



On not being afraid of a blank slate

Creative director Piera Gelardi discusses her role at Refinery29, what can be learned from past failures, and always prioritizing your own creativity

The title of Creative Director can mean a lot of different things depending on where you work. What does it mean in relation to your job at Refinery29?

There are so many different types of Creative Directors. For me, it means really looking over the vision of our brand and how it comes to life across everything that we do, plus finding ways to create a forcefield around the brand that allows people, internally, to understand who we are and how we express ourselves and to be able to execute amazing work that is consistent. At the same time, you want to have the flexibility to allow the talented people that we've hired to express their own voices within our larger voice. I sort of think of myself as a fairy godmother of our brand, or somewhere between a quarterback and a cheerleader. I think a lot about how we can educate, empower, and inspire people to create within our brand. I also oversee how our brand is growing and expanding and evolving into different places as a business.

There's a lot of content on Refinery29 that spans a wide variety of subject matter. As the site's grown, how do you make decisions about what to cover? Is it often sort of intangible? Things that either feel right or just don't for some reason?

Yeah. We have our brand guidelines and a philosophy around our mission, which is to be a catalyst for women to feel empowered. Our brand values highlight individuality, inclusivity, impact, and imagination, and we have to always try and define for people what those words mean and how they come to life in the work that we do. Those values ideally serve as a decision-making filter for everyone here.

In terms of what makes a Refinery story, the main thing is that it hits on at least one of those four values. We are focused on providing tools, not rules, to our audience so we try to create content that is a resource, that has a take-away, that doesn't dictate how someone should live their life, but instead gives them information and resources to make their own decisions. We're also trying to create a space that's free of judgment.

Within those parameters, we look at the topics that our audience cares about and we figure out how we can write about those things. It can be tricky. How do we write about things in a way that ties back to our brand and what we stand for without being judgmental about the topics that people care about and want to read about? There's so much judgment around taste and around change and around things that are considered "millennial" in nature. For us, we're not judging those things; we're trying to take those interests into account and find relevant ways to bring them to life within our site.

Previous to working on Refinery29 you were involved in starting a magazine that didn't work out. You've spoken in the past about how that failure was ultimately very illuminating. What did you learn from that experience, and how did that experience carry into what you did next?

I come from an entrepreneurial family and am definitely very entrepreneurial myself. I'm also an Aries, so I love a blank slate, I love creating something new. I like the challenge of that and I get bored doing the same thing over and over again. Back then I was working at a magazine. It wasn't necessarily doing the same thing over and over again per se, but after a few years the cycle of the magazine and the actions that you're constantly doing started to feel routine. Even though the shoots are different and the content is different for every issue, the structure is the same and the challenges are kind of always the same. So I was looking at doing something new, and a couple friends and I wanted to start a magazine of our own that was basically a merger of arts and creativity and entrepreneurialism. Something about creative people that were launching their own weird, wacky, inspiring things.

We were really excited about the idea and it was a fun, creative thing, but ultimately it didn't work out because we all had basically the exact same skill set. Because of working at that small magazine I learned how to write, how to package, and how to handle headlines. I knew about design and even a little bit about the advertising side of things. But, for the most part, our skill sets all fell heavily on the visual side of things. Specifically on photography.

We put so much work into it. We met every Sunday for the whole day for about a year and a half and built out all the content. We had all this content for an incredible, high-production magazine that would include things like flexi-discs and die-cut things as part of it, all this cool printing. But at the end of the day we didn't have the business knowledge or the access to money to get it printed, or the advertising. We just had a prototype. We didn't have circulation or distribution, the things that you need to really bring an advertiser in.

So, the magazine ended up not happening, which felt hugely embarrassing because, again, we had put together this 250-page thing and tons of amazing people had participated in it. Ultimately I do think it was a helpful learning experience for me, because I realized that it's much better to start small. Just start by putting something out there and working through it, in an iterative process, versus working for a year and a half to make something that you think is perfect, but that's so top-heavy that you can't actually birth it into the world.

I still think about that project a lot. I tend to lean towards perfectionism and I have a high standard of excellence for myself and others, so a deadline helped me to learn when that's useful and when that's not useful. I had to learn how to scale things back so that you can actually put things out into the world and learn from them and then make them better. When you have a high bar for excellence, you're probably never going to put out something that's just totally shitty. Even if I'm putting something out that I feel like is at 60%, that's probably someone else's 125% or something.

The other thing I learned from that experience was that I do need partners and I need for them to have different skill sets and areas of responsibility apart from me. When we started Refinery, we really laid out the roles and responsibilities much differently so that it was more balanced with who was going to handle what. I wanted to be able to play to my strengths. I still wore every possible hat when we were launching Refinery, but I also had these talented partners around me to fill in any gaps.

When things really took off with Refinery29, how hard was it making sure you had the right people around you and knowing when you could let certain things go so you could focus on the big picture? Was it difficult?

Yeah it was. It's funny because we often say that it took us eight years to be an overnight success. I think in other people's minds the trajectory appeared much faster. There was a great trajectory, but at least the first six years were so DIY and the growth was pretty slow. It just was very grass roots.

Once we started to really grow, that was definitely a hard thing for me—going from actually making the content myself to having other people also do it. In the beginning I was often doing the whole thing—sometimes I would be photographing a story, assigning it or writing it, uploading it into our CMS, coding it and pushing it live. To go from being so hands-on in controlling all those aspects to giving over that control to other people felt very weird.

Like anything else, I think it's just a skill that you have to develop. I'm actually naturally very trusting, but it was more an issue of having to understand how to export my brain. Not that people have to think exactly like me, but they need to know that filter that I'm putting something through so that they can operate with the same knowledge and framework that I have, while also bringing their own expertise to the table. It was basically about creating systems that I could give to others regarding how I did things.

There was a point in time when I myself was still approving every single story or image that would show up on the home page. Obviously, once we were doing 30, 40, 50 stories a day, that was just a total bottleneck. People would practically have to push something by without me seeing it because I was so busy. I realized that I was creating a bottleneck, so I sat down and I looked back at hundreds of these emails and I identified the themes—what was making me say “yes” to a piece? What was making me say “no” to an image? Eventually I was able to very simply put those into six decision-making filters and then I said, “Okay, from now on, you are approving these openers. You have the autonomy to decide. Here are the six questions I want you to ask yourself before you set something live.” I told everyone that if I see something that I think is really off, I'm going to let you know. It's not to make you stop what you're doing and scramble and fix it, it's just for your reference moving forward or to start a dialogue so I can also understand how you were thinking.

I remember that moment vividly because it was an early challenge of scaling and of realizing it was me who was creating a bottleneck. I had to figure out how to let someone be autonomous while still feeling secure in that they understood what it was I was looking for. I think a lot of my work as Creative Director is about setting those expectations and making it as clear as possible for people as to what it is you're looking for. That's been my approach ever since—to try and just take the time to understand my own mind, my own decision-making process, and then be able to give that to someone else.

We also have a monthly creative meeting that I work on, which is a big moment for me to teach, celebrate work, and remind people of the purpose behind what we're doing. We can also bubble up feedback from the audience and from different people that reinforce the impact that we can make. I think it's become a bit more of a teaching and influencing-people thing versus directly managing or approving. I approve almost nothing on the site at this point, which is something I feel really good about.

When your creative project becomes a big business, how do you stay connected to creative part of yourself when you're also sitting in tons of meetings and dealing with money and numbers?

It's interesting. I think I was more creative—at least in the way I expected I would be creative—at the

magazine job that I left to start Refinery. When I started Refinery, I was suddenly creative in a different way. I was much more entrepreneurial and, between the four co-founders, I was someone that knew how to take an idea and make it into a reality. That became my role in the beginning, kind of figuring out how to build and grow something and how to take these different impacts and inputs and turn them into something real.

Early on I got excited about the analytics. I would go into Google Analytics and see what was performing and moderate audience feedback and send traffic reports. I was really into that, especially coming from the magazine world, where you often got so little feedback. I enjoyed immediately seeing what was working and learning from that. For me, that part didn't feel like something that could suck the life out of creativity. Instead, it was an input that I could use to justify the next thing that we wanted to make or the next thing that we wanted to try.

I love that piece of things. It's funny, over time I've been able to circle back around to a lot of the things I used to love so much. I studied art, so I love art and design. I'm fascinated with expressing creativity very vibrantly and colorfully in a very multi-faceted dimension. When we were first doing Refinery, that wasn't really what I was executing, mostly because of where the web world was at that time. It wasn't the most visual creative medium. At the time, everything we made fit into these teeny, tiny postage stamp boxes. I feel like I've watched the medium grow up.

At times it's been challenging for me to get used to the world of an executive, of sitting through business strategy meetings and figuring out some of the big, hairy business challenges that come from growing and running a business the size of ours. But in terms of staying connected to the creative, this feels like a part of it. I do love building things. I put myself in a position where we were building something new and I am there to help build it, so that allows me to tap into what I love the most, which is unknown territory—the blank page of what can we can do.

Probably my favorite project that I worked on at Refinery is when we created 29Rooms. We knew we wanted to do something for our 10-year anniversary and it was really fun to gather everyone together to just hang out and brainstorm and present ideas. I also love just tapping into all the creative minds here and creating a structure where people's ideas can flourish. I also love curating things, so getting people together and hearing their ideas and being able to pick out those diamonds in the rough that we can then polish into something beautiful is... well, it's the best.

I always want to make sure that I still am involved in exciting new projects where I can create new prototypes and show people what's possible. When we did 29 rooms, it was a hard project to make happen, and I was filled with so much fear and doubt because we'd never done something like that before. Internally people were calling it my project because they didn't really get it. That sounds great in theory—to have it be your project—but at the time it was terrifying. I basically told them, "Wow, if I fail, I'll fail alone."

When you do something like that, when you expand in a new way and show people a new sense of possibility, it reverberates and creates so much excitement. You're reminded that there are these creative opportunities all around us. Staying connected to the creative people here is also really important to me. I need to feel creative. I need to feel fulfilled in that way. I prioritize my own creative inspiration as often as possible.

Piera Gelardi recommends:

I think one of the most invigorating thing you can do as a creative person is to take a class. This year I'm taking a storytelling class and a pottery class. Last year I took an improv class. It's invigorating to always continue to learn and think, especially when it's something that is not directly related to your own work. You end up making unexpected connections. We have an education stipend here and it's always cool to see what people do with it and how it launches these new passion projects for them. Also, doing these kinds of classes just makes me love humanity, too. In this storytelling class I'm taking there are people of all different ages and backgrounds, all with their own different reasons for taking the class. Each week people get up and are just so incredibly vulnerable, sharing these little windows into their lives. You're seeing these different people's creative process happen in real time. When I took my improv class, it felt like summer camp was ending. I didn't want to leave anyone. These kinds of experiences are great because they often let you connect with people who might not always connect with. And I think in relation to being creative, you just need to always, when possible, break yourself out of your comfort zone. Taking a class is a great way to do that.

Also, if I feel stuck creatively, I love doing word association. When I worked at the magazine we would often do these brainstorm and it would be very free-flowing. Like when we were doing headlines, we would just call words back and forth. Also, just picking up a magazine or a book and seeing what words pop out to me or opening the thesaurus—that really gets my brain going.

It's pretty basic, but I also find that just looking at Pinterest will often jog something in my brain. My whole office is filled with photos and little scraps of paper with words on them. I like to be visually surrounded by a lot of input that I can pull from.

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Photo: Karen Doolittle

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