

Steal with pride

Rob Grant picks the remarkably busy brain of marketing guru Mark Earls, about how to build brands through the love of the crowd, with ideas you've basically copied from others.

Widely known for his 2007 book, *Herd*, Mark Earls is a thought-leading writer, speaker and consultant on a mission to change the way marketers think. He passionately espouses an approach to brand-building that focuses on the group rather than the self. It flies in the face of Western thinking, yet the evidence for this approach is undeniable, both from reams of academic studies and as demonstrated by countless successful brands. Earls has an uncanny ability to recount them at will.

In his latest work, *Copy, Copy, Copy*, Earls goes one step further and gives marketers a licence and rulebook on how to steal the best of what others do for their own purposes. Citing references from every imaginable corner of the cultural and business worlds, Earls explains that the most creative, original thinkers throughout history were nothing of the kind. They were masters of imitation, reframing and repurposing. He invites us to do the same.

Marketing: How did you first become interested in societal influence on the behaviour of individuals?

Mark Earls: There was a moment when I was doing the Ogilvy planning job and I was working with some super talented people from other, non-Anglo Saxon cultures. What became very clear to me – and it's often the case when we have a conversation with smart people – is that they talk at the surface level and you all agree. But there's something underneath they're not saying, because they're too polite, about the way people differ.

The more I looked at their base assumptions, about how people actually work, they were so different from the ones I had grown up with and my American and North European colleagues used. I've always been a bit of a geek. So, I'd read a lot on the social science that was emerging. It became really clear we're social creatures, first and foremost, and we have a socially shaped brain. Much of our brain is adapted not to doing advanced mathematics, but in fact to living in a world of many other people.

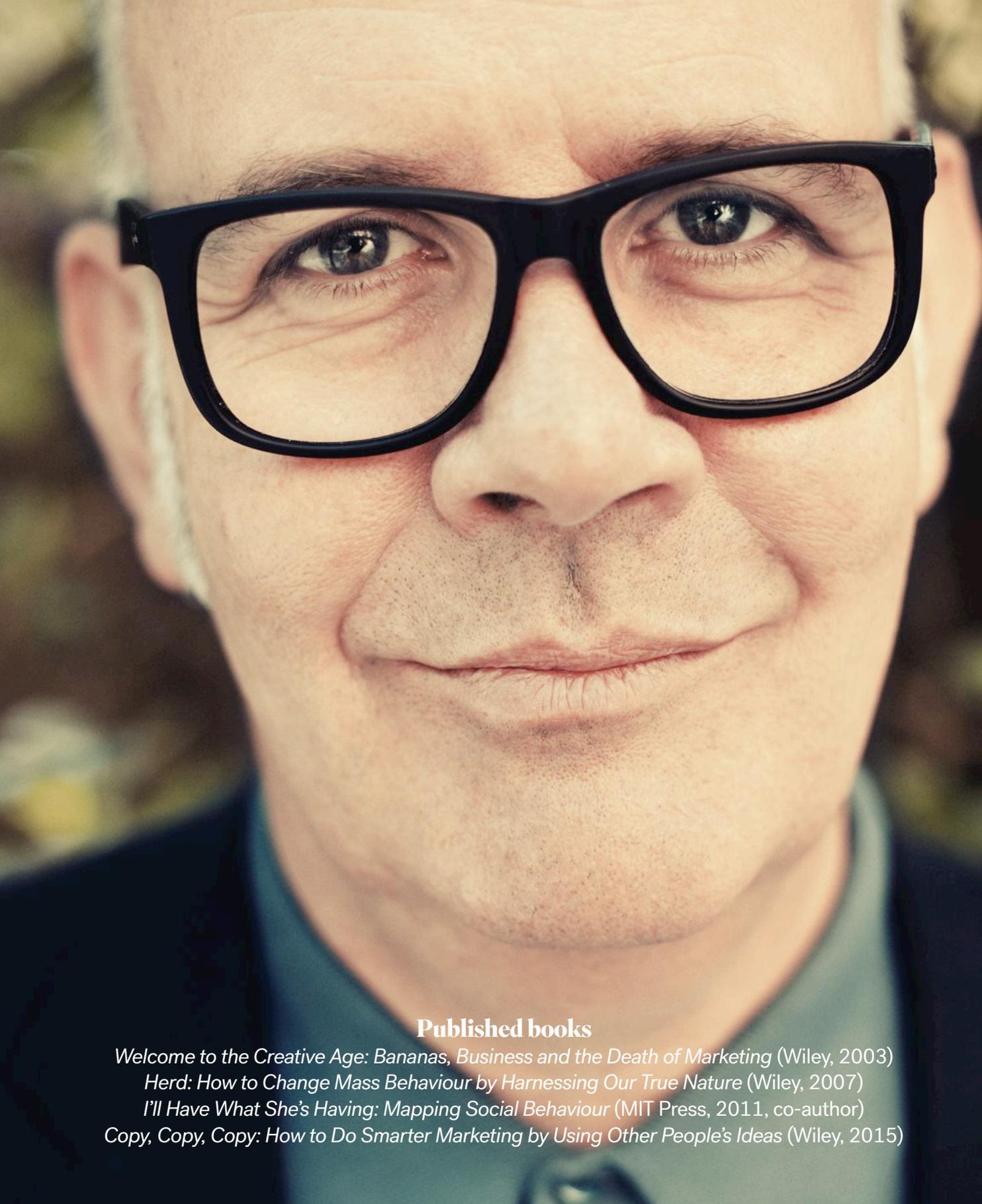
There's an amazing longitudinal study with primates on their group size versus the size of their brain. Basically there's a very strict correlation between the size of your brain relative to your body and the number of people you interact with on a regular basis. In humans, our brains seem to be largely adapted to living with others.

It occurred to me that this idea may be something we are missing out on. What if we are more like other cultures say we are?

How did this thinking affect your working life back then?

Quite quickly, I found myself having a theological disagreement with my employers and many of my colleagues. They were very excited about what CRM (customer relationship marketing) and speaking to individual people was going to do for the future of marketing.

It became clear to me that they mistook the medium for the mechanic of mass behaviour. Everywhere I looked, there was more and more stuff saying that it's the social stuff that's really, really important.



Published books

Welcome to the Creative Age: Bananas, Business and the Death of Marketing (Wiley, 2003)

Herd: How to Change Mass Behaviour by Harnessing Our True Nature (Wiley, 2007)

I'll Have What She's Having: Mapping Social Behaviour (MIT Press, 2011, co-author)

Copy, Copy, Copy: How to Do Smarter Marketing by Using Other People's Ideas (Wiley, 2015)

Is other people's love for a brand more important than your own desire?

Absolutely. It's really easy to make decisions when you see other people around you making decisions for you. It's what I call 'outsourcing the cognitive load.' It's a nice way of saying 'copying other people,' but it means you don't have to think very hard.

In brand land, we like to think that the consumer sits there, on their own, making smart choices – as the classical economists tell us, measuring the benefits themselves of option A versus option B and calculating somehow which is the best for them in this situation. We know two things are wrong about that. One is that human beings aren't very good at calculating. That's the founding work of behavioural economics. The other side of it, the other thing that's wrong about it, is that most of the choices we face are not clear A versus B. Most of the time, it's lots of things that look pretty good and none of them are life threatening choices.

If markets aren't shaped like that, why do we carry on counting people as individuals? We know they're either going to do what they did before, or do what other people are doing. Why not reflect the reality of how people choose, rather than try to force some old view onto them?

A lot of your early thinking predates social media, as we know it. How has the dramatic rise of Facebook changed your perspective?

It's been a great help to me! It explains the craziness of us using social media all the time and being constantly connected. It's not because the technology has somehow got evil in it, which makes us unable to put it down. It's the fact that it gives us constant access to other people, which is the most important need.

You just have to watch something like Twitter. People go on forever about subjects. They want to have a row in the middle of the night and you think, 'You should go to bed, my friend. You really should.' When was the last time that a rational argument on social media persuaded anybody? Like in the real world, it doesn't. But we keep doing it, because it's connection to other people.

How do things become popular, overnight successes on the internet?

I think the really important thing here is to distinguish between how we think about it and how it really works. If you go back 50 years, hula hoops become a craze among American youth. How did that spread? Did it spread because hula hoops are particularly special? Or did it spread because people saw other people doing it and became enthusiastic. It did not spread because the thing is that great, to be honest. After the fact, it's really easy to go, 'Well, of course, hula hoops, they were brilliant.' But the truth is, they got lucky.

There's a great idea from Steven Rose, an evolutionary biologist. If you were to rewind the tape of history, would this particular thing come out as the most popular again? If you rewind evolutionary history, would we come out as the ultimate primate? And the answer is: probably not. Similarly with a meme, you can't just look at the key characteristics of something that got 600 million views, to determine what will get you 600 million views. Because it just got lucky.

Yet, we take the metaphor of 'viral' from medicine, which assumes there is actually something infectious about the thing. The real truth is, it just got lucky because people copied other people copying other people.

But how can you be the thing everyone copies?

You know the best way to be successful in getting something to go viral is to do what Duncan Watts, who's an Australian sociologist, calls 'lighting lots of fires'. Just try a lot and one of them may be successful. If you want to light a forest fire, you don't get the biggest match you can find and go to the biggest tree. You light it here, here and here, and then just hope the wind takes it. If it does take, we put more stuff on it. That's how you get something to be viral. Not because there's something particularly special about it or unique.

What about the flipside, do hate and fear spread in the same way?

Emotions spread through populations in exactly the same way other things do. Kindness travels about three-and-a-half steps away from the giver. But bad feelings do too. The reason is that we're using the minds of the people around us to make decisions. And they're using the minds of people around them. And they're using the minds of the people around them. Probably the best way to visualise this is to think of a crowd in a football stadium. Something happens. You know quite quickly that something's happening. You don't have to see it. There's a vibe in the crowd and you get it, and the reason is because all these people are using each other's brains to watch out for stuff

People respond to each other really quickly and sometimes that's a good thing and sometimes that's a bad thing. Sometimes it leads to crushes and sometimes it leads to the group organising itself out of the way safely.

If it's all about the crowd, what about in creative fields? Is there a role for the maverick, passionate individual?

Well, yes in creative agencies, it is still the thing to have the guy who is the creative genius. The guy who just somewhere in the middle of the night – he just comes in with the idea. It's really important for us to sustain that belief. But it is nonsense really.

When you look at the broad range of studies on creativity, you learn it's a team game. Very rarely is it done

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on your own. You need to create people around you. You need to have people to criticise, develop, spread and advocate. Sigmund Freud was a very smart, creative mind, but he needed to build a band of people who could argue and bitch with each other, in order to spread his ideas further and further and further.

Also, it’s a team game in the sense that very rarely is it based on a completely fresh idea. Picasso famously said, “Talent copies, genius steals.” Bowie’s amazing ability to reinvent himself again and again and again was because he was like a magpie. He found interesting stuff in visual arts, music and fashion. He went, ‘Oh, that’s interesting. What could I do with that?’ He took things and then twisted them, made something new with them.

Ziggy Stardust is probably his breakthrough period and the whole world he created there was based on a William Burroughs novel. When he met William Burroughs, he subsequently learned the cut-out lyric writing technique where you take a certain text and then cut it up and rearrange it randomly.

You explore and even advocate the idea of copying in your latest book, *Copy, Copy, Copy*. Isn’t this anathema to the idea of marketing?

We’re very uncomfortable with the idea of copying and creativity, but it is the mainstay of what works. Zuckerberg did not invent the notion of a book of faces that provide a means of social interaction, because that’s well established

in US colleges. Nor did he invent the online version called ‘The Facebook.’ That’s what that long legal suit was about. He didn’t invent it. He took someone else’s idea and made it work.

Steve Jobs and Apple never tried to invent things. They didn’t invent the smartphone. They didn’t invent the laptop. They didn’t invent the desktop. They didn’t invent graphic user interfaces. They didn’t invent the app economy. None of these things. They have taken them and made them work mostly better. That’s their success. When they tried to invent something, they screwed up.

One suggestion in the book is that you should copy badly. Why is that?

Machinelike copying, where the thing you copy is transferred 100% accurately, is not human. What we do as humans, we always create error and you need some error to make it interesting. Even just recontextualising something from one space to another space makes it interesting.

Andy Warhol is one of my favourite visual artists and he didn’t create new images. He found images and then replicated them, creating error as he did. Things being out of register, things not quite fitting, things not quite aligning. That’s what makes a thing beautiful. Really, it’s about error and the beauty of error.

How do marketers themselves copy the best strategies of other companies?

The social stuff makes you work on changing behaviour better than telling people about how brilliant the product is.

So if you want to get people to file their tax return on time, the best way to do it is to make it personal. ‘Dear Rob, did you know that nine out of 10 people like you have already filed their tax return?’ That’s the most powerful message you can send. That’s down to popularity. This is what everyone else is doing.

Or take something like vaccination. You’d imagine that experts are the ones who know about this. You’d imagine the most important strategy uses experts. But the ‘anti-vax’ gang have had so much success. It’s about people who have been through this. None of your distant experts, so-called scientists. It’s people like you and me, and the experiences we’ve had that tell us what to do.

How do you use these somewhat radical ideas with your clients?

One of the things – probably the most important thing – I’ve learned about the practice of advising clients, is that the ideas clients create themselves have a much longer life in the organisation than ideas they buy from the outside. Part of my job is to help clients, who are not stupid, uncreative or unstrategic, create better ideas themselves. Rather than imagining I’m going to do it for them. **M**