

THE POWER OF
IGNORANCE

Also by Dave Trott

Creative Mischief

Predatory Thinking

One Plus One Equals Three: A Masterclass in Creative Thinking

Creative Blindness

THE POWER OF IGNORANCE

HOW CREATIVE SOLUTIONS
EMERGE WHEN WE ADMIT
WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dave Trott is a creative director, copywriter and author. He studied at the Pratt Institute in New York City, majoring in advertising before going on to found the advertising agencies Gold Greenlees Trott, Bainsfair Sharkey Trott and Walsh Trott Chick Smith. In 2004 he was given the D&AD President's Award for lifetime achievement in advertising. He has also received lifetime achievement in advertising awards from The Creative Circle, The Marketing Society, and The Scottish Advertising Association.

Dave is married with two children and lives in London. *The Power of Ignorance* is his fifth book.

INTRODUCTION

I always learned more from stories than from lectures.

This book is written for people like me.

There's a story about an American student of Buddhism who travels to the mountains to see an elderly Buddhist master.

He wishes to learn from him, so they sit cross-legged on the floor as tea is served.

The student is nervous, he wants to impress the master with his knowledge.

He starts telling him everything he knows about Buddhism.

The master begins pouring tea into the student's cup.

The student mentions all the books he has read, every famous teacher he has studied.

The master continues pouring tea into the student's cup.

The student mentions every monastery he has visited, he begins to get nervous as his cup begins to fill.

The master continues to pour tea into the cup.

The student is talking faster and faster about all the different forms of meditation he has tried, he can't take his eyes off the cup which is now full to the brim.

The master continues pouring and the cup overflows.

The master continues pouring as the tea runs across the table and down onto the floor.

The student shouts: **"Stop, stop, why are you still pouring? The cup is full, it can't take anymore."**

The teacher says: **"Your mind is like this cup – it is so full there is no room for anything else. Like the cup, you must empty your mind before it can accept anything new."**

THE POWER OF IGNORANCE

That is the problem most of us have.

We are scared stiff to let go of what we know, we acquire knowledge and cling onto it, consequently we can never learn anything new.

As Adlai Stevenson said: **“Most people approach every problem with an open mouth.”**

We feel we must be the first to offer a solution.

We think knowledge is strength and ignorance is weakness.

But all that actually ensures is we offer a solution from the range of options that already exist, we never learn anything new.

We never learn anything new because we never ask questions.

We never ask questions because we're afraid to say **“I don't know.”**

We never say **“I don't know”** so we can never discover anything new.

Our cup is full to overflowing.

Socrates was involved in a discussion with Meno, who believed his forceful opinion would win him the argument.

Socrates said: **“I am wiser than this man, for neither of us appears to know anything great and good, but he fancies he knows something, although he knows nothing; whereas I, as I do not know anything, so I do not fancy I do. In this trifling particular, then, I appear to be wiser than he, because I do not fancy I know what I do not know.”**

Lao Tzu (the father of Taoism) put it more simply: **“The wise man knows he doesn't know. The fool doesn't know he doesn't know.”**

What both of these men were saying concerns the way to approach a problem.

Contrary to the conventional belief, there is actually weakness in knowledge and strength in ignorance.

INTRODUCTION

Ignorance, properly used with curiosity, allows us to find out things we didn't know.

And that NEW knowledge allows us to come up with new solutions.

Solutions that weren't visible from the previous position of existing knowledge.

This entire book is about asking questions, because creativity is about asking questions.

Using ignorance as a torch, to uncover what everyone else has walked over, unaware.

Because ignorance coupled with curiosity results in questions that no one else is asking.

Questions like: how could Pepsi sell cola to Russia when Coca-Cola couldn't?

How did IBM build the biggest computer company in the world in a depression?

How could a madman and a murderer be the saviour of the English language?

How do you sell glassware to people who've already got all the glassware they need?

How did George Washington's friends kill him with too much knowledge?

How did the competition build Uber by trying to kill it?

How did an expert create the useless rule of passwords that everyone still believes?

How and why did Disney create the myth of lemmings?

How and why did the cleverest and most famous people in the world lose billions?

How do you build a brand out of purposely not having any brand at all?

Our mind is like that student's cup.

THE POWER OF IGNORANCE

We can't put anything new into it until we first empty it.

That's how we use ignorance, as a tool to empty the cup so we can fill it with new knowledge.

Ignorance coupled with curiosity is where all new knowledge starts.

Ignorance, used properly, is our secret weapon.

PART 1

WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW YOU DON'T KNOW

THE ANSWER ASKS THE QUESTION

In 1942, Britain was losing the battle of the Atlantic, which meant they were losing the war.

This has a way of concentrating the mind, so they were prepared to try anything.

One of the desperate moves was to try war-gaming.

All that could be spared was a retired naval officer and eight young Wrens, for a group called Western Approaches Tactical Unit (WATU).

The young Wrens knew nothing of anti-submarine warfare of course.

This meant they had lots of questions.

As with any problem, questions are always a good place to start.

Q) Whereabouts in the convoy are the ships being attacked?

A) Usually in the centre, at night.

Q) How big is the convoy?

A) About 8 miles square.

Q) What is the torpedoes' range?

A) About 2 miles.

Conclusion: the U-boats must be attacking from inside the convoy. Torpedoes can't reach the centre from outside.

Q) What is the convoy's speed?

A) Around 10 knots.

Q) What is a U-boat's speed?

A) 16 knots on the surface, 6 knots submerged.

Conclusion: the U-boats are attacking on the surface, they are too slow when submerged.

Q) How long does it take to reload the torpedoes?

THE POWER OF IGNORANCE

A) About half an hour.

Q) Would they do this on the surface?

A) No, they would submerge.

Conclusion: after an attack, a U-boat will submerge and be left behind by the convoy.

They will then have to surface to catch up.

In having to answer the Wrens' questions, the naval officer had to think like a U-boat commander, and that was the first time anyone had done that.

Instead of rushing around after the first ship exploded, they realised the destroyers had some time while the U-boat reloaded.

They could let the convoy pass on and, after it was gone, search for the U-boats that were reloading.

Because they were submerged they were slower, and the destroyers could use ASDIC (underwater radar) to locate them.

But first they had to prove it to the Admiral in charge, so they used a war game.

Admiral Sir Max Horton was an ex-submariner.

He took the role of a U-boat captain.

Five times he attacked the convoy, five times he was sunk by his unseen opponent, using these new tactics.

He asked to be introduced to his opponent, who he hadn't even seen yet.

His opponent was 18-year-old Wren, Janet Okell, who'd been helping devise the new tactics.

The Admiral was convinced, and the tactics began sinking U-boats for real in the Atlantic.

WATU was expanded to eight male officers and 36 Wren officers and ratings.

THE ANSWER ASKS THE QUESTION

During the war, they trained 5,000 naval officers in anti-submarine warfare.

At the end of the battle of the Atlantic, 75% of all U-boats had been destroyed.

They discovered the value of asking new questions is you come up with new answers.

Which wouldn't have happened without having to train those Wrens.

Asking questions that hadn't been asked before wasn't silly, in fact it won the battle of the Atlantic.

THE POWER OF NICHE

At Gwyneth Paltrow's site, goop, you could buy a candle labelled: SMELLS LIKE MY VAGINA for just seventy-five dollars.

Naturally, the online media went wild with outrage and jokes.

It was only on sale for a few days and it sold out straightaway.

Never mind, if you're too late to get one, you can still buy one of her Vaginal Eggs.

They're made from jade and cost just sixty dollars apiece.

Again, when they first went on sale, she was completely ridiculed in the press and on TV.

But if vaginal jade eggs aren't your thing, there's always her Vaginal Steaming.

You sit over mugwort-infused steam and feel the benefit.

Again, the media was beside itself with disdain and disbelief.

Paltrow was interviewed about it, in magazines and on TV chat shows all over the world.

The interesting thing is that goop hardly advertise, and yet it's one of the most famous, most talked about brands in the world.

There are 2.4 million visitors to the site every month, and up to 600,000 listeners a week to the podcasts, and a Netflix series.

Every time she needs some publicity, Paltrow simply releases another story about a vaginal product and the media goes crazy.

She gets free coverage that would cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

The New York Times said: "The weirder goop went the more its readers rejoiced. Every time there was a negative story about her or her company all it did was bring more people to the site."

Paltrow told a class of Harvard students: "What I do is create a cultural firestorm, and I can monetize those eyeballs."

THE POWER OF NICHE

The focus of so much ridicule, goop is now valued at a quarter of a billion dollars.

The lesson is, Paltrow is targeting the opposite of mass media. She wants women who see themselves as confident, individual, and discerning: women with money.

When the mass media is outraged, she has simply provoked another advertising campaign.

Obviously, goop doesn't make money from its vaginal products.

But what it does get is an enormous amount of publicity.

The vaginal products are the advertising equivalent of loss-leaders in retail: products which get people into the store in order to buy other things.

Like: earrings for \$3,900, or trousers for \$790, or a jump suit for \$1,395, or boots for \$860, or T-shirts for \$145, or bracelets for \$4,775, or shoes for \$650.

Those items make money, but none of those things would attract any publicity.

She tried selling Psychic Vampire Repellent for \$27, a Medicine Bag of Gemstones for \$85, even a 24-carat gold-plated vibrator for \$15,000, but none of these things attracted as much free publicity as the vagina products.

Because none of them caused the outrage that goop needed as fuel for controversy.

And that really is the lesson here.

There's an enormous amount of money to be made in what we perceive as niche.

I remember when Saatchi was one of the biggest ad agencies in the UK, apparently it had just 2% of the market, in other words for every person that wanted it, 49 didn't.

Which leads us to the power of polarisation.

THE POWER OF IGNORANCE

Once you know the niche your market's in, you can spend a lot of time publicly turning off everyone else.

Like Saatchi, you don't need 100% of people to find you bland and okay.

You need 2% of people to love you, even if that means 98% of people hate you.

By focussing on her niche, Paltrow built a \$250 million business, almost without advertising.

By shocking the people her market didn't want to be like.

IT'S NOT WHERE YOU START IT'S WHERE YOU FINISH

The chainsaw was invented for chopping down trees, right?

Wrong, the chainsaw was invented for helping women give birth.

But how can that be true?

Well, until two hundred years ago, childbirth wasn't pleasant for the mother.

Especially if, for whatever reason, the baby wouldn't fit through her opening.

The main medical tools of the time were knives, saws, chisels, and mallets.

If the baby was too large, or turned the wrong way, the opening had to be widened.

This involved cutting away bone and cartilage, and lots of pain (because there were no anaesthetics).

The process was called a symphysiotomy: the pelvis had to be cut and expanded, in order to make the opening wider.

This was such an unpleasant procedure that two Scottish doctors independently invented a tool to make it more efficient.

They invented the chainsaw.

The chainsaw was a tool with a chain of saw-teeth that was hand-cranked.

In 1783, John Aitken illustrated his device in *Principles of Midwifery, Or Puerperal Medicine*.

In 1790, James Jeffray developed his own version and wrote about it in *Cases of the Excision of Carious Joints*.

THE POWER OF IGNORANCE

Their chainsaws were an improvement on the surgeon's saw, which had to be inserted into the opening and pulled and pushed back and forth, while the legs were held apart.

At least with the chainsaw the surgeon just held it in place and turned the crank.

Obviously the principle of continuous motion over reciprocating motion was better for the patient, but it was also a more efficient use of energy.

In 1905, Samuel J. Bens spotted this and used it for the giant redwoods he was logging.

When men sawed back and forth, every stroke had to stop, and reverse, and waste energy.

But with a chainsaw the movement was in one direction only, there was no wasted energy.

And he was granted US Patent 780,476 for his 'endless chain saw'.

Enlarging surgical chainsaws up to tree-felling size meant they were huge and cumbersome, but still had to be cranked by hand.

So in 1926, Andreas Stihl invented the electric-powered chainsaw, and in 1929 the petrol-powered version.

In the 1950s the chainsaw became smaller and portable, to the point where one person could operate one on their own.

And today, most people wouldn't believe you if you told them where chainsaws started off.

But that's the way it is with ideas.

An idea doesn't pop out fully formed and stop there forever.

An idea gets changed, improved, and repurposed.

That's the difference between pure math and applied math, between pure art and applied art.

One person makes a discovery, another person decides what it can be used for.

IT'S NOT WHERE YOU START IT'S WHERE YOU FINISH

We don't usually invent something from scratch, we repurpose an idea that already exists.

Something the original innovator didn't even see when they created it.

That's how creativity works, in incremental stages, each stage is a new creative vision.

As film maker Jean-Luc Godard said: **"It's not where you take something from, it's where you take it to."**

Or as the best advertising art director ever, Helmut Krone, said: **"First you make the revolution, then you decide what it's for."**

HOW TO WIN BY GIVING IN

When Steve Jobs returned to Apple, the smartest things he did was spot Jonathan Ive.

Ive was about to quit, Jobs persuaded him to stay.

Subsequently, Ive designed products like: the iMac, the iPod, the iPhone, the iPad.

Each design was groundbreaking, other firms could only do poor copies.

But Ive freely admits, his inspiration was another designer: Dieter Rams.

When you compare Ive's designs with Rams' you can clearly see the influence.

Dieter Rams began life as a designer in 1955 when he joined Braun.

For the next forty years he revolutionised domestic appliance design: from radios to kitchen mixers, from record players to electric razors, from watches to TV sets.

Today there are museums full of his work in cities from London to New York to Tokyo.

But for me, the most creative thing that happened wasn't anything he did.

It was a decision taken by the two brothers who employed him, Artur and Erwin Braun.

Rams had been working for Braun for about five years when he was approached by a designer friend, Otto Zapf.

Zapf was opening a furniture design company with Niels Vitsoe.

They wanted to know if Rams could help them out by doing a bit of freelance design.

Rams hadn't done furniture before, but he was happy to try.

HOW TO WIN BY GIVING IN

He designed the furniture the same way he designed the Braun products: minimalist, functional, practical.

His designs were successful, so they asked him to do more and more.

Rams decided this was becoming a conflict of interest.

The Braun brothers were paying him to be their designer, but he was also working for someone else.

So he went to see Artur and Erwin Braun and asked them if should stop freelancing.

And here's the really creative part for me.

Most companies would immediately say: **"Of course you must quit your freelance, we're paying you to design for us not someone else."**

But the brothers didn't say that.

They said: **"Go ahead, we don't make furniture so there is no conflict. In fact, if people buy your furniture it can only be good for Braun."**

That decision, for me, is the really creative leap.

What they'd realised was that, in the 1950s, most homes were furnished with old-fashioned heavy, upholstered wood and cloth furniture.

People wouldn't buy Braun's minimalist, metal and plastic, functional designs to go with furniture like that.

But if younger people began to furnish their apartments with modern minimalist furniture, made from plastic and metal, then Braun products would fit perfectly.

So, by letting Rams design furniture they were creating their own market.

And that's exactly what happened.

Rams designed bookshelves, and chairs, and tables, and sofas and all of his furniture designs fitted perfectly with all his home appliance designs.

THE POWER OF IGNORANCE

Both companies grew and, over the next few decades, changed the design aesthetic.

What we now recognise as good design came from Rams' furniture and Braun electronics.

Without them there would be no Habitat, no Ikea and, as Jonathan Ive admits, Apple certainly wouldn't look the way it does.

And it all happened because of the Braun brothers' creative decision to go against conventional wisdom and allow their top designer to freelance for someone else.

Which goes to show, sometimes the most creative thinkers aren't the 'creatives'.

SOMETHING FROM NOTHING

As we know, there are three kinds of media: paid-for media, owned media, and earned media.

The first two are easy. Paid-for media is any space you pay for: TV, print, OOH (out-of-home), online.

Owned media is anything you own that can be used as media: delivery trucks, shop windows, packaging, mail.

But the real creative opportunity is the third one: earned media.

This is where no media exists until you make it happen.

An example would be the El Paso Zoo in Texas.

To attract visitors, they needed to get people talking about the zoo to make it more relevant, more topical and interesting.

What could they do that was different, that would get people talking, what would earn free media?

Valentine's Day was coming up, every zoo would be doing the usual – adopt a pair of lovebirds, or similar.

How about if they went in the exact opposite direction?

Instead of celebrating the few happy couples, what if they went for a larger market?

Everyone's had their heart broken, and a lot of people think Valentine's Day is just another cynical way to make money.

Nobody is talking to that market, so the zoo could have that all to themselves.

And that's exactly what they did.

On their Facebook page, they advertised that they would be happy to name a cockroach after your ex and feed it to a meerkat live online, on Valentine's Day.

The event was called QUIT BUGGING ME.

THE POWER OF IGNORANCE

You simply left a message on Facebook with your ex's first name and initial, then at 2.15 on Valentine's Day the cockroaches would be fed to the meerkats.

Meerkats love them, large Madagascar hissing cockroaches are specially bred to supplement their diet.

Just days after that post on Facebook, 1,500 people had already left messages with the name of their ex.

Some, from as far away as Germany and Australia, were even organising parties to watch their ex get eaten.

The promotion was covered by TV, newspapers, and online media around the world, all for free.

That's earned media – it didn't exist until they had the idea, and it didn't cost a penny.

A few years before, Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle had a different idea.

It wasn't earned media, but it also created something from nothing.

They noticed they were paying \$90,000 a year to get all their animal dung removed.

They thought, how about if we turn that round: if we don't pay someone to take it away but we sell it.

And they began selling ZOO POO fertilizer at \$20 for a two-gallon drum.

It's a much better fertilizer because it only comes from herbivores: giraffes, hippos, gazelles, and zebras and it's mixed with straw, grass, leaves, and woodchips.

Garden plants don't have to rely on artificially mass-produced fertilizer made in factories.

Plus, they also sell WORM POO for \$10 a pint.

This is compost that worms have eaten and expelled, so it has the added benefit of being '**twice pooped**', and therefore exceptionally rich in nutrients for seedlings and potted plants

SOMETHING FROM NOTHING

These zoos made something from nothing: no money, no media, no strategists, no brief.

And yet they're more creative than most of us.

DON'T OUTPLAY THEM, OUT-THINK THEM

Liverpool's fourth goal against Barcelona in the 2019 Champions League semi-final.

The ball went out for a corner, Trent Alexander-Arnold carefully placed it then walked away.

Then he turned, ran back and crossed it.

And, while Barcelona were standing still, Divock Origi ran in and scored for Liverpool.

Liverpool came back from 3-0 down in the first game, to win the second game 4-0.

They knocked out the best team in the world and were going to the Champions League final.

That's why everyone loves that cheeky goal.

But it wasn't just the result of an instinctively taken half-chance.

It was the result of careful preparation.

Before that match, Liverpool had their analysts look for weaknesses in Barcelona.

It's very tough to find weaknesses in the best team in the world.

But one thing they did notice was they argued about every decision that went against them.

These were the best players in the world and their egos told them they were right, so the referee must be wrong.

Besides which, if a referee doesn't quite see the foul, you can often get him to give the decision your way.

So, it seemed to be worth arguing over every decision.

The Liverpool analysts had noticed it and told Jürgen Klopp it could be a weakness: while they were arguing they weren't concentrating.

So Klopp talked to Carl Lancaster, the head of the coaching academy.

DON'T OUTPLAY THEM, OUT-THINK THEM

The boys at the academy are also the ballboys for Liverpool's games. Lancaster showed them videos of Barcelona arguing after the ball had gone out of play.

He made the ballboys realise that if they could get the ball back really fast, Barcelona wouldn't be ready for it.

So the ballboys worked on that all week.

It seems a tiny thing, but delivering the ball fast was what led to Liverpool's fourth goal.

The ballboy was 14-year-old Oakley Cannonier.

He was prepared so, when the ball went out for a corner, he didn't even have to run and get it, he had a spare ball ready.

He instantly rolled it to Alexander-Arnold while Barcelona were arguing.

Alexander-Arnold placed it and walked away, as if leaving it for someone else.

He casually looked up to see where Origi was, then turned and kicked the ball over the heads of all the still arguing Barcelona players.

Because they were arguing, their defence was completely out of position.

Before they finished arguing, the ball was in their net, Liverpool were 4-0 up, and Barcelona were out of the Champions League.

All because of attention to detail and thorough planning.

All down to looking for an opportunity where no one else was looking.

Spotting something no one else had spotted.

That's what competition is, that's what creativity is at its best.

As Schopenhauer said: **"Talent hits a target no one else can hit. Genius hits a target no one else can see."**

That's what creative thinking is, creating an unfair advantage.

Bill Bernbach spotted it before anyone else, that's why he said:

THE POWER OF IGNORANCE

“It may well be that creativity is the last unfair advantage we’re legally allowed to take over the competition.”

In other words, if you can’t outplay them, out-think them.

ADVERTISING AS CAMOUFLAGE

In 2008, Anthony Curcio needed twenty-five men to help him on a job in Monroe, Washington.

So he advertised on Craigslist, the pay was good, \$28.50 an hour.

Landscaping work, but you had to come dressed ready to start: jeans, blue shirt, work shoes, yellow safety vest, safety goggles, and a painter's mask.

The meeting place was in the Bank of America parking lot, September 9th.

At the time stated in the ad, dozens of men showed up dressed and ready.

They looked around for the boss, but there were just lots of other men dressed like them.

Then a Brink's armoured car pulled in outside the Bank of America, and the guard went into the bank.

A minute or so later the guard came out with two sacks of money.

Suddenly one of the landscapers pepper-sprayed the guard, grabbed the sacks, and ran off.

Everyone stood around wondering what the hell was happening, it must be a robbery.

Eventually the police showed up and asked for a description of the robber.

All anyone could repeat was what he was wearing: jeans, blue shirt, work shoes, yellow safety vest, safety goggles, and a painter's mask.

Just like the dozens of other men standing around in the car park.

The police checked all the VCR cameras, but everyone fitted exactly that description.

Because the job Anthony Curcio advertised on Craigslist wasn't what everyone thought.

THE POWER OF IGNORANCE

It wasn't a landscaping job, it was a bank job and he escaped with \$400,000.

He did it by reversing conventional wisdom.

He didn't make himself blend into the environment, he changed the environment to blend in with him.

He had been setting up the robbery for weeks, dressed as someone nobody would notice, a landscaper: sweeping up, picking weeds, cutting grass.

He noted the days and times the armoured car came, when it had the biggest bags of cash.

He noted the number of guards, their security routine.

All he needed on the day of the robbery was to make sure no one could identify him.

So he advertised for several dozen people dressed exactly like him to be standing around in that spot at exactly that time.

It was a new take on camouflage.

Fitting in so no one will notice you, because that's what he wanted, not to be noticed.

But that's pretty much the opposite of what we want.

If we fit in and no one notices us we've wasted our money.

If no one notices us we may as well not be running any advertising at all.

If we look like all the other ads around us, we'll be as invisible and we'll escape unnoticed.

But is that really what we want our advertising to do, escape unnoticed?

Every time I do a talk I make the point that, if you live in a major conurbation, you're exposed to around 2,000 advertising messages a day.

ADVERTISING AS CAMOUFLAGE

Press ads, OOH, radio ads, pre-rolls on YouTube, ads on Facebook and Twitter, 16 and 48 sheet crosstracks on the Tube, commercials on Freeview or Sky, plus all the rest, that's 2,000 advertising messages a day.

Then I ask: **"As a consumer, hold your hand up if you remember one from yesterday."**

Out of an audience of 200, usually six, maybe ten hands go up.

So, do the math, 200 times 2,000 ads each, equals 400,000 ads.

So 400,000 ad exposures and, every time I do it, around ten ads are even remembered twenty-four hours later.

I think we're doing a pretty good job of camouflaging ourselves.

WE REALLY WANT WHAT WE CAN'T HAVE

In 1503, a Florentine artist took on a commission for a local businessman, Francesco del Giocondo.

It was a painting of his wife, it wasn't considered anything special.

It wasn't big, it measured 30" × 21" (between modern sizes A1 and A2).

But around 300 years later, in 1797, it ended up on the wall between much larger pictures in the Louvre in Paris.

The public barely noticed it, until 21st August 1911.

On that day, Vincenzo Peruggia visited the Louvre and hid in a broom closet.

After the museum closed he came out and took the small painting off the wall, it fitted under his coat so he took it and calmly walked out of the building.

No one even noticed anything unusual until sometime the next day.

Then someone remembered that there used to be a small picture in the gap between those two larger pictures.

No big deal, it must have been removed for cleaning.

Eventually they found it hadn't, and they realised this was an art theft.

But not just any theft, the thief ignored all the other masterpieces and targeted this painting.

It must be worth more than anything else hanging on the walls.

The newspapers got hold of the story and everyone wanted to know what this masterpiece was that had been targeted above all the others.

The Louvre checked and told them it was known as the **Mona Lisa**.

The public didn't remember it, but it was obviously the most valuable painting in the Louvre.

Suddenly everyone wanted to see the **Mona Lisa**.

WE REALLY WANT WHAT WE CAN'T HAVE

They must see the painting that was worth stealing above all others.

But no one could see it, because it wasn't there, which made them want to see it more.

The **Mona Lisa** soon became the most famous painting in the world.

It was as if the Louvre was only half the museum without it.

Eventually, after two years, it was recovered when the thief tried to sell it to the Uffizi gallery in Florence.

It was quickly returned to the Louvre and everyone packed in to see it.

Today, according to director Henri Loyrette, six million people visit the Louvre every year just to see the **Mona Lisa**.

This is known as the scarcity heuristic: people never want something so much as when they can't have it.

I saw the same thing at the National Gallery's Caravaggio exhibition.

The star exhibit was the painting **Supper at Emmaus**, the crowd was seven deep, people had to wait ages to glimpse it for a few seconds.

Yet for the rest of the year it was on permanent display upstairs in the main gallery.

You could look at it all day on your own if you wanted, but no one even bothered.

The producer, Mike Todd, knew all about the scarcity heuristic.

He had a play running in Manhattan that wasn't at all successful.

So he hired a lady with arthritic fingers for the box office.

When someone wanted a ticket it took her ages to give them their change.

The people behind them had to wait and this caused a queue.

Seeing the queue, other people joined, figuring it must be a good show.

The queue got longer and people passing decided they couldn't miss out, so they joined.

THE POWER OF IGNORANCE

Eventually, the queue was round the block.

Mike Todd's show became a huge success, thanks to the lady with arthritic fingers who unwittingly utilised the scarcity heuristic.

EVERYONE NEEDS A SECOND CHANCE

California has more cars and drivers than any state in the USA.

So naturally, they also have more car crashes, and consequently more fatalities.

95% of people in California think organ donation is a good thing.

Every organ donor has the potential to save eight lives, and enhance up to 75 others, via organs, eyes, and tissue donation.

But only 45% of drivers have actually signed up as organ donors.

That means 114,000 people are waiting for organs.

Why the discrepancy?

To become an organ donor you need to fill out forms and get a pink dot stamped on your licence.

But to renew your licence you have to go to the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV).

This is a famously unpleasant experience: the queues are long, everyone is grumpy, they can't wait to get out of there.

So ad agency Casanova//McCann and the client, Donate Life CA, took a new look at the problem.

Instead of nagging non-users with posters, in the DMV queue, how about rewarding current users?

People who already had the pink dot on their licence.

So everyone would see the whole experience was a lot more pleasant.

And they created an idea called SECOND CHANCE.

They had a logo made out of two number 2s facing each other, like a heart.

They persuaded three police departments in California, Fullerton, Placentia, and Cal State, plus Calgary in Canada, to get involved.

THE POWER OF IGNORANCE

The idea was that when a driver was about to get a traffic ticket for a minor violation, if the officer saw a pink dot on their driving licence, indicating they were a donor, he could give them a second chance.

And they made a film recording how the idea worked in action.

The film showed officers stopping drivers for speeding or going through stop signs.

The officer would see their licence and fill out a ticket, as usual: Name, Address, City, State, Zip Code, Driver Licence Number, Description of Violation, Citing Officer.

But when he handed the ticket over to the driver, it was different.

It read:

“Instead of a fine, today you get a SECOND CHANCE.

Why?

- 1. Because you’re willing to give your fellow citizens a second chance at life, by registering as an organ donor.**
- 2. Because only half of Americans are registered donors, and you’re changing that statistic.**
- 3. Because the police department wants to thank you for doing something for others.**
- 4. Because we want to remind you how easy it is to be a hero.”**

The film shows the immense relief on the faces of the drivers when they receive it.

The officer thanks them and says how much everyone appreciates their donation.

110,000 drivers signed up as donors in one month (that’s 30,773 more than the same month in the previous year).

Those extra donors have the potential to save 246,184 lives.

But the really creative part is they didn’t nag non-donors with facts and figures.

EVERYONE NEEDS A SECOND CHANCE

They showed them what they were missing out on.

Now organ donations are up, people are alive who wouldn't be.

And the police enjoy the more positive interaction with the community.

Real creativity works for everyone.

READING THE SIGNS

At art school, in New York, I had a class called Visual Communication.

Today, this is known as semiotics: language without words.

At the time, it was a difficult class.

Words were the only communication I knew about, but actually that wasn't true.

Words were the only communication I was conscious of, but there was so much non-verbal communication I wasn't aware of.

Consequently, we learnt about packaging, typography, colour, shapes, sounds, movement, editing, even body language.

Another expression for semiotics is the study of signs.

And the purest, most powerful form of that was road signs.

Information that had to be stripped down to its simplest, most impactful.

Signs that could mean the difference between life and death.

In Britain, we have one of the best systems of road sign language in the world.

It was designed by Margaret Calvert in the 1960s.

She had recently graduated from Chelsea School of Art and, together with Jock Kinneir, she was given the brief for signage on the UK's first motorway.

There was to be no speed limit, and no one knew how anyone would be able to read a stationary sign when someone was travelling at 100 mph.

So clarity was everything.

Which is why I love the way Margaret Calvert researched her designs.

She took them to Benson Airfield in Oxfordshire and fixed them to the top of a car.

READING THE SIGNS

Then, at different speeds, she drove them towards a group of seated airmen.

And then she found out at what distance and what speed they could read the signs.

That's something most designers won't do, they'll judge their designs in an office on a table.

But her designs couldn't work like that.

Her designs weren't about subjective preferences, like whether anyone liked them.

Her designs had to communicate, it was semiotics in its purest form.

So they were judged in the context they had to work in, moving at speeds up to 100 mph.

Which is why they are such superb examples of clarity.

The motorway signs were such a success that she was asked to design the signage for the entire road system.

This isn't an exercise in style, this is an exercise in making the complicated simple.

The different roads had different speed limits and needed different information.

So she broke it down as follows:

Motorways would be white on blue.

A roads would be white on green (with numbers in yellow).

B roads would be black on white.

And there would be a simple system to emphasise what was being communicated.

So shapes were introduced as follows:

Triangles for warnings.

Circles for commands.

THE POWER OF IGNORANCE

Squares for information.

As Margaret Calvert said: **“Direction signs are as vital as a drop of oil in an engine, without which the moving parts would seize up.”**

No decoration, no subjectivity, no emotional preferences.

Just the functional clarity needed for the job.

Nothing to do with whether anyone involved liked it or not.

Pure semiotics: purely about how well it worked.

I wish more people could learn to think like that.