

Openfield Creative: Helping clients to see the view, new angles from high atop downtown Cincinnati

BY: Eileen Fritsch, WCPO Contributor

POSTED: 2:15 PM, Oct 1, 2014

UPDATED: 2:44 PM, Oct 1, 2014

CINCINNATI - Openfield Creative occupies the entire 25th floor of the Fourth Street office building that was the tallest building in the U.S. outside of New York when it was built in 1913.

Stroll the perimeter of the suite of studios and offices, and you get a fresh view of Cincinnati at every turn. This is fitting because Openfield Creative (<http://www.openfieldcreative.com>) prides itself on fresh perspectives. The firm uses design thinking to help clients of all sizes and from all industries look at marketing and communications problems from angles they might not have considered.

As technology transforms how people live, learn, and work, designers help businesses, communities, and organizations adapt to the changes. Good designers are influencing how technology can be used to solve problems and enhance the quality of life for everyone. WCPO takes a closer look at some of the Cincinnati-area designers who are making an impact on our city.

Brian Keenan, Josh Barnes, and Brandon Blangger--the three co-founders of Openfield Creative--believe that design firms today must be “50 percent strategist, 50 percent designer, and 50 percent technologist.”

While many of the firm’s current projects involve mobile apps and websites, digital marketing, and video and animation design, the three co-founders are experienced enough to know just how fast communications tools can change. So they help clients capitalize on today’s technologies, while preparing for whatever disruptions the next wave of innovations might bring. Their services also include brand identity development and coordinated collateral.

We recently talked to co-founder Brian Keenan about Openfield Creative about the changing role of design firms and the growth and diversification of the design community in Cincinnati.

Brian Keenan, co-founder

1. Technology is disrupting just about every business in some way. To what extent have technology-driven changes affected the role of the designer and design firm?

It’s not just the technology causing the disruption. It’s the combination of design and technology. From sun up to sun down, people are having highly designed experiences across an array of devices. It’s creating an expectation that everything should be as beautifully designed as the apps and websites we’re using in our personal life. People are bringing these expectations into the workplace.

The experience of raw technology is just that—it’s raw, and sometimes it’s unpleasing. Integrating great design from the start determines whether or not using the technology is a good experience. For us, it’s a great time to be in this business, because design is touching people’s lives in many more ways.

2. How would you describe Openfield Creative? Is it an interactive agency?

Most people interchange interactive with digital or just think of it as design for the web. But we think all design should be interactive in some way. Yes, the crux of our work are things that live on the Internet and are delivered through devices such as a computers, tablets, and smartphones. But that's just because these devices are the prevailing media of the day. If the Internet goes away tomorrow, we're not going to be worried. We really think of ourselves as "experience experts." We'll go wherever design is needed to create great experiences for consumers or B2B clients. What we do transcends media, because it's a way of looking at a client's problems and presenting options for attacking those problems.

A The custom-built table in the main conference room at Openfield Creative is comprised of over 60,000 individual Lego pieces.

3. Do clients come to you with well-defined problems or just a vague sense of being overwhelmed by change and complexity?

A lot of people see the work we do with mobile apps and web design, and some do come to us with a bias of needing a certain type of technology solution. But the biggest trend in our business is the development of strategy.

As technology and changing expectations disrupt businesses, our clients need smart partners to help them examine the impact of all the changes. Whether they are a large healthcare organization such as Premier Health or a two-person start-up firm, our clients need additional support to help them navigate a much more complex world. Some projects involve design pieces, but sometimes they don't.

Sometimes our ideas just result in a change of viewpoint within the organization, or a new road map for progressing in the future. We don't want to make it hard for our clients to adapt to technologies that are coming down the road. We're setting them up to have less pain in the future.

4. How long have you been in business and why did you choose the name Openfield Creative?

We started the company in 2006, and chose the name because it suggests limitless possibilities; it doesn't lock us into any single field. It also implies our open way of working with people. We paired Openfield with "Creative" instead of "Design" or "Interactive" because we expect all of our people to be

creative, whether they are project managers, programmers, or strategists. We know that creativity goes beyond design.

Co-founder Josh Barnes

5. Because museums are creating new types of experiences for visitors, you seem to have a number of clients in this area. What type of projects have you done for local Cincinnati Museum Center, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, and The Henry Ford indoor/outdoor museum complex in Michigan?

We don't really try to pigeonhole ourselves in one type of industry or business. But it has been fun working with cultural institutions such as the Cincinnati Museum Center, the Freedom Center, The Henry Ford, and Zoo New England.

They all have three similar problems. First, there's the marketing element of having to compete with other destinations such as amusement parks, sports venues, and apathy (the natural tendency to want to stay home on the couch). Our challenge is to figure out how to capture what is truly exciting about each destination and express it in a way that makes people want to go. (For example, see Openfield Creative's redesigned website for the Cincinnati Museum Center.)

Then, there is the fact that mobile technology is changing how people experience museums when they visit. We help museums create navigational tools that can not only help visitors find their way around but also help them access more information about what they're seeing. The third part that is fun about working with cultural institutions is that many groups want to extend their footprint beyond their campus or region. Obviously digital media represents big opportunities here.

The OnInnovation video project we did for The Henry Ford was one of the most fantastic projects we've ever done. The Henry Ford gave us over 30 hours of video interviews with some of our country's innovators and asked us, "How can we make this accessible to more people?"

Our take was "What if you didn't ask people to watch the whole Bill Gates video? What if you could chop up the videos and mix together pieces from various videos by themes? So if you want to learn about overcoming failure, you could hear ideas from Steve Wzoniak, Martha Stewart, and Bill Gates. That's really cool. In addition to creating nearly 900 HD video chapters, we helped make it possible for teachers around the world to bring some of the content from The Henry Ford into the classroom.

A conference room at Openfield Creative.

For The Freedom Center, we helped launch the End Slavery Now initiative, a network of global organizations you can access if you want to become involved in the cause of ending human trafficking.

Using certain types of technology and the Internet to widen the footprint of cultural institutions represents a huge opportunity for these clients. Not only does it build credibility, but it also helps them connect their mission to actual initiatives that are making a difference in the world.

6. What types of clients to your most enjoy working with?

We work with clients in many different industries. We love working with clients who share our belief that delivering great experiences for their customers isn't an option if they want to win in the marketplace. The world has come to expect great experiences. If people think something is ugly or hard to use, it affects how they feel about that company or product. We like working with people who know that it's critical to give people a great impression through a good experience.

When a potential client asks us about the type of work we've done in their industry, we explain that they need to work with someone who will help them understand the problem. And the problem is not necessarily exclusive to their industry. We're very lucky. We have terrific clients and an awesome team.

7. How much of your work comes from clients in the Cincinnati area and how much comes from clients outside this region?

Right now it's about 50-50. Usually companies start a business locally and then ripple outward to go regional and then national. We did a reverse ripple. Because my partners and I were living in Los Angeles and Boston, we had a lot of professional connections before we came back to Cincinnati.

We started out doing a lot of business for clients outside of Cincinnati for the first couple of years. Then, through doing good work and networking, we became known locally as well. Now we get a lot of our work from word-of-mouth referrals.

Co-founder Brendan Blangger

8. The Fast Company blog "Innovation by Design" recently published a post "[Why VC Firms Are Snapping Up Designers.](http://www.fastcodesign.com/3029639/innovation-by-design/why-vc-firms-are-snapping-up-designers)" (<http://www.fastcodesign.com/3029639/innovation-by-design/why-vc-firms-are-snapping-up-designers>) **Would you agree that it makes sense to get designers involved in the early stages of planning a start-up company?**

While it's great to see these developments, it comes as no surprise to us that forward-thinking companies are finding ways to leverage what designers do best – examining problems, distilling information, imagining new ways to solve issues and creating great experiences. More than most businesses, startups need to use every resource they can to push through the noise.

Design is a powerful business tool that should not be thought of as a “nice to have.”

It’s a “must have.”

Those who understand how to incorporate excellent design at the beginning of their process will find that it’s easier and less costly than trying to add it after their product is already built. Obviously venture-capital groups such as Kleiner, Perkins, Caufield & Byers, and Google Ventures are visionaries who provide great examples for us all.

9. What should Cincinnati area residents know about the design community that has blossomed in the Cincinnati area over the last few years?

My partners and I all graduated of the DAAP program at the University of Cincinnati. Today, there are many excellent design programs at nearby schools and universities. When I graduated, Cincinnati was still regarded mostly as a packaging town. So when I got a job offer from one of my co-op employers for a position in Los Angeles, I took it. It was a great experience working there, and I worked on all different kinds of design projects. But when I moved back here about 10 years ago, I realized something amazing was happening here and the local design community was really blossoming.

When you think about the renaissance in Cincinnati right now, it’s no coincidence that the design community has also undergone a great transformation. Now, you can find just about any type of design here in Cincinnati. It’s a world-class community and I’m thrilled to have been a part of it for the last 10 years.

Connect with Openfield Creative on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/OpenfieldCreative)
(<https://www.facebook.com/OpenfieldCreative>) and [Vimeo](http://vimeo.com/openfieldcreative/views)
(<http://vimeo.com/openfieldcreative/views>) .

Follow WCPO Contributor Eileen Fritsch on Twitter: @EileenFritsch.

Photos courtesy of Openfield Creative.