We don't believe in telling people what to do. But we do like to make people feel welcome. What follows is meant to help you get grounded, and to put things in perspective when you are feeling fearful.

this is

.not a handbook

Hi.

We're glad you are here.

In 2010, we started an advertising agency. And we are excited to say that it hasn't turned out exactly as planned--we have been formed in a large part by the market, and have changed in many ways since we opened our doors. We have embraced new opportunities and discarded unhelpful habits from the past. But one thing has stayed the same since 2010--fearless is an agency committed to fearless appraisal. It informs both the kind of work we do and our organizational structure. We strive to look at things for what they really are and build true solutions for ourselves and our clients. We make the kind of work that we believe will have a real impact on our clients' businesses, the kind of work we love to work on and want to share with the world.

It's a simple proposition in theory, but in practice it can be more difficult than it seems. When we were starting the agency, we talked a lot about the things that get in the way of success. We had the humility to acknowledge that where others had failed, we might fail too. And these discussions led us time and time again to the subject of fear. We came to the conclusion that fear drives a lot of decision making in business, and that this fearful decision making leads to a lot of mediocre work, and a lot of potential value lost. We decided to fight fear with fearless behavior and took this on as our central mission--and our name.

This handbook will explain a little bit about what we mean when we say 'fearless' and give you a brief introduction to our guiding principles and our company culture.

Above all, Fearless is a work in progress--and we hope to stay that way for as long as we can. We are happily and actively shaped by the people who work here and we are excited for you to help us discover and change and grow. We believe in learning through doing and in letting people define their own roles. Sometimes you may not be sure what it is that you should do. This handbook is a reminder to do something fearless. We want this to be the best job you'll ever have. We're here to help, but in the end its up to you--what kind of fearless things are you going to do while you are here?

We think big. And we hired you because we see big things in you.

Welcome. Let's do something fearless.

What's in our name.

We started with an observation

There are a lot of smart people working in advertising.

A lot of smart agencies.
A lot of smart clients.

So why do we make so many dumb decisions?

and came to a conclusion

We think the answer is fear.

Fear of getting fired, fear of looking stupid, fear of trying something that hasn't been tried before.

Fear leads to waste—wasted time, wasted money, and wasted talent. Fear drives us to reward cautious behavior. It drives us to try not to get it wrong, instead of trying to get it right. It drives us to dramatize our similarities to our competitors. And it drives us to talk to ourselves, instead of to our customers.

that inspired us to be fearless

We believe that we can fight fear with honesty–by calling things out for what they really are. We expect straight talk and encourage strong points of view. We talk to people like people—online, offline or anywhere else. We constant-ly question, challenge, debate, learn, and then learn to un-learn. We reward experimentation and unconventional thinking. We stand behind the work we believe in and aren't afraid to take risks. And we make a damn good lunch.

Here's a little bit about us.

Fearless is...

self-funded

Fearless was started by a group of partners who fell in love with an idea and put their personal savings on the line to turn that idea into a reality--100% on their own terms.

a capitalist commune

At fearless we are all in this together. We believe in building a successful business and we believe in sharing the wealth with those who help us build it. Everybody benefits when the company does well.

redefining 'advertising'

Fearless is more than an advertising agency. We started as a fairly traditional full-service agency, and we're still one, but with a hugely expanded focus. This has allowed us to develop a highly integrated work process, and to diversify our services. We're an entertainment company. A media company. A platform company. But mostly, a company full of spirited people who love the products we create.

What does
fearless make?

Fearless' core competency is strategic analysis that leads to marketing that works.

Obviously, different disciplines are part of making our services and products, but we're ultimately a strategically driven company. That's because we believe that the key to successful marketing is strategy. If you aren't working in the right bit of the field, the best tactics in the world aren't going to help you to get where you are trying to go.

If your expertise is not in coming up with strategic ideas, then every bit of energy you put into understanding the strategic side of things is to your (and Fearless') benefit. If you are a media person, push yourself to think creatively. You don't need to become a copywriter or designer, but broadening your awareness in a creative direction can help you come up with more innovative and comprehensive solutions.
And if you are a creative person, learn about the media department--the best creative solutions carefully consider the context in which the message will be consumed.

The fearless
world is flat.

un-departmented

Segregating people is silly. People are complex and while they often have a specific established skill set, they can contribute to a project in a variety of ways.

hierarchy-free

Fearless has a flat structure because we believe that everyone has something to learn from everyone else.

expert-less

We learn something new here every day--we hope you will too. Not knowing how to do something is the perfect place to start learning how to do it exceptionally well.

resourcefully yours

We are community minded and try to share our skills and create opportunities. Look at everyone and everything around you as a potential resource-- what can you learn from the person sitting next to you?

interest driven

We hire people to work in their areas of interest because we think people do their best work when they are having a good time. If you find yourself gravitating towards work that falls outside your present role, let's have a chat about it. We want you to be where you want to be.

open doored

Fearless started with a small group of people sitting around a single table. This meant 100% of the employees were part of 100% of the company meetings. It turned out that having the "wrong people" at the table led to some really interesting and unexpected ideas. Please feel free to join in on any conversation or meeting that you feel you have something to contribute to.

Unstructured Structure

titles

We don't list titles on the website. This is by design. Instead we have things we call ourselves, for ease of communication. When interacting with clients, titles provide clarity and understanding. In our day to day work however, we all take on the role that suits our skill set and the task at hand. This role may change from project to project, and managing your role is part of your job. Everyone has to function as a "strategist" all of the time--it is everyone's job to figure out how to do what's best for our clients.

organic organization

Project teams tend to form naturally. Although we don't have fixed job descriptions, we do have clarity around our roles on any given project. We each communicate our planned contribution to a particular project and clarify our role in achieving a project's goals. That contribution may change as requirements change, but the temporary structure provides a shared understanding of what to expect from each other.

flexibility not anarchy

Fearless is not averse to organizational structure--when established collaboratively for each individual project it can be extremely useful. But we do try to avoid entrenched hierarchies and restrictive labels. Roles should be as fluid and complex as the people who fill them and should be established directly in relation to the project or client. Organization is more of a polite way of letting everyone know what you are up to than anything else.

account managers

We've found that its useful to have a central person for a project to orbit around, to be a point of contact with the client and keep track of all the relevant information and deadlines and make sure important details don't get overlooked. This person keeps track of the project as a whole while other members of the team contribute their individual parts.

On figuring out what to do

what to do

Deciding what to work on can be the hardest part of your job. Your job is to do more than a set list of tasks. Your job is to be constantly looking around for the most valuable work you could be doing, and for new and interesting ways of helping our clients. We hope that this will help to expand your thinking and skill sets and lead to some really interesting work.

with freedom, responsibility

Our lack of a traditional structure comes with an important responsibility. It's up to all of us to spend time and effort thinking about what we think the long-term goals of the company should be. Every few days, take a minute to think about what you are working on and how it contributes to the company as a whole.

Its up to you to organize your priorities, and make sure you meet deadlines. Because every project is open to you, you may find yourself tempted to take on more than you have time for. Make sure to balance your priorities and keep on top of everything you need to get done. And be sure to ask for help when you get in over your head.

More on figuring out what to do...

monday meetings

Every Monday at 9:30am the entire agency gets together to go over ongoing projects--this will give you a sense of what is going on and where you might be able to fit in.

conversations

The best way to find out about current projects and opportunities is to ask people what they are working on. And tell them what you are up to too. Let people know what kind of work you'd like to do so that they will think of you when the right kind of project comes up.

collaborate

People are going to want you to work with them on their projects. Help where and when you can and always think about how other people may be able to contribute to the projects you are currently working on. The more we can collaborate the better output we will have as an organization.

where can you add value?

People join projects because they can add value. If you think you want to work on a specific project, you should ask yourself how you can best contribute and then propose this to the team. Strong teams are built on clear communication and smart distributions of tasks.

how to prioritize

Because its up to you what to work on, there will be a lot of options. Learn how to prioritize and decide which projects are the most important, and where your time & talents are best spent.

who should I work with?

Nobody expects you to do everything yourself--ask for help when you need it, and pull together a team of the people you need to get the job done.

Even more on figuring out what to do...

big and small

Its easy to focus most of our energy on what seems most urgent at any given time. But don't forget to step back and look at the bigger picture. Getting lost in the weeds can waste a lot of time.

set goals

Set goals and check in with them from time to time--are you taking steps to achieve them? What do you want to achieve in the long term? What can you do this year? What can you do this month? What can you do this week? What can you do today?

share your mind

One of the most valuable things you have to contribute to fearless is your considered opinion--if you think someone has made the wrong decision on a project, have a conversation about it. Never be afraid to share your opinion and have a discussion about anything that doesn't seem right. Listen carefully to the opinions of others and together think the problem through.

innovate, on brief

We don't want to separate out client work from personal innovation. Be inventive in your approach to client work. We try to give clients the best possible solutions we can. Sometimes this means straying from the brief. But--its important to present the innovation as an alternate recommendation *alongside* the initial ask--its just respectful. There may be other factors we aren't aware of. Do whats right for the client and do right by them in the process.

a few places to start

• Of all the projects currently under way, what's the most valuable thing I can be working on?
• Which project will have the highest direct impact on our clients? How much will the work I do benefit the team?
• Is Fearless not doing something that it should be doing?
• What's interesting? What's rewarding? What leverages my individual strengths the most?

Even MORE on figuring out what to do...

make mistakes

You won't get fired for making a mistake. We wouldn't be rewarding fearless behavior if we operated that way. We do our best to reward people for doing what they think is right--not what seems like it will be the least likely to get them in trouble. Providing the freedom to fail is an important trait of our company—we couldn't expect such big things from the people who work here if we also penalized them for errors. Even very expensive or public mistakes are seen as opportunities to learn. We can always repair the mistake or make up for it. Screwing up is a great way to find out where our assumptions went wrong. As long as we've learned from our mistakes, we'll consider the episode an essential part of our eventual success.

There are some bad ways to make mistakes though. Repeating the same mistake over and over is one. Not listening to clients or peers before or after a mistake is another.

test and learn

Whenever possible, test your decisions. Our predictions are proven wrong far more often than we would like to admit. We try to avoid 'conventional wisdom' whenever we can. Instead, we come up with hypotheses and then look for ways to test these beliefs. We run experiments and collect data. We ask experts in the field. And we're upfront with our clients through every step of this process.

Ask yourself "what would I expect to see if I'm right?" Ask yourself "what would I expect to see if I'm wrong?" Then ask yourself "what do I see?" If something completely unexpected happens, try to figure out why.

This kind of testing takes place across our business, from creative development to hiring, to media planning.

Does this way of working actually work?

order in chaos

If every employee is autonomously making his or her own decisions, how does everything not devolve into chaos? How does Fearless make sure that the company is heading in the right direction?

Over time, we have learned that our collective ability to meet challenges, take advantage of opportunities, and respond to threats is far greater when the responsibility for doing so is distributed as widely as possible. Namely, to every individual at the company.

We are all responsible for our long-term relationships with our clients. Sometimes they get angry with us. But because we communicate openly and honestly, and because we genuinely always have their best interests at heart, there's faith that we're going to make things better, and that if we've done something wrong today, it wasn't because we were trying to take advantage of anyone.

upkeep

Running a company this way requires everyone to participate fully. It will all fall apart if we don't each play our part and take our responsibilities and freedoms seriously. Fearless's success requires the full commitment of everyone—especially those who've been here the longest.

How will things change as we grow?

scale

The fearless culture and organizational structure may seem best suited to a small start-up--how do we get big without getting bad?
We think: by continuing to be fearless. If we look at ourselves honestly and critically and take responsibility for our decisions and our work, we believe we will succeed. As we grow, it is up to all of us to identify our weaknesses and come up with creative solutions to fill these gaps.

Because the culture and company is shaped so much by the people who work here, the success of our growth will in a large part depend on how well we hire. If we start adding people to the company who aren't as capable as we are at operating as fearless, self-directed, creative decision makers, then things might take a turn for the worse.

We do not have a growth goal. We intend to continue hiring talented people and to continue scaling up our business as fast as our clients and capabilities allow.

What are the downsides?

things fall apart

The design of the company has some downsides. Here are a few things we wish we were better at:
• Helping new people find their way.
• Mentoring people.
• Disseminating information internally.
• Finding and hiring the right people.
• Making predictions longer than a few months out.
• Losing talented people who prefer to work within a more traditional structure.

help us fix things

Sometimes, the beliefs and ideals outlined in this book don't match perfectly with the realities of your day. Like we said, fearless is a work in progress--and we want you to be part of our process and progress.
We're confident that with everybody's help, even when problems persist over time, we can root them out and find solutions.

Are there areas of the company in which our fearless ideals are realized more fully than others? What should we do about that? Are those differences a good thing? What would you change? This handbook describes the values and goals we believe in. If you find yourself in a group or project that you feel isn't meeting these goals, be an agent of change. Help bring the group around. Talk about these goals with the team and/or others, and if possible, offer proactive solutions up for discussion.

On not being bullies

no secrets

If you want to be included in something just talk to the people involved--you are welcome to work on any project and be a part of any decision making process where you have something to contribute.

please help others out when they are in a jam

It's just good manners.

everyone does the dirty work

We're not in the habit of exploiting interns around here and the dishwasher does not empty itself.

respectfully disagree

Disagreements are going to happen and we are glad that they do. Disagreements make us think things through in new ways. When you find yourself in a disagreement with a colleague keep thinking about whether or not you are right. Be respectful of where they are coming from--why do you think they believe what they do? Broaden the conversation. Really listen. Hold on to your goals if you're convinced they're correct, but be sure not to trample anyone else in the process. Check your assumptions. Pull more people in. Listen some more. Draw on other people's valuable experience. Try to see things in different lights. And always respect people's right to see things differently.

give gifts

We believe that every time we put a piece of communication out into the world we have the opportunity to give a gift. A gift can take many forms--it can be a laugh, or a smile, a sympathetic tear, a great song, or a perceptive insight, or a tip from a friend. If we are going to interrupt someone's day, we want to do so with politeness and grace--we want to treat them with respect and give them something in exchange for their time. This is one of the ways we try to do good in our work.

On how to come up with great ideas

"*People look at what they want to look at, and sometimes what they want to look at is an ad.*"

we don't have time to be conventional

There are a lot of people out there upholding the status quo. We won't get anywhere by doing the same. Don't stop at good enough—keep pushing until you've come up with something great.

it's better to be seen once than ignored twice

Be interesting. Be arresting. Be controversial. Always ask yourself—why should anyone care?

get uncomfortable

If an idea makes you nervous, you've probably hit on something interesting. Great ideas feel risky. They're worth the risk.

don't underestimate the temptation to do safe work

We all want to come up with a great idea. One that's wildly successful and earns a standing ovation that resonates around the entire world. While you are searching for this great idea you will have to face down a very dangerous daily temptation: The Idea That Ticks All The Boxes. There's a big problem with this idea. It probably won't achieve the result the client is looking for. It may be easy to sell, but it won't get the job done. Be fearless. Kill The Idea That Ticks All The Boxes. And get ready to kill it again tomorrow.

beware of the numbers

Numbers can be very useful, but keep in mind that they only tell part of the story. And just because it worked yesterday, doesn't mean it will work again today.

be fearless, not reckless

No manipulations. No gimmicks. Just straight talk and honest critical assessments. Treat the target audience with the respect and intelligence they deserve.

failure is success

Coming up with great ideas is a process. We aren't going to fire you if you try out an idea and it doesn't work. We'll congratulate you for being one step closer to the idea that will work.

On hiring

**the most important decision
you'll ever make**

We cannot emphasize enough how important the hiring process is. Fearless is shaped by the people who work here so it is crucial that we bring on people that will have a positive influence on the company and culture. A great hiring decision can have a huge positive impact and a poor hiring decision can cause lots of damage.

whole person

We don't care if new hires know how to use Microsoft Word. On the off chance that they have yet to encounter a spreadsheet, its something we can easily acquaint them with. We do care how new hires will contribute to our company culture and environment--are they smart? Do they have a good attitude? Do they inspire you? Do they have interesting skills and the drive to acquire more? Are they good at what they do?

nothing is temporary

One of Peter Gibb's favorite sayings is that *"There's never time to do it right, but always time to do it again."* Take the time you need to find the right person--we'll get by in the meantime and it will be worth it in the end.

hire for more than one job

Sometimes we need to hire for a specific task. But nine times out of ten that person will work on much more than that task or even become a permanent employee. Treat every position with the same attention and care.

More on hiring

hire someone you'd work for

We want to hire the people who will have a big impact and shape who we are. When you interview someone think--is this someone you would like to see be one of the next partners?

spread the word

One of the most valuable things you can do as a new employee is invite talented and interesting people in for us to meet. The more great people we know, the better we will be able to hire when positions open up.

hire up, not down

With each new hire, we want to raise the bar. We want to hire the people who inspire and intimidate us. People often gravity towards hiring others who are less capable than themselves. In some ways, hiring lower-powered people is a natural response to having so much work to get done. In these conditions, hiring someone who is at least capable seems (in the short term) to be smarter than not hiring anyone at all. But that's actually a huge mistake that can have far reaching repercussions. We can always bring on temporary/contract help to get us through tough spots, but we should never lower the hiring bar.

On how we get and keep our clients

clients like us

We look for clients who share similar values and appreciate the kind of work we do. We also try to bring in work that will best use our talents and push our boundaries.

flexible

We have been formed by the market. So we have learned to stay open minded to new kinds of opportunities that we might not have considered before.

agile

We move and change with the times. We keep up with the latest in culture, technology and human behavior so that we can bring relevant and innovative ideas to our clients.

the best new biz is old biz

We are always looking to find ways to further improve our current client's business. While we are busy working on existing briefs we keep our eyes peeled for other areas where we might be able to help that same client. We love pitching exciting new ideas to existing clients--clients who we have good relationships with and know we work well with. Winning this kind of business is much easier than a cold pitch with a brand new client. So always keep an eye out for new opportunities and be sure to share your ideas with the team.

On lunch

fearless fridays

Every Friday we cook a communal lunch in the office. We believe great things come from cooking together and sharing stories and ideas over food.

the communal table

The big black table we eat around was the same table that the partners first gathered around when the company was started.

should I cook?

Of course! Do you have to? Of course not. If you have an idea for a lunch let other people know and ask some people to help out. We can't wait to enjoy your home cooked meal!

guests

We often invite interesting people to come and have lunch with us. If there is anyone you'd like to invite let us know!

On Reviews & Compensation

reviews

We have a formalized method of evaluating performance through annual reviews. Reviews are done in order to give useful feedback on how to best grow as individual contributors.

on the go

We all need feedback on our performance—in order to improve, and in order to know we're not doing a bad job. Once a year the partners give each employee feedback about their work. Outside of these formalized reviews, we feel that feedback is most helpful to individuals when it is given in real time.

method

There is a framework for how the partners give this feedback to everyone. The purpose of the feedback is to provide people with information that will help them grow. That means that the best quality feedback is directive and prescriptive, and designed to be put to use by the person they're talking about. The feedback is then gathered and used as a way to help define future goals and provide direction as you advance your career at Fearless.

incentive

Fearless' goal is to pay individuals at, or ideally above, their market worth, bearing in mind their increased competence and skills over time and the company's overall business performance. This is reflected in our year end bonus payments. We also have a longer term incentive scheme in our phantom stock option program. This gives individuals a reward based on the 3 year performance of the company.

On personal success and growth

growth

Because Fearless doesn't have a traditional hierarchical structure, your career path here will be somewhat unconventional.

It is your responsibility to set you own personal goals and measures of success. Fearless doesn't embrace the traditional time lines and markers of typical industry promotions. Instead, it provides an opportunity to broaden one's skill set. Your growth will happen organically, and we think--very very fast. You're in charge of your progress, and you can ask for help with it anytime from those around you. We believe that the people we hire are generally self-improving. Working at Fearless provides an opportunity for extremely efficient and, in many cases, very accelerated, career growth. Most people who fit well at Fearless will be better positioned after their time spent here than they could have been if they'd spent their time at a more traditional agency. If you have any concerns about your trajectory, be sure to have a chat with the partners.

What time should I wake up?

office hours

The office is open from 9-5 and we love the sense of community and the unexpected collaborations that come from having everyone around at the same time. That said, it isn't always the best use of your time to be at your desk. Make your own schedule, and make sure it works for those you are working with.

balance

Sometimes an urgent situation will require long hours, but this is the exception, not the norm. We think people do their best work when they have a good work/life balance. Consistent overtime reflects poor time management and communication. If your workload is becoming overwhelming, its time to start a conversation about hiring someone to help. Enjoy your hours away from work and come back refreshed.

working from home

There will be times when it will be more comfortable or efficient to work from home. As with scheduling, be sure to make decisions like this in collaboration with the people you work with who may be impacted. Some kinds of work can be done effectively remotely, but don't forget that some of the most interesting ideas come from us all being together in a room. As with every-thing--use your judgment and communicate clearly.

A fearless future

Fearless is continually changing and growing and we are excited for you to contribute to this process. We can't wait to hear the ideas you come up with and see the great things you will do. The work you do for our clients will go on to define us. Whether it's a creative new commercial, a way to save clients money with modern production techniques, a painting that teaches us what's beautiful, an innovation that protects us from legal threats, a new typeface, an idea for how to be healthier while we work, a new media technology, a great new recipe for Friday lunch, a new kind of test that lets us be smarter, or (more likely) something we haven't thought of yet—we can't wait to see how you shape and change the future of Fearless.

A fearless
appendix

some fearless tools
This section contains some of the core tools we use to organize our thinking and serve our clients. There are also some recipes and anecdotes and a whole lot else. We hope you'll add something of your own to the mix!

Fearless Tools:
Questionnaire

BACKGROUND

What is the story behind this brand?
What is the story behind this business?
What does it do that is different?
Why will it be successful?
What is your ambition for this brand?
What is your ambition for this business?

BUSINESS CHALLENGE

What do you want to achieve?
What do you want to happen as a result of our efforts?
When do you want it done by?
How will success be measured?

AUDIENCE

Who should know about this brand?

PROPOSITION

Why should they be interested in your product?

SUBSTANTIATION

What facts support this proposition?

ACTION

What action do we want to inspire in the people who we reach?

CURRENT COMMUNICATIONS

What are you currently telling your customers and how?

BUDGET

What resources are available?

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

What is the most important thing you want us to know?

Fearless Tools:
Brand Essence

The Brand pyramid frames and focuses our discussions of what a brand stands for on a functional and emotional level. It also prompts discussions about the "something bigger," the emotional ideal one associates with the brand.

From the essence we will develop a positioning statement that is the core input to the creative brief.
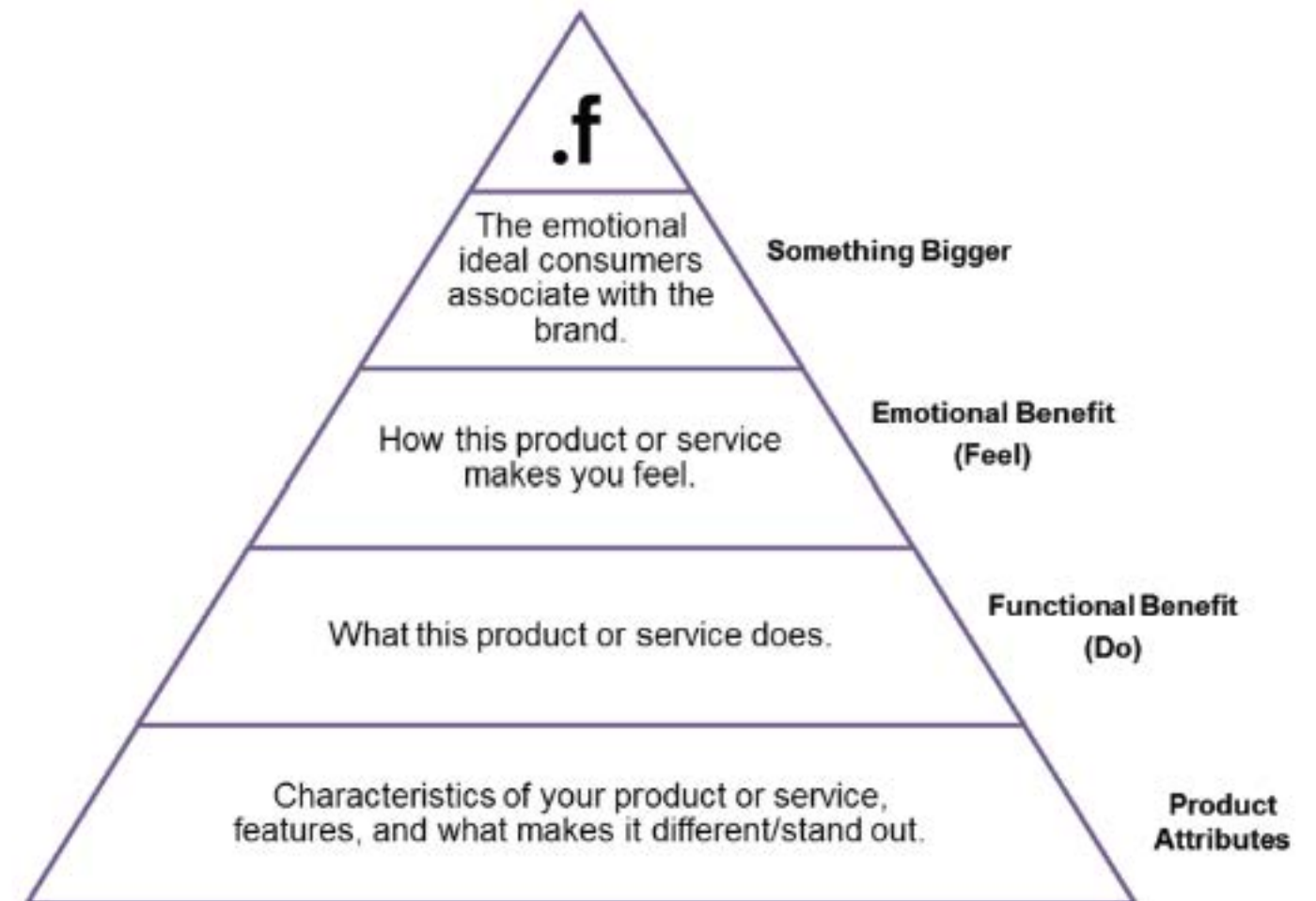
Fearless Tools:
Creative Brief

Who is the client / product / service?

(Client name and related service.)

What makes it unique?

(What differentiates the company from competitors in its industry?)

Why are we advertising?

(What is client looking to achieve?)

Who are we talking to?

(Who is the intended audience?)

What do we know about them?

(What do we know about this audience?)

Are there any secondary targets?

(Name secondary target audience.)

What do we want the advertising to say?

(What is the message we are trying to get across?)

What do you want the advertising to achieve?

(What will be result of the advertising?)

What—if anything—is standing in our way?

(What are the obstacles and challenges we face?)

Mood and tone?

(Tone in which we're going to convey message.)

Context & Media

(What format should the messaging take? (TV, Radio, Print etc)

And where will the messaging be displayed?)

Client related information.
Client
Agency Partner
Date

Agreed and accepted.
Client
Agency Partner
Account Manager
Account Planner
Creative Director

An anecdote in counterintuitive thinking

Undamaged plane (left). A plane shaded everywhere bullets struck returning aircraft (right).
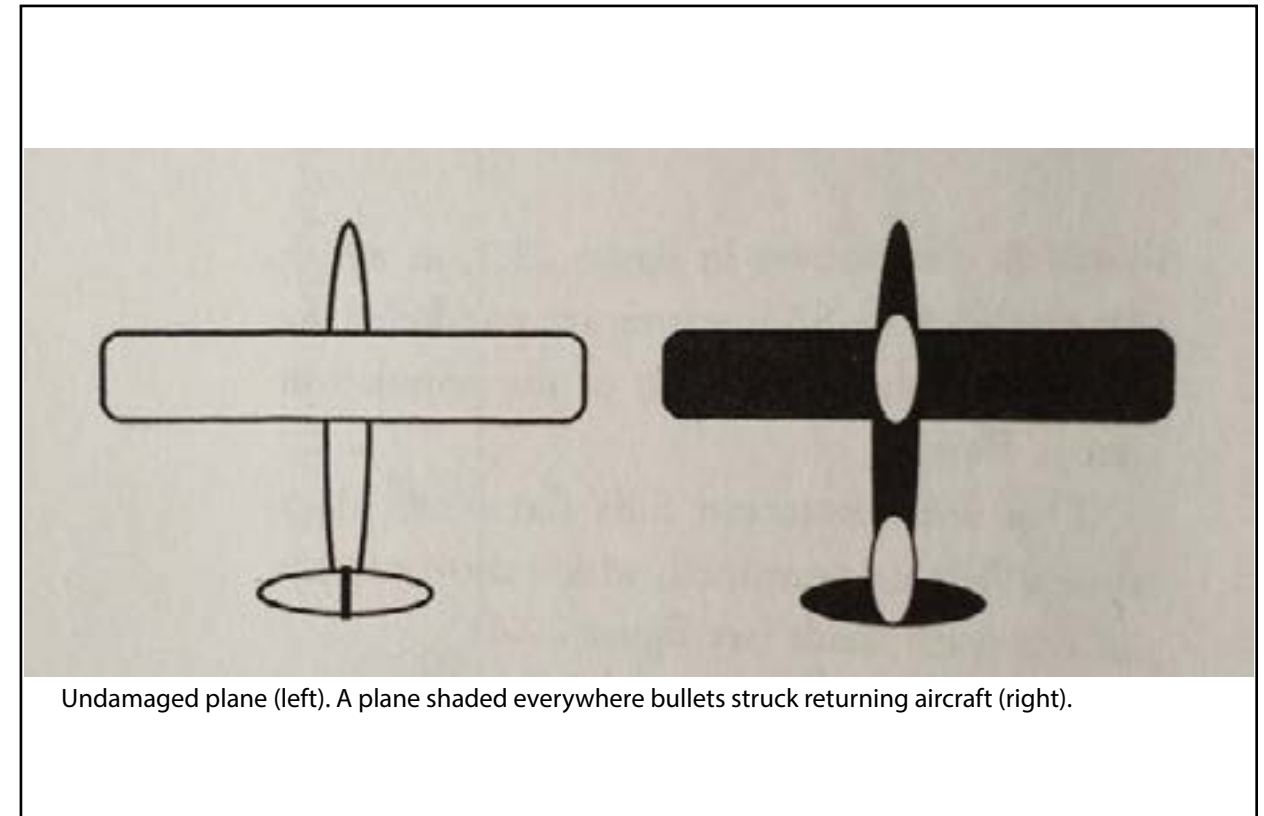
In WWII, a team was working to reinforce airplanes, to protect pilots from being shot down under heavy fire. They needed to minimize the amount of armor they used to reinforce the planes because the armor was very heavy and the plane could only support so much.

The team pulled together the data, recording every bullet hole on the planes coming back from battle. The result was an anatomy of common plane damage. The wings, nose, and tail were blackened with bullet holes, so these seemed to be the spots that needed more armor.

However, a mathematician named Abraham Wald looked at the data another way. He said the military didn't need to reinforce the areas of the plane that had bullet holes. They needed to reinforce the parts of the plane that didn't have bullet holes.

He argued that the planes that had been shot in these bullet-free zones never made it home to be accounted for, and so couldn't be included in the data. A bomber shot through the wing could likely make it to his diagram. A pilot shot through the cockpit wouldn't. So to best protect the pilots, they should reinforce the areas that hadn't been hit on any of the returning planes.

Only by taking into account what was missing from the data, was Wald able to come up with this insightful strategy.

.fearless