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How to Blow Up Your Creative Process



WHY DOING BETTER MEANS DOING DIFFERENT

Sitting at Jackson Place Café with Co-Founder Ben Pham during my first interview for the Head of Strategy role at Character, I asked him, “What’s your vision for the future of Character?” His answer surprised me. “I don’t really have a vision necessarily,” he said. “All I know is that we’ll push ourselves to be better everyday. For our clients. And for ourselves. And if that means doing things completely differently tomorrow and then again the days and weeks and years after, we’re in. That’s what gets us excited.”

A year later, Ben’s words feel second nature to me. At Character, we are at our best when we’re totally immersed in a challenge—passionate about the question we’re answering, unencumbered by ‘how it should be done’, and empowered to walk alongside our clients as creative problem-solvers. We’re at our best when we’re simply trying to do better. And we’re at our best when we’re doing different.

“That’s why we often change teams around, change our processes, so we can do something new all the time. By doing that, we get that feeling we crave, of jumping off a cliff.”

— Ben Pham, Principal and Creative Director

Doing different is never a reflex. It’s a series of choices that we have to consciously make everyday. It involves ignoring our instincts, making ourselves uncomfortable, forgetting what we know. It takes work. But it’s the only way we know how. And it’s always worth it.



TREAT EVERY NEW AS NEW

→ No two [anythings] are the same

A new client enters the building. The common first reaction? “They remind me of client x from last year.” Or, “that founder has the same investors as this other founder,” or, “oh, another client trying to use technology to disrupt a traditional industry.” We’re humans, we look for patterns — it’s natural. But patterns prime us to think that we’ve already solved a problem. So quiet that voice in your head. Actually, shut it down completely. Save the comparisons and keep the slate clean.

Take Rothy’s and Hush Puppies, for example. Both shoe brands came to us touting comfort as a key point of difference. Only by refusing to see double could we have uncovered the unique truths that motivate each brand.

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“At its founding, Hush Puppies created a new category of footwear at the intersection of function and fashion. In refreshing the brand, we were inspired to lean into that origin story — finding the right mix of retro and contemporary to lead the nostalgia revolution.”
— Emily Hofmeyer, Designer



“The Rothy’s team is driven to do things differently and simply won’t follow paths they don’t wholeheartedly

believe in. Committed to sustainability and creating comfortable, beautiful products for today’s woman, they strive to make her proud in everything they do. Comfy, stylish shoes made of recycled plastic bottles are just one outcome of that commitment.”

— Rita Fernandez, Senior Strategist

Treating new as new means seeking out the gaps in our own knowledge. And when we think we know the answer, we ask anyway. Why do you do what you do? What is the legacy you want to leave? If you could change one thing about your brand, what would it be? Why should the world choose you? In short, orienting your creative process means embracing the three word motto that inspires our work — I don’t know.

GET INSPIRED ON PURPOSE

→ Making room for the unexpected is the only way to capture its magic

Sure, inspiration can come from anywhere. But what if you've never been 'anywhere'? Seeking new, chasing different, and choosing discomfort are the directions to 'anywhere' — and getting there doesn't happen by accident. It's the act of putting yourself in a position to feel something that sets the stage for the magic to happen.

'Anywhere' is everywhere. With Core Wellness, it was at a local studio for a full team group meditation session. With a new women's health brand focused on menstruation, it was at the office after hours, eating takeout, watching *Period. End of Sentence.*, and cursing the pink tax. With Tonal, it was face-to-face with their strength training machine experiencing the power of electronic weights firsthand. With The Stronach Group, it was at the track, feeling true horsepower.

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“It was really important to Sarah and Brian to create a brand that was active and pushed against the ‘woo woo’ associations of meditation. That really resonated with me, especially when we took a meditation class as a team. It gave me a personal understanding and perspective on meditation, and it helped me actually feel the opportunity



that they saw to make Core something that stood in its own space.”

— Fen Fen Chen, Mid-Level Designer

Although we don't know what, if anything, those experiences will yield, taking a step away from familiar and closer to wildly uncomfortable is where inspiration blossoms and creativity thrives.

“To really test the flexibility and fidelity of the Netflix Streams system we were collaborating on with the Netflix team, we knew we couldn't just look at the system on desktop — we needed to expand it understanding it would one day live in experiential. Using our gallery space, we projected the system to our giant walls to see how the system worked at a larger scale in motion, which helped to showcase what it would be like in an immersive environment and not just contained to pixels on screen.”

— Teri Kaplan, Director of Partnerships

WFC (WORK FROM CULTURE)

→ Life doesn't (only) happen on our computers

Let us be clear. Working from culture is not going to galleries and posting it on the 'gram (we know you were thinking it). It's attending a poetry reading by Yasin Bey and having a fresh perspective to bring to our work with a venture capital firm. It's hosting a Euphoria watch party then unpacking the right pronouns to use for a women's health brand on a mission to close the gender data gap.

"I saw Mike D and Ad-Rock tell a version of their memoir, *The Beastie Boys Book*, in part live-storytelling, part spoken word... and let me just say I never expected to get misty-eyed with *Fight for Your Right* playing in the background! The way they've grown from teenage hooligans to serious (but still goofy) artists really moved me — and reminded me of the magic in never fully letting go of our adolescence. That ended up being a big inspiration behind the *Games.com* work."

— Hayley Decker, Senior Strategist

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No shade to Pinterest, Slack, and Google, but there's a whole IRL world out there. So step away from the screen and live life. Go to concerts. Take solo hikes  in the woods. Cook something new for dinner this Sunday. 'Living' is an individual excavation

exercise — and when we dig, we find cool stuff that makes our lives (and believe it or not, our work) richer.

"I recently went to the climate strike in NYC and the crowd was absolutely electric. There's this incredible image of Greta Thunberg with a piece of cardboard sitting outside of the Swedish parliament on her first strike and when you fast-forward to millions of people rallying for the cause, it's a perfect example of how small actions can transform. At risk of sounding cliché, it gave me hope — along with a reignited sense of accountability and action. It has directly influenced my design process to a sustainability-first approach."

— Gabby Lord, Senior Designer

GET OVER YOURSELF

→ It's about them, after all

“Even if I was writing my masterpiece novel, if I want anyone to read it, I have to be willing to make edits.”

— Marlena Ryan, Senior Copywriter

We branders are in the service business. So when we show up to a presentation with a creative idea or a perspective, it's with a singular focus in mind — do right by the client. Reminding ourselves of the most important stakeholders is actually freeing. It allows us to go beyond what we could accomplish in isolation, past what's right to what's right for our partners. So don't be precious about the order of operations. Lead with curiosity and openness. Find the right balance of conviction and listening. View feedback as the opportunity it is. Get out of your own way, and let the magic happen.

Creativity can feel like a miracle. It's not. It's not a formula either. The trick is turning 'process' into something flexible — something that changes as much as the problems that need solving. Doing so means always starting from the beginning. It takes intention. It needs detours. And it demands that we make everything for the person across from us.

At least that's how we do different.

