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Embracing Uncomfy Feelings
"Conversations with Creative Minds"

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COURTESY OF Crain's Detroit Make it Here

Marketers Jan Nichols and Susan Bachman relaunched a series called "Conversations with Creative Minds" as a podcast in September. The duo also own Ann Arbor creative services agency, Market Arts Creative.

Leaving Jan Nichols wordless is a challenge. The Ann Arbor talk-show host spotlights creative people from varied walks of life on her pioneering podcast series, "Conversations with Creative Minds."

"It's hard to make me speechless — but I always come away illuminated from every single conversation," she says. The first set of conversations includes chef-owner Craig Common of The Common Grill in Chelsea, Paul Saginaw and Ari Weinzwieg, co-founders of Zingerman's, PBS nutritionist Zonya Foco and Guy Sanville, artistic director of The Purple Rose Theatre Co.

"Conversations" originated as a live monthly series hosted by Nichols at the ITZone, which merged with Ann Arbor Spark, from 2003-2006. She and art director and business partner, Susan Bachman, revived the idea as a webcast in September 2008. Each episode augments the main interview with add-ons, such as the Zingerman's partners' video list of best and worst advice. Interviews are shot on location.

Nichols herself is no stranger to creativity. She started at the top — of the musical range, that is. The former opera singer loves the dark arts of marketing and promotion. With Bachman, she runs the 13-year-old Ann Arbor creative services agency, Market Arts Creative.

"I think it began because I was born in Peculiar, Mo. — I was already in a quirky state of being," she says.

Her appearance is as fashion-forward as her ideas. Slender and energetic, the 57-year-old dresses in bright colors. Her spiky haircut seems to stand on end with the help of an internal, word-powered generator.

"Conversations started out as a labor of love. It was always something more than a hobby. It's a vital part of our new and improved Web 2.0 business model and a richly rewarding part of my personal life," Nichols said.

Since September, using social media sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, Plaxo, YouTube, Vimeo, iTunes and Flickr as distribution platforms, Web traffic to the Market Arts site is up 61 percent, increasing from about 3,500 hits a month to 5,600 hits a month.

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Google Analytics has recently been added to the “Conversations” Web site, so actual traffic data will be available soon. Nichols estimates “Conversations” monthly Web traffic at 5,000 page views.

Although it’s a possibility, the podcasts do not yet have a sponsor. Instead of creating their own content, some sponsors aggregate programming on social media sites, Nichols said.

“If a sponsor wants to purchase content like a network rather than an advertiser, I’m all for it,” she added.

Google ads appear sparingly on the “Conversations” Web site to avoid distracting from the content, or worse, annoying visitors. Nichols declined to provide revenue figures for Market Arts, but said the Google ads are not a significant source. She expects 2009 to be a profitable year with a 30 percent revenue increase.

Among her insights from “Conversations” podcasts:

- Structure is essential if creativity is to flourish, even if it seems contradictory.
- Feeling “uncomfy” is OK, even welcome. Creativity is the capacity to sustain uncomfortable feelings. Feeling confident may preclude considering new ideas.
- Jettison habits of thinking — if only briefly — to generate new ideas.

“If you don’t begin with an intention, there’s no focus for creative thinking. For creativity to have the kind of currency in the world that I would like it to have, it needs to be practical — and it needs to be practiced. Otherwise you just have some cool ideas but they aren’t made manifest,” Nichols says.

There’s no danger of losing your way by suspending your thinking habits, she says. We snap right back to our habits because that’s efficient.

“When you shift habits of thinking, there’s a little bit of identity loss. The generation of ideas, an ability to conduct thought experiments, means embracing the ridiculous. It is not predictable, but it’s probable that you’ll walk away with fresh ideas,” she says.

“Creativity is the ability to escape the boundaries of what you know, to use your knowledge as a catalyst. To be at ease with not knowing, is really productive.”

Creativity is often driven by a need to change, and it absolutely can be taught, she says.

“Some people have a predisposition to be musical or have a scientific turn of mind or grasp mathematical equations with ease. They may not be creative as a predominant talent. It can be learned, starting with a purpose, a stated intention. Creativity can’t begin unless you know what you intend to do.”

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Nichols' tricks to boost creative thinking:

Consider your intention from its opposite point of view. If your intention is to increase widget sales by 20 percent in 2009, what if we gave away widgets in 2009? Who would we give them to, how would we get them to those people?

Or think of a metaphor for your intention: "Increasing sales is like a blue jay." How is it like a blue jay? Even if the metaphor is obscure, that's the purpose — shifting habits of thinking to arrive at new insights.

Nichols has even invented a new measure: Return On Innovation. The new ROI is needed to bring respectability to creative thinking, she says.

In the next two months, Nichols and Bachman will begin work on the next round of interviews. They also plan a book based on the conversations, a process that has already started as a blog, Creative Juice. They Twitter, too. It's all part of creativity.

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