Rethinking thinking.
Unframing: the first step in innovating

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We live in interesting times

Survival in business over the next few years will depend upon leaders who think entirely differently, and thus innovate successfully. They will be people who use a new, broader approach in their thinking, and interpret the world with an artist’s vision of the possibilities.

People who can unframe their minds from the prevailing, restrictive demands of thinking by analogy, and think from first principles, approaching every prevailing idea with intense scepticism. Those are the minds that can innovate. Those are the minds that can create and deliver brave combinations of technology and behaviour that will attract attention, participation and revenue from real people. Those are the minds that can take and manage risk in the digital age.

Those who reach for analogies with what has gone before will fail. ‘The way we do things around here’ is an idea that contains the seeds of cataclysmic failure. Models of marketing are dead and must be reinvented: the brave new world promised to advertisers by Facebook, Google and many much-hyped online advertising offers is a superficial sham that borrowed far too many ideas from the old ways. It’s time business started thinking again. From first principles.

Businesses and the methodologies they use are being reset in the face of simultaneously breaking waves of changing consumption, behaviour, and disruptive technology.

Early 21st century thinking about business has coagulated around an incrementalist, methodical, scientific approach. As the dice of the digital revolution are rolled, we need to adopt and develop new methods of thought — akin to those of the bravest and most farsighted entrepreneurs — if we are to make the most of the opportunities unfolding. We have to rethink how we think.
The age of unframing

We are entering an age of unframing — an age during which we must remove whatever mental ‘frames’ we have created and think afresh about why things are; how they might change; and therefore, how we achieve what we want. We have to create things that have never been seen before, imagine how we would respond to very different market dynamics. We must challenge every assumption we’ve made — which will sometimes demand that we rethink many of the things we take for granted.

Freeing our minds of previous patterns of understanding, inventing new ways to codify and respond to a very different world is the biggest challenge we face in achieving future growth in the age of unframing.

For the first time since the industrial revolution we live in an era in which the past gives us no clue as to what we must do to secure our future. So we must rethink everything — with clarity, breadth and creativity.
Trajectories of change

There are at least ten trajectories of change, each one bumping into some or all of the others. Every bump throws up opportunities and threats alike. They are rendering a world in which success at innovation has become a priority.

1) Digital technology has democratized information, and is putting processing power at our disposal anywhere, anytime. (Providing us the ability to take ever more complex decisions, based upon more information).

2) The final act of globalization is playing out as information flows ever more freely around the globe. The world is smaller, increasingly more accessible. The shock of wholly foreign cultures is reducing as we begin to understand and celebrate their diversity.

3) All nations are learning what it means to become a ‘global citizen’. Isolationism, and thus the illusion of control that it brings, is over. The few states clinging to isolationist ideologies will, eventually, crumble. After years of recrimination and violence, they will gradually assimilate.

4) However slowly, we are tackling the problem of wastefulness with natural resources: finding more and renewable fuel types, conserving better what we do use. Raw materials are being more successfully recycled.

5) Attitudes to diet, wellbeing and lifestyle are being rethought with huge consequences for the economy. New ways of living are being created — at first in localized pockets and small groups, but ultimately many of these ideas and behaviours have become pervasive. Experiences are defining us, not possessions.

6) Electronics and robotics are introducing new manufacturing possibilities, aided by new and exciting materials.

7) Distribution of retail goods has broken free of the High Street. Existing ideas of promotion (reaching new customers) are irretrievably broken.

8) The barriers to entry to financial services are finally reducing to almost zero, unleashing a new generation of ideas as to how we handle our money.

9) Cars and transport systems are being completely rethought.

10) The media we use to learn about and communicate
with the world has reached a form that would have been completely unrecognizable just ten years ago. The mass audience, conveniently assembled for advertisers, has ceased to exist. It is atomized across millions of digital distractions, all available instantaneously.

It follows that all of us will change as those trajectories follow their course. Life will be different, and the task of running a business successfully will change with it. That is easy to observe, rather harder to effect.

What must we change? We will be tempted to try harder at what we know. But what we know brought us to where we are, and may be unhelpful for a radically different future.
The unframing conundrum

Every business faces the unframing conundrum. The prevailing culture of business-as-usual fosters its own form of reasoning and safely keeps everything as unchanging as possible — there is a very real need to preserve things within acceptable limits of risk. Every business has its own personality, its own way of being, its own corporate culture. But such aligned thinking is the antithesis of a culture supportive of innovation and rethinking. There is no doubt that however large the organisation, a true diversity of opinion cannot be achieved from within. Thus the creativity necessary to invent the future is almost impossible to sustain inside a single organisation.

The unframing conundrum affects every one of us: the ideas we grew up with and what we have learned in our working lives may be inadequate to cope with the rapid adoption of new skills and techniques demanded by the age of unframing. As every business must unframe their thinking, so must we all — as individuals — unframe our minds for new ideas. Doing so demands a flexible mind, open to and critically evaluative of a very different future.

The new ideas necessary to navigate the age of unframing depend upon a diversity of approach and healthy challenge (expressed through reasoning) if they are to emerge successfully. So the established firm must understand how it can break the reality of business as usual, and allow a group of dissenters, misfits and radicals to consider a different future. The first stage of unframing thinking from business as usual is complicated, fraught, frustrating and often tense. The safety net of the prevailing culture is disconnected, everything feels unfamiliar, and the uncertainty of outcome is deeply unnerving.
The innovation test

Now’s a good time to challenge yourself (or the business you work for) with the innovation test: in ten years’ time, how much turnover and profit will be demanded to carry your stakeholders with you? Then, crucially, you must tackle the follow up questions: to hit that target, what will you be selling, to whom — and how do you plan to do it?

Do you have good answers for all those questions? Are they shared across the organisation so all are working with a common idea of what they’re up against?

Do you have the thinking resource to answer those questions with flair and success? And even if you have the resource, are they offered the freedom to be properly creative in finding the answers?

While none of us can predict a future with any accuracy, we can contemplate the trajectories of our time, and hazard some attempt at anticipating a different future.
The prevailing thinking of business

The published thinking about business reflects business as we have known it, not necessarily business as it will be. We are schooled in ideas of return on investment. If I spend this much, what return must I achieve? How big are the risks that we don’t get there? There is nothing wrong with such thinking: it is entirely logical. But it has lead to a prevailing ethos of incrementalism in many businesses.

Time and again we see businesses shutting down conversations that start with “what if we…” Time and resource is too precious to be spent with what can appear to be frivolous imaginings of distant and uncertain outcomes. Much better to knuckle down and worry about the next quarter’s earnings.

Creativity is a fragile thing, and withers in the face of any rationalist-incrementalist challenge. Getting senior people to see the world differently — to unframe their ideas so that they may contemplate a radical proposal — is not a trivial exercise. Almost all market research — the default reasoning mechanism for the rational manager — is rooted in incrementalism. “Will this pack work better than that one?” is far easier to answer than understanding consumer reaction to no pack at all.

The rationalist-incrementalist bias of all businesses can be seen in how they project themselves outwardly and how they behave. All tasks are tackled from a rational perspective, and start from what is happening now. How do we do things faster, more efficiently, more effectively?

But the real question for the age of unframing is bigger than that. In the face of all this fundamental change, how do we prosper?
Lessons from the blacksmith

In the age of unframing many of us are in the same situation as that faced by the blacksmith (the craftsman who shoed horses) at the turn of the last century.

In 1900 there were about one million working horses in Britain, at a time when the population of the country was 30 million.

Less than fifteen years later, the working horse population had dropped to around 30,000, such was the consequence of the new technology of steam power, the impact of industrialization and the arrival of the motor tractor. Steam technology had been available for a long time but as steam engines became smaller it trickled down to devastating effect on the horse industry.

Blacksmiths were for a short time sustained by making decorative fittings and embellishments for the construction industry but it was a short respite: the depression of the 30’s saw blacksmithing all but disappear. But the shaping and forming of metals generally was growing enormously. Between 1870 and 1913 demand for pig iron grew from 6.7m tonnes to 10.4m tonnes. No doubt many of the blacksmiths of the day became skilled metalworkers, transferring their skills from the local smithy to a factory. They unframed their world to sustain their living.
Where do we look to find new thinking?

Surviving the digital revolution requires creativity and originality: new ideas for a new age.

There is, however, one aspect of human endeavor that is wholly based upon creativity: art. Where do we look for inspiration? In all its forms: written; painted; sculpted; performed; filmed; art starts with nothing. Just an artist, wanting to express something to others. To get an idea across, to tell a story. Rather like sport, art is difficult to explain in rational terms and yet seemingly fundamental to the fabric of all cultures — and has been for rather longer than we have had organised businesses.

But what does art do? What makes one artist more successful, more enduring than another? There are many diverse explanations, but art (in all its forms) tells us stories about the human condition. It helps us to ponder relationships and how we relate to each other, what we are here for, why we exist. Art in all its forms tells stories of morality and diversity that help us see things from a different perspective. Artists present us with ideas that take us out of our immediate environment. Successful artists (defined as those who sell well or are remembered long after their departure), have found a ‘voice’ that resonates with many of us — the story the artist first told still holds lessons for us today.

Art forces us to contemplate the first principles of the world we live in. And thus art helps us to see the world differently. Good artists are those who do this consistently. A favourite of ours is Manzoni’s *Socle du Monde (Plinth for the World) in Denmark* (see next page).
This shows how an artist can help us unframe our thinking: for most of us a new idea is introduced to our minds as we look at this work and try to understand its underlying story. The thoughts it stimulates as we reach for what the artist is trying to tell will be different for all: but the start that Manzoni gives us is rich with profound possibilities.

Art, therefore, and the thinking it requires, can be a powerful inspiration for unframing, for looking at things differently. What artists do and the process they follow contains lessons for those of us seeking survival in the age of unframing. The artist’s mind is, after all, a perfect blank at the beginning. They are given no guidance on what to produce, but they are driven by a need to express, to produce work that stimulates others and makes them think in new ways. They develop their own views and fundamental ideas of the world, of what they want to say to it, then begin the process of thinking how best to present their thought or commentary. It’s close to the entrepreneur in a business start-up — they have an idea and then commit to the long process of expressing that idea to a (usually) indifferent world until enough people buy with sufficient frequency to create a profitable enterprise.

It seems that success for all purveyors of a creative craft emerges from our individual blend of education, experience, knowledge and innate sensibilities. By using this unique perspective artists are fortunate to be able to produce work that a majority recognise as different, better, more intriguing. The artist is the unframing master.

All artists seek to make work to make people think, to reflect, to experience. Sometimes it works subconsciously, summoning previous feelings and attitudes from their lives and attaching them to something new. Sometimes it is fresh, new and surprising. The struggle is always to produce work that becomes something we call ‘good’. And experience has shown us that ‘good’ work, though difficult to define and hard to find, will add commercial value.

The artist’s working process usually involves endless loops of critical thought. It starts with a small seed of an idea. Round and round goes the thought process, considering myriad changes in perspective on the problem. Harsh judgements are made, and adjustments incorporated. The work changes and develops. Eventually, the loops of thought and experimentation begin to settle into a
pattern. That pattern gets tested and tested until it cannot be improved. That’s when the artist looks up, thinks they have something good. And finds the courage to let their work go forward for critical acclaim.

In our experience, the artist’s process of thought must become increasingly familiar for those in business. It is the first step in seeing things differently, in assessing a situation from first principles, in finding opportunity. The secret lies in developing the artist’s habit of critical thought.

Take a problem. Don’t start by trying to fix it — that’s the fixation of the analogous thinker. Instead dissect it. Walk around it. Think about where it sits in the world. Be creative in finding ways to think about it, to see it, interpret it. Let the work follow the process. Accept nothing, challenge everything. As this process develops, so adjacent and sympathetic ideas emerge, building upon and improving the original idea. The process itself reframes the mind, and thus it is primed to know when it has finished.
Mastering unframed thinking

A good innovation process is one that gives space and consideration for artistic-type thinking, but recognises and uses the discipline and rigour behind the more scientific style of business thinking. The important word here is recognises. That doesn’t mean applying the science behind business thinking — it means bearing it in mind and understanding where it applies, rather than using it to get to a yes/no.

Apply conventional business thinking to evaluate a new idea without considered thought and you’ll almost certainly get a no. Remember that Kodak created a digital camera in 1975, but decided it wasn’t for them. Their prevailing business thinking couldn’t imagine a different future.

Use artistic thinking exclusively and you risk too much: ideas straight from the mind of the artist can be too extreme to succeed. The real answer lies in creating an artist’s level of judgement in the approvals group. Thus the most important step for the introduction of a new idea to anyone for the first time is the initial unframing. How you tell the story of your own unframing will determine whether others can manage even the simplest glimmer of understanding when you let them in to your radical, disruptive, never-before-seen idea.

As the urgency to innovate grows greater than ever, fostering a climate of innovation rooted in an unframed reading of the future — then mastering the art of making balanced decisions on the results — will determine your future.

That is: whether you have a future or not.
Fearlessly Frank is an innovation business: a group of creative individuals and consultants who have joined together to create an innovation process that has worked in many different situations. Over the years, we have helped many businesses to innovate. In every case we have seen the struggle between business-as-usual thinking and the need to reinvent for the future.

We have followed our curiosity into how people think, where new ideas come from, and how successful entrepreneurs have described their approach. We have seen how hard it is for successful businesses to introduce new ideas. Finally, we have come to realise that for many people, thinking innovatively is almost impossibly difficult. Yet we can all learn it — the only barriers are the ideas already established in your mind.

This article is about how you can think about how you think: and prepare yourself to tear down those barriers and become a true innovator, or at least understand and recognise the pressures on those who do.