minute theory and neither of us have nodded

off once, which has to be a good thing.

He says that he wouldn't mind ducking back to the hotel for a kip before the big social night tonight. The jetlag is still lingering and... well, knowing this industry it could be a late one and he does have his presentation to do tomorrow.

I attend Richard's session the following day on "commoditising events". There's a good turnout and feedback.

We make plans to catch up at the end of the awards night which is on tonight for another couple of beers. I spot Richard during the evening and say I'll be over later. When the awards end I wander over and he's gone. A few laps of the room I presume he's headed back to his hotel room for an early night. I learn later that he was holed up in the bar behind the stage area of the venue until he and the stayers got ushered out. He apparently kicked on until 4am...

I was glad I didn't find him earlier. 4am is waaay too late for this ageing hack. **m**

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