# Learning Theme:
## *Business Models*

As Director of Innovative Solutions at Ogilvy, **Nicole Yershon** is used to developing new ways of working within a competitive business environment. She shares her insights around our second major theme.

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The second major theme from the Digital R&D Fund for the Arts is business models. It is hard to remember a time when pressure on the bottom line, together with competition for attention, has ever been as great as today. All of which means that across all sectors and all industries, both incumbent organisations and dynamic startups are searching for new, innovative and sustainable business models that can create the revenue needed both for health and growth.

The arts is no different. We have seen the emergence of new distribution channels for performance and other content, to big screens and to small. We are seeing theatre become more game-like and video games become more theatrical. But business model innovation is both challenging and potentially very rewarding, as Nicole Yershon, Director of Innovative Solutions at marketing communications giant Ogilvy, has found.

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"Imagine the company is an oil tanker and we're a little speedboat alongside it, to help it with its turning—doing things early so that when they become mainstream, we understand them already."

Nicole Yershon has a neat way of summing up her role at Ogilvy, where she founded and heads the Digital Innovation Lab. (Although, she adds, 'digital' goes without saying these days: "I think everything's digital now. I don't even use the term. It kind of just is.")

How would she describe the Lab's activities within the wider organisation? "I guess the easiest way to put it is that the role of the Lab is to educate and inspire in order to innovate, and do brand new things that have never been done before within the group. It's very much looking outside and bringing in, building partnerships, increasing revenue, and obviously being up to speed with all the very latest developments. We operate something called *Semesters of Learning,* which are a very process-driven way of innovating but allow for serendipity as well."

These semesters are 24-week intensive periods of research and collaboration, each on a specific area—from mobile technology to augmented reality, startups, streaming, gaming, and social media. "You start a semester with a blank sheet of paper —you know nothing—and by the end of it you know enough to be dangerous and to be able to start connecting," Yershon explains.

"The semesters follow a fixed process of seeing who's out there in the ecosystem— meeting ten to 15 different companies in a week, scouring everywhere and immersing ourselves in that area—then attaching it to business and implementing it, so that after we've done it once we can offer it again. And because we attach it to business, there will always be a case study. We've just done a semester on the Internet of Things, and we did a project with Battersea Dogs Home at Westfield, Stratford."

The Battersea project provided a virtual canine companion for visitors to the east London shopping centre. "There was an experiential team from Battersea handing out leaflets and talking to you as you arrived, and the leaflet they gave you had an RFID tag in it, so that when you walk past every digital poster site, it kicked off a film of a dog following you. The dog would stop if you stopped, or double back if you doubled back, because it's picking up everything from that chip. By the time you got to the end, the dog was on a huge screen with its nose to the camera, almost saying, 'Take me home'."

There are enormous hurdles (technical, technological and otherwise) to be overcome, Yershon admits, simply because innovation projects like these have never been done before —but that's the point. And the partnerships she and her team have forged throughout the nine years that the semesters have been running enable her to extend the boundaries of the possible.

Yershon chairs the BBC's Online Advisory Group and also works with the Greenwich Digital Advisory Board. "They're all great knowledge-sharing platforms," she says. "Being part of other organisations outside Ogilvy means that I get to see who's doing interesting stuff across all creative industries. And it allows me to see interesting things that are happening and be able to utilise that information and bring it back to Ogilvy."

A reminder, perhaps, that business model innovation is a job in itself—and that in an increasingly competitive environment, looking beyond your own organisation is a vital part of staying ahead. ◣