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Ideas curator: Brad Grossman at his New York office where he and his 'zeitguides' operate as a human form of crammer's notes for corporate clients

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The executive's cultural attaché

Working lives



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Brad Grossman turned a thirst for knowledge into a business that keeps clients up to date on what they need to know

A few years ago a job notice circulated in Hollywood for a "cultural attaché" for Brian Grazer, the Oscar-winning producer behind films including *A Beautiful Mind*, *Frost/Nixon* and *Rush*.

To some it seemed like an urban myth. Not to Brad Grossman. He had held the post for four years and wrote the job spec for the position, which he called an "ideas curator" back in 2008 when curating was a job undertaken only in art galleries. It was, he reflects, "the coolest job in the world".

Accompanying Mr Grazer all over the world in first-class seats and on private jets, he was given the task of finding interesting people from outside the "suffocating, insular" confines of Hollywood for the film producer to meet. These ranged from Nobel Prize-winning physicists to writers including Salman Rushdie and Christopher Hitchens, the only person allowed to smoke inside the house. Robots were off-limits: the sole area in which Mr Grazer had no interest.

Just before a meeting, Mr Grossman would hand his employer a one-page précis of their work and "brief him as if he was Hillary Clinton". In fact, he was helped in this by *Selling Your Story in 60 Seconds: the guaranteed way to get your screenplay or novel read*, an elevator-pitch guide that Mr Grazer had given him.

Despite having a job that many con-

sidered the stuff of mythology, Mr Grossman wanted to leave to set up on his own. Today he runs a consultancy, helped by five researchers, who distil cultural and industry knowledge for busy executives who lack the time and contacts to do it themselves.

Beth Comstock, the chief marketing officer of GE, calls him the "human CliffsNotes", after the crammer's aid. She hired him recently to compile a history of military strategy from Clausewitz and Sun Tzu to the predilection of fashion designers for camouflage military wear. The purpose? To help her think about roles that veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq could take at GE.

Mr Grazer became an early client after he failed to find a replacement for Mr Grossman. He brought with him Ron Howard, the director and his film collaborator.

Cultural attaché is a tag that has followed Mr Grossman, but he prefers to describe himself as a "cultural translator" or "expert of experts" since his job is to learn and "connect the dots among the experts". He also sees his company as a "cultural think-tank/do-tank" – as well as producing reports and presentations for clients.

His team of "zeitguides", as his researchers are known, crunch through up to 2,000 "pieces of content" every week. Technology aggregates a vast array of content ranging from traditional journalism, industry white papers, social media and live events – either in person or following them online.

Being autodidactic helped fashion this new career, says Mr Grossman. (He refers to this a lot, as in: "as an autodidact", "being an autodidact"). He attributes the desire to teach himself to his early years. Raised in New Jersey, his parents were not academic – his father sold cars and his mother was a dental hygienist – and the young Brad lacked any sporting ability.

Having failed to do well at school initially, he decided to teach himself and ultimately got into Brown University to study pre-med with a view to becoming a doctor. After vomiting over a patient in dialysis, he realised his chosen career was unrealistic. The problem was not so much the sight of

blood or the smell of hospitals: his physical nausea "reflected my internal struggle. I thought I should be a doctor but didn't want to be a doctor." However, he was good at organic chemistry and began tutoring students as a sideline while taking his new subject of cultural studies at Brown.

After graduating he would "aggressively" scrutinise *Variety* magazine for opportunities, faxing a letter of congratulations to anyone who had been promoted, asking for a 10-minute meeting. In time, the approach brought him his first job – at an independent film company in New York. He then realised that if he wanted to continue in film he would have to go to Los Angeles. He found a job as an assistant to the executive president of production at Columbia Pictures, which entailed answering the phones and doing "what my boss told me to do".

After the terror attacks of September 11, 2001 the industry shrank along with the economy. At the same time, strikes by writers and actors were slowing film production further. Mr Grossman found himself without a job so returned to tutoring chemistry. It being Hollywood, one of his early students was Gia Coppola, granddaughter of Francis Ford Coppola (and now a director herself). Word spread and his business grew. It was then that he got a call from Mr Grazer who had heard of his reputation as "tutor to the stars" and suggested he could teach him not so much about science as about "everything".

So every Sunday Mr Grossman would deliver an interesting person to the film producer's home or office. In between Mr Grossman would need to read as much as possible to keep on top of trends and world events. At any moment, Mr Grazer might call to discuss the latest Maureen Dowd column in the *New York Times*.

Mr Grossman brought in Sheldon Lee Glashow, the Nobel Prize-winning particle physicist. Mr Glashow later offered advice on the film *Angels and Demons*, the thriller based on the Dan Brown book that tells the tale of an evil genius stealing a canister containing anti-matter from Cern, the European physics

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centre. In 2004, during a visit to Washington, the producer requested an introduction to two politicians on the up. John McCain and Barack Obama were duly delivered.

He would pitch the meeting to these people by saying, "Brian is a really interesting person who likes meeting people outside his comfort zone." The subtext was, of course, the possibility of a future project. The movie mogul, for example, took options on Vivienne Westwood's biography after meeting the British fashion designer.

Yet Mr Grossman had a nagging feeling that he wanted to set himself up in business. He was convinced the service he provided to Mr Grazer was one he could also sell to executives. So in 2008 he left and moved to New York to go it alone. "In my heart of hearts I'm an entrepreneur."

Why would anyone need his services when there are so many consultants and companies that have a strong reputation for delivering detailed market research? "Silos are breaking down internally and between other industries," he says. "They need people to inform them about how other industries are dealing with disruption."

Moreover, he insists, people need distilled intelligence because we are "over-saturated with information" and the "world is changing so quickly it's hard to keep up".

One of his first clients was Shepard Fairey, the street artist who created the artwork for Mr Obama's presidential campaign "Hope" posters, who wanted advice on how to break into the fine art world.

Mr Grossman meets his clients on a weekly or monthly basis to discuss a subject: "Our job is to make them better and smarter than they are. As the world keeps changing, our job is to make sure they aren't blindsided."

Some companies are also looking for opportunities beyond their core operations: As one client puts it: "How can we become the company that would put us out of business?"



Brad Grossman's clients have included Shepard Fairey, creator of the Obama 'Hope' poster, and Brian Grazer

