

Business, metaphors and role models

by Gianni Anchois

Metaphors and role models can be very powerful and can help convey what we mean in a fast and effective way.

We use metaphors that matter to us because they carry history and meaning, which we embed in the physical context from which the metaphor draws. Similarly, role models are very helpful when trying to explain an approach, a methodology, a way of doing things, and they become especially handy when we lack tangible examples for “showing” what we tell.

MIMICKING OTHERS

In business, it has become common practice to use metaphors, it's generally effective and often fun too. Some of them, however, are definitely abused.

The most common one is perhaps sailing, typically used as an example of teamwork. Choose the best course to a destination (i.e. select your target), combat capricious winds (lurking competitors), sail on through unpredictable weather (changing needs of clients) and cross treacherous oceans (economy slow downs). Formula 1 racing is another popular

one, once again used to depict teamwork in high- tech and highly-competitive top performance challenges.

For products, it is often the case of quoting a car manufacturer of choice to trace a parallel between just-in-time or lean-production (both of course Toyota's innovations: for an intriguing deep dive on the car manufacturing world, I strongly recommend the book "The machine that changed the world" by James P. Womack, Daniel T. Jones and Daniel Roos), and the best way to innovate in the areas of design and product development.

In terms of leadership attitude and behaviour, Sun Tzu's "The Art of War" is quite simply the industry standard.

INSPIRING MODELS

Beyond metaphors, I also quite like it when famous historical characters and their accomplishments are used to convey a certain intent, a desired attitude or simply to provide a real-life example of a model to follow.

When talking about creative work, of course a much adopted role model is Leonardo da Vinci, universally considered a genius in many different fields: drawing, painting, civil and military engineering, fashion, music, architecture, sculpture, and many more.

Nonetheless, I personally find Leonardo sort of overrated — at least when mentioned as the ultimate example of mastery. As often happens, when covering larger than life characters biographers can get carried away by the myth and involuntarily neglect historical facts (by the way, the best biography I have read of Da Vinci is "Leonardo da Vinci — The flights of the mind" by Charles Nicholl — highly recommended).

Leonardo was certainly an outstanding figure in middle ages' Italy and Europe. His curiosity and power of observation, joined with an innate gift to represent reality in drawing, painting, sculpturing and writing, was the real key asset he was born with, and that he managed to develop until the very end.

However he was also a constant tinkerer, who would not hesitate to try new materials or techniques but would thus jeopardise the final results (e.g. The Last Supper), and who would bore quickly of whatever

endeavour he was embarking on, to the point of often taking upfront money for work only to promptly move on to the next challenge before finishing the assignment. Testimony of his anxiety is the well documented fact that almost all of his works — including the world famous Mona Lisa — are unfinished.

THE UNIVERSAL MAN

Without denying Leonardo's greatness for a single moment, I simply believe we cannot really use him as a role model for business purposes.

In my view, a much more relevant figure of creative arts and mastery, this time based on a practical, responsible attitude aimed at innovating and improving his field of expertise, would be Leon Battista Alberti — the original "Universal Man".

Born in Genoa in 1404, Alberti was an author, poet, linguist, architect, philosopher, cryptographer, renaissance humanist and a polymath. In 1435 he famously authored the book "De Pictura", the first and most famous treatise about the three core rules of painting: perspective, composition and colour.

It's intriguing how he wasn't the first one to identify and focus on those rules, and certainly did not invent them — curiously enough, he wasn't an established painter either! But he was the first to write about those three elements in a cohesive, convincing and logical way, changing painting forever after. He wrote "De Pictura" in Latin first, but he soon translated it into Italian, having identified this as an opportunity to broaden circulation — a great marketing move.

I believe that Alberti's rules of painting are perfect for tracing a resounding parallel with the business world.

PAINTING THE RULES OF BUSINESS

Rule #1: Perspective.

Analyse the whole picture, focus on both the details and the broader representation. Control matter in space using a grid/net to locate objects in space.

What it means for business:

- Look at things from a new, unfamiliar, uncomfortable point of view. Pay attention to how they relate to each other.

- Understand that what happens on the market never happens in a vacuum, but it always has identifiable causes and effects.

What it delivers:

- A clearer understanding of the market and its scenarios, players, opportunities and threats.
- A list of actionable do's and (more importantly) don'ts.
- A sharper focus on client's needs in relation to your business portfolio of products and services.

Rule #2: Composition.

Decide what subjects will be in your painting, and what is left out.

What it means for business:

- Help choose what are the best offerings/solutions for the target market/clients. What your company chooses not to do qualifies what you do.

What it delivers:

- A list of priority offerings/solutions.
- A clearly identified priority target clients.
- A way to decide where to invest and develop and where to cease and desist.

Rule #3: Colour.

Pay attention to both light and shade. Shine a light on important things, shade others that are less important to your painting.

What it means for business:

- Focus on clients, market and opportunities where your company can deliver a winning proposition. If you cannot solve a problem, provide innovation or deliver better value for money, don't get involved. If there are areas where all you can provide is "industry average" goods, just move on quickly and focus the attention on your shining silver bullets. Colour them bright, paint them with the boldest strokes of your brush so that everybody will pay attention.

What it delivers:

- Value proposition statements that resonate internally — your employees and partners — and externally — the market and your clients.
- Sharp, relevant and to-the-point marketing and sales deliverables.
- Tangible, measurable benefits easy to identify and purchase.

DRAW YOUR INSPIRATION

This of course is just an example on how we can draw inspiration from great people of the past. Finding good role models will help you get your story through, make it become alive and reach a larger number of people.

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Gianni Anchois is a writer, blogger and technology enthusiast, with a background in electronics engineering, computer science and marketing. He has worked at Olivetti, Italia Online, Yahoo! and Hewlett-Packard, holding international responsibilities across IT services, business management, e-commerce, sales and marketing.

<http://twitter.com/giannianchois>

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/giannianchois>

<https://medium.com/@giannianchois>