

# Building brands like Pixar make movies

Pixar is an amazing business. Built on **imagination and creativity**, harnessing digital technologies to create the most engaging characters. **What can brands learn** from their ideas, process and storytellers?



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In 1979 Star Wars creator George Lucas and computer scientist Ed Catmull established the foundations of what was initially a digitally-enabled special effects business. Seven years later Steve Jobs acquired the studio, renamed it Pixar, and gave birth to some of the most successful animated films - like *Toy Story*, *Finding Nemo* and *The Incredibles*.

Today it is one of the world's most creative businesses.

## **Brands need bigger ambitions**

Similarly today's most successful brands have moved on from special effects and advertising, much more than a name and logo, to be an enduring narrative, to embrace the digital and human world, to capture the creative and emotional essence of a business and its customers.

Marketers are no longer support functions for sales, or brief writers for creative agencies. They are the creative talent, making sense of the world around them, turning insights into ideas into innovations. They are the driving force of business, the champion of customers, and the guardians of incredibly valuable assets called brands.

From Apple to Beauty'in, Camper to Desigual, Wagamama to Xiaomi, Yeni Raki to Zespri ... the most successful brands have bigger ambitions.

These brands recognise the wider impact they can have on customers and society, rather than just communicating relevance and difference at the point of sale. They define what they enable, rather than what they are. In fact they are more than communication tools. They give business purpose, shared with customers. They give people confidence, bring people together, and enable them to achieve more. They make life better.

Brands are about ideas, marketers are the creative talent. Pixar, therefore, is a fabulous metaphor for brand-building and marketing in this new world. Like the best movies, brands are about ideas more than effects, stories more than icons, enabled by software more than hardware, touching people more deeply, and memorably.

## **Building a creative business**

Emeryville lies just across the bay from San Francisco, and this is where the story of Pixar, Buzz and Woody, Nemo and Mickey Mouse, unfolds.

Steve Jobs was much more than a tech geek. He was a man of extreme vision, creativity and commerce, and ability to get the best out of people.

In 1986, having temporarily let go of his Apple passion, he set about transforming

his newly acquired animation business. He moved it from making and selling hardware, to designing and distributing software. He brought in John Lasseter, who had a background in off-beat mini-animations, to drive his vision into reality. The two men shared a vision, not just of how they could make great movies, but of how they could transform an industry, bringing together the best technologies with a human touch (maybe an echo of the iPod, a decade later).

After much rethinking and developing, in particular perfecting the proprietary Renderman animation process, and funded by making quirky ads for Kelloggs and IBM, Pixar was ready to take on the world.

Christmas 1995 saw the much anticipated launch of *Toy Story*. It received tremendous critical acclaim, generating \$362 million in worldwide box office receipts and earning Lasseter an Oscar and Academy Award.

On its success, Lasseter built a creative team of highly skilled animators, a story department and an art department. But he didn't just want great technicians, he wanted people with insight and imagination. He sought animators with superior acting ability, people who could sense how characters and audiences would feel, deeply and emotionally. The new Pixar University quickly became the training school for animators from around the world, and Pixar developed complete creative teams in-house, whilst the non-creative tasks were outsourced.

More blockbuster animations quickly followed ... *A Bug's Life*, *Toy Story 2*, *Monsters, Inc.*, *Finding Nemo*, and *The Incredibles*. The six films combined grossed more than \$3.5 billion at box offices worldwide, the most successful animated films of all time.

With each success, Pixar learnt more and invested in its process, brands and audiences. It revolutionised the technology of filmmaking, it transformed the expectations of audiences, and it gave children (and adults) across the world, a new genre of heroes.

## **Mickey meets Monsters Inc.**

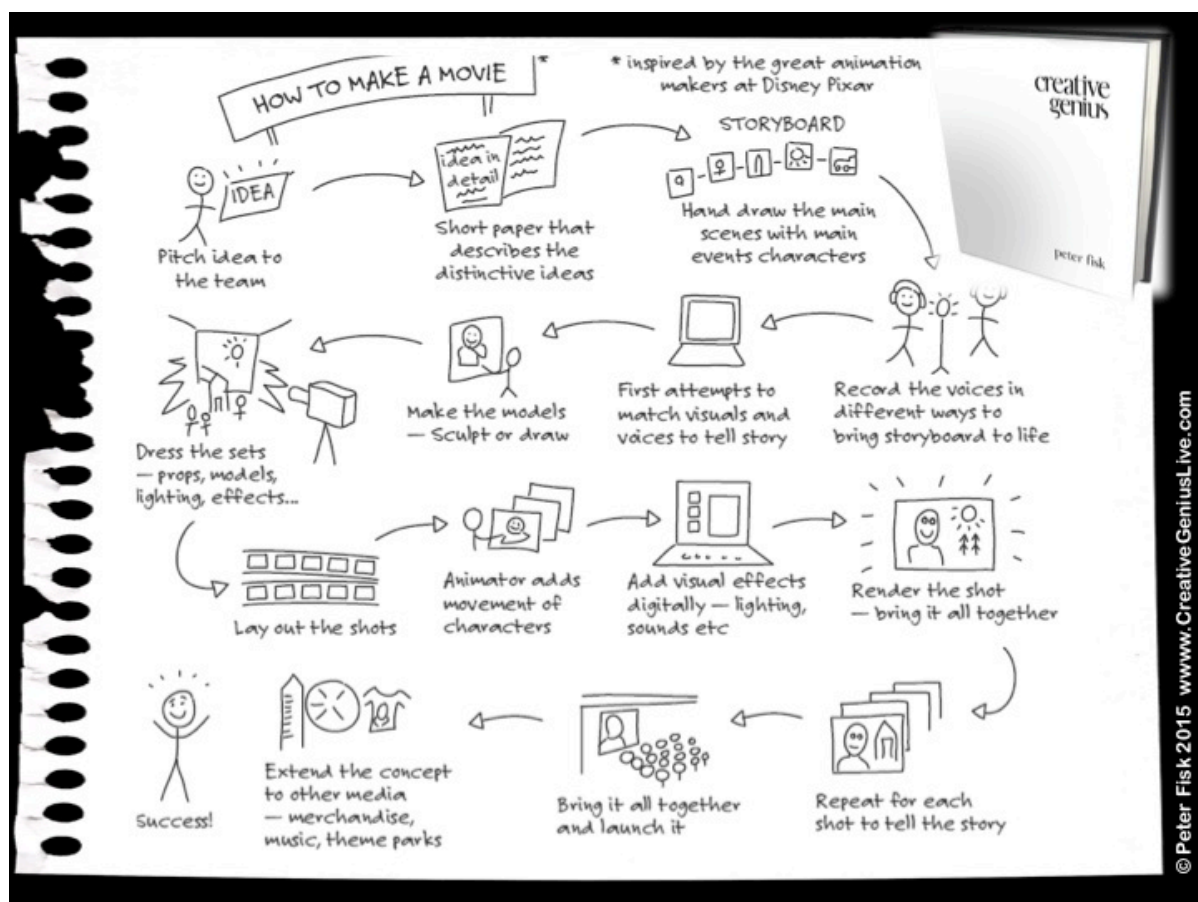
In 2006, Pixar became a wholly-owned subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company in a \$7.4 billion deal that saw Jobs, who was the majority shareholder of Pixar with 50.1%, take a seat on Disney's board of directors, and with 7% of all stock, the largest individual Disney shareholder. A new brand name "Disney·Pixar" was created, and as Chief Creative Officer, Lasseter reports directly to Disney CEO Bob Iger. He became responsible not just for Pixar, but the entire creative activity of the group.

The Pixar blockbusters continued, as did the related theme parks and merchandising - a result of carefully building the movie and character brands - personalities that kids loved, and defined their lives by. *Cars* and *Ratatouille*, *WALL-E* and most recently *Up* all took Oscars or Academy Awards. The stories reflecting a

changing world, more global, more technological, more mixed up.

## Pixar's creativity

Pixar Studios has evolved into a workspace that defines and inspires the creative process. Jobs was never a great movie maker, but he knew how to bring 1200 creative people, and their collective talents, together. He designed big open spaces, atriums with fabulous cafes and a wood-fired pizza oven. He encouraged designers to construct (and decorate) their own wooden sheds rather than sterile work stations, and provided scooters to help people get around faster. He recognised that the organisation needed to “loosen up”, to be more fluid and human, in order to drive collaboration and creativity.



One of the unique aspects of the business, Pixar University, has become much more than a training school for new entrants, rather a constant source of eclectic learning and provocation ... from astrophysics and space travel, to conservation in the Amazon, knowledge drives insights, drives ideas and inspiration. It creates more rounded, more thoughtful people, and maybe the next blockbuster.

Just like in the Googleplex at Mountain View, or Nike Campus in Portland, Pixar Studios has been described as a corporate playground with its own rules and rituals. Lasseter describes these in a very simple way :

# LEADING THE FUTURE

- **Dream like a child** – without prejudice or inhibition, live in a world where anything is possible, and the more fantastic the better.
- **Believe in your playmates** – see the best in people, see them as the best people in the world, and together as a team that can do anything.
- **Dare to jump into the water and make waves** – don't be afraid to break new ground, to challenge conventions, break rules, or do what hasn't been done.
- **Unleash your childlike potential** – don't just think like a child, make those wild ideas happen too.

Ideas come in all forms, inspired by all types of insights, but usually impulsive and unstructured. The process begins has some simple principles

- **Begin with the story** – describe the dream, make it relevant and stretching, distinctive and inspiring, and explore how it can become reality.
- **Build the set** – create the fantasy environment, the staging, the feel and smells, taking time to get all the details right, so that it really is believable.
- **Engage the cast** – the people who are going to bring the story to life, in this case the model makers, the voices, the musicians and the producers.
- **Deliver backstage** – make sure the creative team have all the support they need, from finance to technology, marketing and sales, and lots of coffee.

## What can we learn from Pixar?

Pixar is a digital content business, and in many ways that's what brands are today. Beyond the products and services which they support, brands are about ideas, stories, relationships and communities, and the capturing and sharing of them increasingly digitally, virtual experiences which become reality.

So here are 12 insights from Pixar, inspiration for every brand and marketer:

- **Imagineering** – ideas are the starting point, driven by insight and experience, but more often through imagination often through the creation of a "imagine if" scenario which is gradually scoped out and brought to life from the future back.
- **Creative fusions** – this is not an ingredient, but the essence of the whole business, where the creative process defines the organisation, its operational and commercial models, enabled by the fusion of creative talents.
- **Deep immersion** – thinking like the character, and like the audience, is the skill of the animator – recruiting people who are great actors, who can put themselves inside the heads of others, see and feel, think and act like they would or want.
- **Storytelling** – the core narrative that brings together characters and experiences, in a way that adds context as well as the plot, immerses and captures the imagination of the audience, and makes it memorable and talked about.
- **Humanity** – whilst technology is essential to a Pixar movie, in terms of

production and distribution, it is not what matters most – these are human stories, where the characters tap deep into the emotions and psyche of its audiences.

- **Moving you** – a Pixar movie is fun and entertaining, gripping and memorable, but more than anything it moves you – it inspires you, it makes you think, it challenges your prejudices, or makes you cry with happiness
- **Viral infections** – these stories are truly contagious, becoming the “must see” for generations of children – more than just advocacy, their stories and the desire to watch them, spread like wildfire.
- **Branded content** – the business is a phenomenal example of a large and complex brand architecture that really works, with each brand clear and distinctive - Pixar is a brand, Toy Story is a brand, and Buzz Lightyear is a brand.
- **Personality** – at each level, the brands are more about a sense of character, attitude and behaviours, rather than names and logos. Indeed as long as the essence of the brand is strong, the visualisations can flex and change.
- **Content spinning** – beyond the movie, licensing each level of brands across many different products, adding to the experience – from theme parks and computer games, to books and clothing – all part of the business model.
- **Never ending** – Pixar is a relentless stream of creative success, replicating the model with ever more innovative stories, stories which themselves have no end – living, evolving - *Toy Story 3* was just as good as the original.
- **Inspired leaders** - a creative business is by definition chaotic and unstructured, but that’s why leadership matters more – an inspiring purpose, a shared direction, confidence and clarity, led by an energising leader.

Maybe brands need to own more of their own creativity, rather than being subservient to their agencies. Maybe they need to immerse themselves deeper in the world they are trying to simulate and stimulate, to challenge each other, to unlock and mesh their talents, in a more sustained and evolving way. Indeed the marketing departments of Apple and Zappos are more like creative studios, the hub of business thinking, delivering strategies and innovations, as well as brands and communication.

Most important, is to apply the lessons of Pixar’s creative process to the challenge of brand building. This is where many marketers are falling behind, and where many business leaders fail to recognise its importance and impact.

The characteristics of successful brands have now changed.

## **Building a better brand**

In a world where image and reputation can be built, and destroyed, in an instant, brands need to be stronger, richer, and in the hands of the beholder. This is why the movie-making analogy is useful, and why today’s best brands are “ABCDE”, that is:

- **Aspirational** – Brands capture the dreams and desires of their audience, what they seek to achieve, rather than simply labelling a business, product or service. They establish a richer, more relevant context. They are about them (the people) not us (the business).
- **Bold** – Brands are more ambitious, they challenge the norm, they stand out from others and go where others fear or have never imagined. They are iconic, or at least use icons to demonstrate their purpose. .
- **Connecting** – Brands build communities, because people ultimately enjoy being with other like them, people who share a similar passion, purpose or experience. Customers don't want relationships with companies or products, but they do value brands that facilitate their ability to connect and do more with others.
- **Dramatic** – beyond names and logos, product or services, brands have a strong and distinctive idea that is brought to life in more meaningful ways. They capture a shared purpose, supported by values which come alive through attitudes and behaviours.
- **Enabling** – Brands do more for people, giving them functional means and emotional confidence to do what they never thought possible. Awareness and purchase are just the beginnings of a deeper brand experience. Advocacy, repurchase and ongoing collaboration are steps to a brand to live your life by.

## Brand innovation in three steps

So what is the essence of brand building today? The “BrandLab” process in my book *"Creative Genius: The Innovation Handbook for Business Leaders"* describes the three essential phases for building brands, or indeed driving any form of creative development in business today. The three phases are

### 1. Future Space

Brand innovation starts by thinking from the “future back” ... Finding the real issue, recognising the paradoxes, imagining possibilities, exploring potential scenarios, and deep diving for interesting customer insights.

New ideas emerge in the margins more than the mainstream, maybe trickling up from emerging markets – improvisation is a great source of ideas – like with M-Pesa in Africa where a new currency emerged as a result of people's access to mobile phones and ability to send SMS, or Aravind Eyecare where the lack of qualified hospitals and doctors led to an innovative low-cost online solution to curing blindness in India.

### 2. Design Studio

Fusion is key to designing a brand concept: the fusion of function and form, of business and customer, of different ideas, More than anything fusion comes through collaboration – working with customers, partners, academics,

technologists, other brands, and some weird and unusual people too.

From business models to brand architectures, products to customer experiences, everything can be designed better. El Bulli the world's best restaurant builds its reputation on crazy, unusual fusions of ingredients. Christian Audigier built the Ed Hardy brand sensation by fusing tattoo designs with latest fabrics, styles and licensing models.

### **3. Impact Zone**

Brands must ultimately deliver results – transform attitudes and reputations, build engagement and drive sales ... short and long-term. Impact is about launching new ideas into markets, but also about making them work over time.

Nike Plus transformed the sportswear brand's performance through enablement and community, adding technology to shoes that monitor and map your runs, share with others, and created the world's biggest mass-participation race ever. Skoda is the unlikely hero of Volkswagen, using its deeply loyal following in Eastern Europe to become the portfolio's most profitable brand.

A great brand can come from anywhere ... big company or small, emerging nation or developed, young marketers or experienced leaders, limitless budgets or almost none. It's not about what you are, but how you think.

As Buzz Lightyear often says ... "To infinity, and beyond!"

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