

Think weird and prosper

by Rahel Anne Bailie, Intentional Design Inc.

In the driver's side pocket of my car door, I keep a red clown nose, one of those foam bulbs you find in joke shops. I got it from a dynamic speaker who talked about giving ourselves permission to be an oddball, to shock people out of complacency by daring to be different. I don't use the nose all the time, but in the times I have, the nose has effectively deflected road rage (who can resist a middle-aged woman in a Jaguar with a red foam nose?), helped me make traffic manoeuvres requiring the cooperation of an adjacent driver, and brought smiles to the drivers around me. It's a weird, but powerful, tool.

Being weird, the outsider, the oddball, has never bothered me much. So you can see why I like this quote from Tom Peters: "The only way to effect true transformation in the workplace is to enlist the outliers in your organization to your cause. Find the weirdos and the freaks, offer support for the projects they're secretly pursuing, then get them to help you with your own revolutionary change ideas."

Part of the reason I like this quote is because I—and many other technical communicators—identify with being an "outlier" in an organization. Techcomm has traditionally been seen as an outlying department. Until recently, we hadn't been seen as a group poised to help an organization go through "revolutionary change." But as the importance of good user experience takes hold, we are clarifying our license to contribute, and contribute in ways that the corporation has never really thought of until now.

As I've discussed in previous articles, the global economic shift is pushing us to become contributors of value. To contribute value, we have to change the way we think about business and think about our skills.

Now, more than ever, we need to "think weird." Some may call it thinking outside the box. But that expression has become trite, and the inner bureaucrat has used that concept to promote bureaucratic thinking in new and different ways. That's not what I mean here. I mean, we have to think, weird. Embrace your inner clown (my apologies to past STC president, Mary Wise, who actually went to "clown school" before becoming a technical communicator) or your inner wildbrain (as coined by Dale Douten to describe certain types of people whose creative genius often goes unrecognized, and too often punished, in the workplace). Tap into ways of working, ways of managing, ways of being that shake up the hunker-down-till-the-economy-picks-up attitude we've taken on.

What would this look like in your professional life? What could this look like? Let me counter that with a question for you: How far can you stretch your imagination? Let me give you a small example with big implications.

Scene: A software engineering firm creating C code is about to branch out into C++ using UML. The developers want to use the code comments to generate the bulk of the API documentation. Is this a techcomm nightmare, or a fabulous opportunity?

Cut to: The "inside the box" thinker who says: Oh no, we'll be reduced to glorified proofreaders. Give me back my control over the documentation! Cut to: The "out of the box" thinker says: Great, once we clean up the comments in the source code, I'll spend less time maintaining this documentation, and have more time for other things.

Now cut to: The weird thinkers, who are so out of the box that they're in a whole other box, say: Wow, what a concept! How can I leverage that technology or a similar one to get that same result on other projects? Maybe I can eliminate most of the production work and spend my time doing strategic thinking to add end-user value!

This is a true story, and as you may guess, I was the "weird" thinker. (If I weren't, the story would be told from an entirely different perspective.) When that situation arose, my in-the-box colleagues branded me a renegade, a troublemaker. Why couldn't we just churn out work like we'd been doing for years? Was that not what our "core business" was: editing documents using the assembly-line production model?

Now, after barely weathering the economic storm, the department is no longer. The I-like-the-box thinkers have moved on, some to other in-the-box positions, others to new in-the-box opportunities. The weird thinker, on the other hand, became a consultant, bringing out-of-the-box thinking to clients as a "strategic contributor who can write." Happy clients, happy consultant.

In the various informational interviews I give, I hear people ask a similar question in many different ways: Where does one start in the quest to "think weird"? How do I differentiate myself from the rest of the market? How can I get someone to "pick me" from among their choices? The answers are as varied and personal as the number of questioners. I imagine it's much like beginning any other venture—a diet, a fitness program, or even therapy—that requires self-reflection and action. For me, it started with a little red ball of foam.