



Don't Script,

IMPROVISE!

Mike Bonifer

I. Goodbye, Industrial Age. Hello, Networked World

In 1937 Walt Disney Studios won an Academy Award for “The Old Mill,” an animated short produced with the help of a multi-plane camera, a Disney invention that added the illusion of dimension to its animated films. Standing fifteen feet tall, weighing half a ton, anchored to the floor of a darkroom on the Disney lot, the camera could add up to seven layers or ‘planes’ to an animated scene. 50-pound plates of glass on which foreground art had been painted could be inserted and removed from the camera’s structure as the lens lowered through it, fractions of an inch at a time, capturing one frame of film at each juncture. Operating this behemoth took a crew of seven strong men. Capturing a ten second shot could take a week. It was a magnificent machine, the height of industrial technology. You can still see one at the Disney Archives on the Disney studio lot.

Today, of course, the multi-plane is a dinosaur. Animated films and games pre-visualized on computers can have unlimited depth and dimension. Scenes can be composed and rendered much more quickly. Images are stored in digital memory instead of painted on glass or celluloid. The machines involved are extremely flexible and mobile. One person can render the scene, a thousand people can contribute to it, and they don’t necessarily have to be strong men to do it. There is no one single way to create a shot.

Business is like that, too.

Companies of the Industrial Age operated like the multi-plane camera. They were cumbersome. Hierarchical. Affixed to geography. Rigid in their designs and inflexible in their processes. They were slow. It took seven strong men to run one.

In the Industrial Age, brands sought to script and control their narratives with as little deviation as possible. The script came from the top and rippled down through the organization with the speed of that old Disney camera. Ten seconds of content was a good week’s work.

Businesses built to operate in the Networked World are as different from the Industrial Age models as a computer is from a multi-plane camera. Networked organizations are more *biological* than industrial. They resemble their employees more than their employees resemble them. They are highly adaptive, mobile, open, sensitive to their environment, and ultra-responsive. They continuously evolve, nurtured by a steady stream of intelligent input from inside *and* outside the organization.

In a networked organization, where good ideas originate is not half as important as how—and how frequently—those good ideas become reality. Good managers don't try to control their brand's narrative but, rather, to foster an environment in which it can be liberated, expanded and unleashed across networks. The emphasis is not on following a script, but on improvisation.

II. The Origins of Improvisation

In the 1920s and '30s, there was a lot of stirring in the American melting pot—economic upheaval, dislocation, labor and social unrest. Fascism reared its ugly head. Railroads slumped and so did auto manufacturing. Inflation was high and so was unemployment. Lots of banks failed. (Sound familiar?) In periods of upheaval, imagination triumphs over the status quo, and innovators and visionaries find opportunities that do not exist in balmier times. When there is confusion, it can be the best time to begin building your cosmos. It was during this era that Walt Disney began making his name in Hollywood. A new kind of music called jazz caught on in Kansas City. New wonders of architecture sprang up across the U.S., from the Empire State Building in New York to the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Consumer brands like Arrow shirts and Palmolive detergent that would prosper for the rest of the century were introduced to the marketplace. Meanwhile, in Chicago, a couple of teachers, Neva Boyd, a Northwestern sociology professor, and her protégé, Viola Spolin, began experimenting with the playing of games as an unconventional avenue to learning. They called their work improvisation. The word (from the Latin *improvisus*, meaning ‘not foreseen’) had first come into use at the end of the 18th Century, most often to describe a poet composing rhymes spontaneously or a speech given without a script.

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In 1938, Boyd and Spolin received a grant from the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration's WPA, which supported thousands of art projects of the era, to open a theater workshop for children on Chicago's South Side. In those theater workshops, populated mostly by immigrant and first-generation American children who didn't speak the same languages at home or share the same life experiences, Boyd and Spolin put their educational theories into practice, and the form we know today as *improv*, which uses games as the basis for performance, was born. These games were not competitive but participative. Games, to Spolin, were a means of creating and sharing focus, and, ultimately, of solving problems. She made the distinction between *competition*—which is ego-driven and corrosive to the collaborative process—and *contest*, which challenges players to extend their personal and team potential. She observed that by setting aside egos and individual concerns to focus on the game of the scene, players are able to create new, productive realities.

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Spolin kept adding to the lexicon. Her landmark 1963 book *Improvisation for the Theater*, summarizes 40 years of developing the practices and theories of modern improvisation. Spolin maintained that improvisation consistently yields three things: Communication, Learning and Transformation. She did not view improvisation as an end in itself, but rather as a method for students to spontaneously and productively engage with the world. The teacher, she said, is present to guide, suggest, and help the students see the possibilities for exploring their themes, and for connecting with their environments. Of the teacher's relationship to the student, she wrote: "In its simplest terms it is *giving problems to solve problems.*"

Anyone who is serious about the art of improvisation must read the first 47 pages of Spolin's book, in which she shares a lifetime's worth of wisdom. She writes things like:

“Remember that a lecture will never accomplish what an experience will.”

And:

“Nothing is separate. In the unity of things rests growth and knowledge.”

And:

“We seek far more than information.”

So:

If it began with a couple of schoolteachers from Chicago whose mission was elementary education, how has modern improv come to be associated so closely with comedy? The answer to that question is a book in itself. In fact, the roots of improvisation go way deeper than 1930s Chicago. The ancient Greek rhetoricians used *tropes* (similar to the modern improviser's concept of *themes*) to explore a subject. Commedia dell'Arte was street theater of the Italian Renaissance in which performers tailored performances to whatever town they were in at the time, much as modern improvisers build performances out of suggestions from their audiences. But the reason most people associate improv with comedy is because of Viola Spolin's DNA.

Spolin's son, Paul Sills, who had helped his mother with her theater workshops, directed the Compass Players at the University of Chicago, whose founder, David Shepherd, dreamed of re-inventing Commedia dell'Arte for the theater. When the Compass Players ended its two-year run, Sills co-founded Chicago's renowned Second City Theater, which became a major laboratory for American comedy in the second half of the 20th Century, and a launching pad for many of its biggest stars.

Spolin was involved in rehearsals leading up to Second City's opening in 1959, and her theories and theater games played a major role in shaping Second City's productions (even though Spolin herself never actually saw a Second City performance). The Second City comedy train may have steamed out of the station without Spolin, but her improvisation games and theories were all aboard.

Now, back to business...

As we transition today from an era in which Industrial Age organizations ruled the economy to a world in which global networks become the new engines of commerce, we are in the midst of a metamorphosis like the one experienced by American business in the 1930s. There are problems to be solved, definitely. The good news is that in the solving of those problems, business opportunities abound.

III. Playing a Changing Game

Life doesn't stick to a script. And neither does business.

The next time you pitch your product, how will the conversation go? If you're a good salesperson, you will admit that you do not know. You will react fluidly to your situation, adaptively responding to what the customer wants, their perceptions, emotions, attitudes and desires. You will, in collaboration with that customer, build a new reality, a shared vision of the future. When you close the sale, it is not so much your product you will have sold, it is a future that includes your product in the customer's life—maybe even a future that would not be possible without it.

When you invest time and money in a business objective, what convinces you to do so? If you are honest with yourself, you acknowledge that the best and most rewarding decisions come from trusting your instincts. If good business decisions came solely from the brain, really smart people would never make really dumb decisions. And we know that they do. Good businesspeople make choices informed by experience, knowledge, and a keen awareness of the world in which they conduct their business. They pay attention, then take decisive action and don't look back. They realize there are infinite ways to achieve a goal and they're open to all of them. That's good business. That's improvisation.

Narratives, by definition, are past tense, they tell of events that have already transpired. Even speculative fiction 'looks back' at the future. For this reason alone, scripting brand narratives is an exercise in futility. Scripting—the act of locking into specific scenarios or outcomes and then stubbornly sticking to them—is Industrial Age behavior. In the endlessly matrixed business environment of the Networked World, putting all your energy into making a particular scripted scenario come true blinds you to the greater part of your potential.

Improvisation, by contrast, is designed to create ‘performance on the fly.’ It is informed by the past, and points toward the future, but it lives in the present. For networked brands and entrepreneurial individuals, the commitment is, therefore, not to a particular script or outcome, but to a consistently compelling performance in the marketplace. This requires continual improvisation.

In the networked economy, so fluid, so shaped by forces beyond the control of any one individual or organization, there is no time to script a narrative, learn that it’s not working, re-write it, and try again. By the time we have re-written the narrative, the opportunity has been lost. There’s no *time* to script. Networks demand instantaneous and spontaneous decision-making. This is a demand that only skillful improvisation can meet on the scale it takes for organizations to thrive.

Here are more reasons why improvisation is important to business in the Networked World:

You are already an improviser. Like the improvisers who perform on theatrical stages, businesspeople participate every day in ‘scenes’ that are unscripted. When you make an unexpected acquaintance, you’re improvising. When you introduce a breakthrough idea or turn an idea into action, that’s improv. When you’re spontaneous, you’re improvising. When you brainstorm, make a sales pitch that departs from the handbook, collaborate with your coworkers, take suggestions from your customers, interview for a job (or conduct the interview)... when your audience is more interested in *you* than in your PowerPoint slides, when you launch a new product or brand... you are calling on many of the skills improv performers use to build their scenes. Improvisation gives these skills a name, and offers a process for continually improving them. As long as you’re doing it anyway, why not get better? Even Tiger Woods takes golf lessons.

It begins with communication. Communication has always been the mother’s milk of business. Today, organizations and people who communicate best give themselves the most opportunities for success. Improvisation deepens, simplifies and speeds communication in every area of business, from HR through R&D. It improves the listening skills of individuals and brands. It eliminates objec-

tive judgments and provides an objective framework for decision-making. It creates clarity in every situation. And, as Viola Spolin first noted, the process does not stop at communication. From communication comes learning. And from learning comes transformation.

Improvisation puts a human face on business. The skilled business improviser does far more than simply pass along information. Information gets augmented with emotion, conviction and context. It is elevated and informed by themes that touch us on a deep human level. In the Networked World, with everyone living in his or her own thousand-channel info-bubble, meaningful communication is scarcer than ever before, which makes the ability to communicate with a truly human touch a key to business success.

It is first, about you. (*Not* about you being first.) This means before all else, take responsibility for your own actions. The best thing you can do for your team, company or brand is play the game as well as you can play it. How your co-workers and other scene partners play along is usually beyond your control. Improvisers don't ask permission. They act. (And they don't ask forgiveness, either. They learn and move on.) There's a saying in improv theater, documented by the legendary teacher and author Mick Napier in his book *Improvise—Scene from the Inside Out*: "Take care of yourself first!" Here, as Napier describes it, is what's likely to happen if players don't take care of themselves first:

Two people on stage staring at each other and wondering who's going to make the first move. Two people being nice to each other and allowing the other to start doing something. In that short amount of time, two humans have created themselves as powerless... The audience is waiting. They don't care about your support [i. e. for your scene partner—my note]. They care about what you do. What you do now (my italics, 16).

Don't "create yourself as powerless." The best thing you can do for yourself and your brand is to have a presence, stand for something and engage one hundred percent when you step onto the business stage.

It builds relationships. Improvisation gives its practitioners a deeper understanding of relationships, and as we all know, business is built on relationships. In the Industrial Age, half a dozen solid relationships could be the foundation for a large organization. In the Networked World, business relationships, for example a brand's relationship with its customers, are much more complex. They spring up spontaneously via networks. They often involve many people around the world who share an objective but have radically different ideas for how to achieve it. Improvisation gives us a way of studying what makes relationships tick. How do players playing different roles find the agreement that makes their scene productive? What is the difference between what people say and what they mean? What is the importance of emotion? How can changing one's status be a productive move? In business, as in improvisation, it is not what you can do, or what I can do, but what you and I can do together that makes the scene productive.

It makes you a player in a changing game. Who wants to *manage* change? Talk about an impossible assignment. And yet, many managers see their responsibilities that way, as if Change were the name of a boy band they're trying to guide to stardom. An improviser knows that it's far more productive to participate in a scene than it is to try and control it. The business improviser rolls with change, and uses it as a catalyst for productive action, like a surfer rolls with a wave and uses it as the catalyst for carving a line through a big blue barrel.

IV. Goodbye Script, Hello Improvisation

Trying to script and control your narrative in a Networked World makes about as much sense as using a multi-plane camera to film scenes in *Finding Nemo*. Can't be done. No use trying.

Technology has changed the way business gets done to an exponential degree; it only makes sense that what we define as productive business behaviors keeps pace with that change. These productive behaviors are not new. They may not be memes recognized within your organization, but they exist even if they're only lurking as the good ideas that people are hoarding for fear of rejection, or in the belief someone else will take credit for them. Successful entrepreneurs have always improvised. Richard Branson is just as good an improviser as Will Ferrell is.

Improvisation provides a way for businesspeople to become more entrepreneurial, and for businesses to teach and evangelize entrepreneurship across their networks.

When you script your narrative, your decision-making becomes binary. There are only two options: On-script and off-script. All the energy goes into one of two areas: Wrestling reality into your scripted vision; and re-writing the script to fit reality.

Improvisation invites participation, liberates good ideas, and challenges players to work at the height of their intelligence.

Improvisation, by contrast, is a narrative engine. It invites participation, liberates good ideas, and challenges players to work at the height of their intelligence. The improviser knows that there are limitless options for action in every scenario and that if the fundamentals are followed, the story will take care of itself. Your energy and focus goes into performance, into making each and every moment of each and every scene count. Those moments add up, and turn into a compelling narrative.

Freed of having to practice what you preach, you will have the much easier task of preaching what you practice.

With improvisation, players can shed themselves of unproductive energies and the fog of useless communication that keep problems from being solved, and useful change from occurring.

With improvisation, players live in a world where clarity, sense of purpose and a spirit of teamwork prevail, and what can be achieved is exactly what Viola Spolin promised all those years ago: Communication, Learning and Transformation.

What business doesn't want that? 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Bonifer is the author of [GameChangers: Improvisation for Business in the Networked World](#). He is the co-founder, with Dr. Virginia Kuhn, and CEO of GameChangers, LLC, a business learning company formed in January, 2007, that helps organizations and individuals use improvisation to achieve their business objectives and personal goals. The improvisation-based theories and practices described in *GameChangers* present an exciting and optimistic vision for the conduct of business in the global digital economy.

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