

# **The Business of Creativity: Mapping the Future of Canada's Advertising, Branding and Design Sectors**

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## What does it mean to work in advertising, branding or design in Canada?

Creative work in advertising, branding, and design broadly encompasses tasks that contribute to the creation of visual and strategic communications. This includes the development of brand identities, marketing campaigns, visual aesthetics, and content that are intended to engage and persuade audiences. Creative work in these fields blends art, technology, strategy, and business objectives, often relying on a deep understanding of consumer behaviour and cultural trends. This work can be performed through both analogue and digital media and includes tasks like concept development, content creation, graphic design, copywriting, visual storytelling, and market research. In the Canadian context, this work is performed by:

- **Creative Professionals:** Graphic designers, branding consultants, copywriters, art directors, creative directors, and multimedia specialists.
- **Strategists:** Marketing strategists, brand managers, and media planners.
- **Support Roles:** Project managers, client liaisons, administrative staff, and IT specialists who ensure the creative process runs smoothly.

### The Creative Economy vs. The Creative Industries

The distinction between the "creative economy" and "creative industries" is a critical one for our understanding of the impact of Canada's advertising, branding and design sector. While these terms are often used interchangeably, they represent different conceptual frameworks for understanding the role of creativity and creative work practices in economic production and labour markets [1]. This distinction is particularly relevant in examining the advertising, branding, and design sectors in Canada, which form an essential component of both.

The term "creative industries" emerged in policy discourse, particularly within the United Kingdom and later globally, to classify specific economic sectors driven by creative labour. The creative industries include advertising, publishing, film, music, television, design, and other cultural production fields. This framework is primarily sectoral, and it defines industries based on their primary output (media content, branded experiences, or artistic production etc) [2]. In contrast, the concept of the "creative economy" extends beyond specific industries to encompass a broader, more integrated understanding of the sectors of the economy that focus on the creation, production, and distribution of

goods and services that are primarily based on creativity, culture, and intellectual property [3].

Other definitions of the creative industries include:

- **United Nations Education Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO):** The cultural and creative industries are those that combine the creation, production and commercialization of creative contents that are intangible and of a cultural nature. These contents are usually protected by Copyright and can take the form of a good or a service. Besides all artistic and cultural production, they include architecture and advertising.
- **United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD):** The creative industries are at the core of the creative economy, and are defined as cycles of production of goods and services that use creativity and intellectual capital as their main input. They are classified by their role as heritage, art, media and functional creations.
- **World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO):** The Copyright-based industries are those that are dedicated, interdependent, or that are directly or indirectly related with the creation, production, representation, exhibition, communication, distribution or retail of Copyright protected material.
- **Department of Culture, Media and Sports of the United Kingdom (DCMS):** The creative industries are those activities based on creativity, individual talent and skill, and that have the potential to create jobs and wealth through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property.
- **Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC):** The content industries are: publishing, film, TV, radio, phonographic, mobile contents, independent audiovisual production, web contents, electronic games, and content produced for digital convergence (cross-media).

In the Canadian context, the advertising, branding, and design sectors are defined as creative industries - “those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” [4]. These agencies, studios and consultancies create content and experiences that often have both economic and cultural value, helping to maintain a “thriving, innovative creative industries ecosystem and tak[ing] Canadian content to the world” [5]. They also tend to be knowledge intensive, open to technological innovation, growing moderately in productivity and are recognized as key contributors to GDP growth, innovation, and job creation. The creative economy Canada has demonstrated significant growth potential to 2030 and beyond and is

recognized as being both uniquely resistant to automation and a key creator of employment opportunities. Perhaps more importantly, Canada's creative industries play a critical role in talent retention and in attracting young and skilled knowledge industry professionals to jobs at a low risk of automation, a key challenge facing our country in the future [6]. As global manufacturing sectors decline, creative sectors offer new opportunities for economic development, particularly in urban centres [7]. While policies at both the federal and provincial levels, such as those from the Canada Council for the Arts and Telefilm Canada, certainly impact these industries, advertising, branding and design focused employers rely on private-sector investment rather than public cultural funding to grow and sustain their businesses.

The impact of advertising, branding, and design work extends far beyond their industry context. Creatives at work in these organizations create work that intersects directly and meaningfully with other economic sectors. Branding strategies, for instance, influence retail and tourism, while digital advertising increasingly aligns with the technology sector through AI-driven marketing and big data analytics. This perspective acknowledges the fluid boundaries between industries and recognizes that creativity is embedded in multiple economic activities, including those not traditionally classified as "creative."

## **Defining Advertising, Branding and Design Industries in Canada**

**Advertising:** Advertising agencies specialize in crafting persuasive messages aimed at consumers, messages which are often shared through mass media channels (TV, radio, print, digital). They create ad campaigns, place them in periodicals, TV, social media, radio or other forms of media, and provide a full range of services for their business clients including consulting advice, creative services, account management, media planning and promotional strategy. Creatives at work in advertising agencies are experts in strategic planning, creative ideation, design, copywriting, media buying, and campaign management. In the current Canadian context, there are 8694 advertising agencies, and together they generate \$4.2bn in revenue (with a profit of more than \$481m - down 2.3% between 2019 and 2024). More than 36,400 Canadians work in advertising agencies, with 41.6% of those employees focused in Ontario, 31.6% in Québec, and 14.5% in British Columbia [8]. Advertising agencies are staffed by, on average, 1 and 99 employees, and only one agency in Canada employs more than 500 people [9]. This is an industry that is quickly changing, and that is characterized by adaptability and innovation. Digital and mobile advertising continue to be key to the evolution of advertising agencies and the services they offer, as do technological advancements like data analysis and machine learning. Other important trends shaping the work of advertising agencies include the impact of major mergers and acquisitions

within the Canadian context (notably: Omnicom's acquisition agreement with Interpublic Group in 2025), the advent of new services, and balancing the demands of tech and capital costs within specialized, creative service agency structures [8].

**Graphic Design:** Graphic design studios plan, design and manage the production of visual communication and the aesthetic presentation of visual information in print, digital or situated forms [10]. Graphic designers work in the studio context to provide services to a range of sectors, from advertising to product packaging, digital media, and corporate communication. These services might range from printing services, corporate and organizational image design, advertising and promotional design, publication design, commercial illustration design, website and digital design, or even wayfinding and packaging design. Overall, these studios generate \$1.6bn in revenue (with a forecasted rise of 1.7% between 2024 and 2029) and employ 6,446 Canadian creatives in 10,712 studios [11],[12]. Graphic design studios tend to be relatively small (in 2023 80.4% of Canadian graphic design studios were considered micro, with less than five employees; 19.4% employed under 99 Canadians, and only .3% of all graphic design studios had more than 100 employees) [7]. While graphic designers and design studios receive little industry assistance, they are connected in a vital network of associations (including the [Association of Registered Graphic Designers](#), and the [Design Professionals of Canada](#)). Most of the work done in Canadian graphic design studios focuses on corporate and organization image design (26.4% of the total reported products and services) or advertising and promotional design (24% of reported products and services) [11]. The work of graphic designers and graphic design studios is rapidly changing: digital technologies continue to shift the industry, as does the prevalence of AI in content generation and customization. Graphic design studios tend to be concentrated in major urban centres, with roughly one quarter of all Canadian graphic design businesses found in either Montreal or Québec city [11].

**Branding:** Branding consultancies in Canada provide a variety of services to other businesses and individuals, including brand strategy, identity, positioning and measurement. Creatives at work in branding consultancies are involved in the creation and management of an organization, service or individual's identity, including its logo, tagline, mission, values, media engagements and overall strategic storytelling plan. This can include everything from visual design to the development of brand narratives and positioning strategies: for that reason, many Canadians who work in branding are employed within advertising agencies, design studios, or as part of in-house teams for other corporations. Branding consultancies in Canada are part of a global market projected to reach \$94.2 billion by 2031, with an annual growth rate of 11.3% [13].

However, specific data on their size, scope, and economic impact within Canada is limited. Changes in this industry are often prompted by shifting digital transformations, globalization, rising use of AI in the generation, curation and customization of brand assets, and changing customer expectations [13].

## Mapping Creative Industries

There are five key framework models that can help us frame these critical industries, and their organizational structures, within the context of the broader creative economy. They help us understand that advertising, branding and design are creatively intense industries which can be framed in the creative industry sector or quadrant, and that these organizations employ specialist, support and embedded creatives who do creatively intense work that produces both cultural products and activities, and ancillary products and activities.

Model/Framework	Description	Position of advertising, branding and design in the model/framework
<a href="#">UNESCO Model of the Creative Economy</a>	The UNESCO model emphasizes the distinction between "creative" and "cultural" industries. While both involve creativity, cultural industries are those that produce goods or services rooted in culture (e.g., film, music, visual arts), while creative industries encompass a broader range, including design, architecture, and advertising.	Advertising, design and branding professionals can be found working primarily within the <b>creative industries sectors</b> of the UNESCO model, particularly under the visual arts and cultural industries categories [14].

<a href="#"><u>NESTA Four Cluster Model</u></a>	<p>The UK's National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) four-cluster model divides the wider creative economy into quadrants: creative industries, transversal industries, culture and cultural industries. The NESTA model is useful for understanding the diverse ways in which creative work contributes to both the cultural sector and broader economic activities.</p>	<p>Advertising, branding and design work creatives can be found working primarily in the <b>Creative Industries</b> quadrant of the NESTA model [4].</p>
<a href="#"><u>The Creative Trident Model</u></a>	<p>The Creative Trident Approach refines traditional occupational and sector-based definitions, offering a three-dimensional model that captures the complexity of creative labour within the creative industries. This model categorizes workers in specialist, support, or embedded categories. This model shifts emphasis from creative outputs to creative occupations as key inputs into the broader economy, illustrating how creative work is essential beyond traditional creative sectors. It also highlights the role of creative activities in the innovation process and economic diversification.</p>	<p>Advertising, branding and design work creatives can be found working in all <b>three categories of the creative trident model of the creative industries: specialist, support and embedded</b> [15].</p>

<p><a href="#">Creative Intensity Model</a></p>	<p>In 2013, Bakhshi et al. introduced five occupational criteria to assess creativity levels across the UK's Standard Occupational Classification (SOC), resulting in the development of the Creative Intensity Model which measures resistance to mechanization, the use of novel processes, non-repetitiveness or non-uniform function, creative contribution to the value chain and interpretation (not just transformation) [16]. The Creative Intensity Model provides a methodology for distinguishing creative sector work based on the proportion of creative jobs within an industry. Creative intensity is measured as the percentage of workers in creative occupations within a given industry, allowing researchers to classify industries as "creative" if their workforce surpasses a designated threshold of creative employment. This model provides a quantitative approach to defining the creative industries, ensuring that industry classifications are data-driven rather than purely sector-based.</p>	<p>Advertising, branding and design work in 2025 is considered to be <b>creatively intense</b>, with graphic design rated at 70% creatively intense, advertising services ranging from 25% to 41% creative intensity.</p> <p>Advertising, branding and design creatives are understood to be <b>working in creatively intense roles, in creatively intense industries</b> [17].</p>
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<a href="#"><u>Canadian Framework for Culture Statistics</u></a>	<p>The CSA framework was adopted by the Conference Board of Canada to define the creative industries and it measures the economic importance of culture in the Canadian economy, providing reliable and comparable numbers such as the gross domestic product, jobs and trade figures related to culture at the national, provincial and territorial levels. Under the Canadian Framework for Culture Statistics (CFCS), cultural production and activity are categorized into six core domains made up of goods, services, and activities that are the “result of creative artistic activity and whose purpose is to transmit an intellectual or cultural concept”.</p>	<p><a href="#"><u>In this framework,</u></a> advertising, design and branding fall either within category three (Visual and Applied Arts) or “transversal domains”. Within the CFCS, advertising, branding and design work is considered to be <b>both a cultural product and activity under Visual and Applied Arts, and an ancillary product or activity</b>, in the sense that they may be used to support manufacturing, construction, production, and/ or dissemination and presentation of cultural products and activity.</p>
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## How can we strengthen this professional community?

### Support creatives with portfolio careers

For designers, branding consultants, advertising creatives and others in this area of Canada’s creative industries, the shape of everyday work is changing rapidly. Their traditional employers – the studios, agencies and consultancies - are hiring more freelance, gig-based and contract creative workers than ever while shrinking their in-house staff at record rates. In the creative industries, this is often called “portfolio career” work [18], [19]. Statistics Canada defines gig workers as workers who “enter into various contracts with firms or individuals to complete a specific task or work for a period of time for which they are paid a negotiated sum.” This includes “unincorporated self-employed freelancers, day labourers, or on-demand or platform workers [20].”

Gig-based work in Canada's creative advertising, design and branding industries now represents 41% of all employment, and creatives in these sectors are more than twice as likely as other Canadians to be self-employed or working in a gig, contract, freelance or piecework model [21]. Indeed, gig work has become the expectation for creative professionals working in advertising, branding and design, rather than the exception to the rule: "Most creative workers [...] are contract labourers rather than permanent employees, are highly mobile in their place of employment, will typically experience 'portfolio careers' or multiple career pathways, and are less likely than in the past to be employed and trained through large, often public sector, agencies [22]". Gig economy work can take many forms. In the creative industries, gig work includes:

- **Freelance work:** short-term employment engagements with different clients on a project basis [23]
- **Limited Term:** a series of renewed fixed-term contracts with a single organization, often a former employer [24]
- **Contract work:** fixed-term contracts often brokered by an employment agency or creative collective [25]
- **Solopreneurship:** the formation of a single practitioner organization, framed as a mini agency or studio in the shape of the "smallest of small businesses" [26], often hiring out piecework to other creative sector participants [27].
- **Piecework:** work-on-demand employment facilitated through a digital platform where creative sector participants can pick up a part of a whole and are paid for the completion of a discrete task [28].

Gig-based creatives navigate their career path on a continuum between traditional employment and forms of gig labour, and that the transition to gig-based work is often instigated by a desire for independence and flexibility in their creative careers. Across all of the sectors, they share a sense of anxiety about the economic, social and personal consequences of moving across this continuum throughout their career [29]. However, they also describe the need for flexibility and balance that motivated their move from traditional employment to gig-based work (and back). In a study of gig-based creatives conducted in 2022, participants shared concerns about surge capacity, unpredictable schedules and finances, but those who had (or were currently) working in a gig-model also describe leading more aligned and creative lives than they had as traditional organization employees [29]. We ignore the gig-based realities of creative work at this sector's peril. Canada could support gig working or portfolio career creatives in our advertising, branding and design industries in several ways:

1. **Seed mentorship connections** throughout the student, apprentice, and professional stages of creative employment.
2. Find new ways to **align creative careers with creative experiences**.
3. Strengthen professional communities to **improve surge capacity**.
4. Integrate **new training and learning opportunities** into marketing and design curriculums to support a wider variety of creative practice and skill development.
5. **Establish strong networks** of gig workers and finding new ways to integrate them effectively into existing organizational cultures.

### **Leverage the impact of creative spillover.**

As Greig de Peuter describes, in recent years, “official interest in creative industries has focused on their market expediency, especially their ability to create intellectual property, generate entrepreneurial behaviour, and fuel job creation—all of which is closely linked to urban revitalization”[30]. While researchers such as Florida [31], Leadbeater [32] and Howkins [33] have been arguing the civic and urban development value of a thriving creative industry sector for more than 20 years, Canada is just now beginning to support creative industries with the intent of activating the “creative spillover effect” [34]. The UK Government’s *Design Council: Design Sprint for Creative Industries 2023* report defines creative spillover as “the process by which activity in creative industries has a subsequent broader impact on places, society, or the economy through the overflow of concepts, ideas, skills, knowledge, and different types of capital” [35]. Canada could strengthen creative organizations by leveraging the **creative spillover effect** in several ways:

1. **Cross-Industry Collaboration Hubs** – Establishing more spaces where creative professionals can interact with businesses in tech, healthcare, and other industries would encourage idea-sharing and innovation.
2. **Funding for Interdisciplinary Projects** – Grants and tax incentives for partnerships between creative organizations and non-creative sectors (e.g., branding agencies working with AI startups) would enhance knowledge transfer.
3. **Embedding Creativity in Business Education** – Encouraging business schools to integrate creative thinking and design methodologies would help companies across sectors benefit from creative industry practices.
4. **City-Level Creative Policies** – Urban planning initiatives that support mixed-use spaces, cultural districts, and affordable studio spaces can help creative professionals work alongside other industries. While creative

industries may benefit from direct government support, fostering the creative economy requires policies that encourage cross-sector collaboration, intellectual property protection, and digital innovation.

- 5. Stronger International Networks** – Expanding global partnerships for Canadian creatives through residencies, trade programs, and cultural exchanges would bring in new ideas and strengthen local industries.
- 6. Support for Creative Tech** – Investing in creative technology (AR/VR, AI-driven design) in collaboration with partners in design studios, and connecting it with Canada's strong tech sector, would amplify creative spillovers into new industries.
- 7. Public-Private Partnerships** – Encouraging corporations to work with creative agencies and creative workers on innovation projects (like brand storytelling or UX design) would bridge the gap between creative and commercial sectors.
- 8. Clusters and Micro Clusters** - Clusters and micro clusters are groups of businesses that benefit from being in close proximity to each other [36]. Supporting the development of clusters and micro-clusters in cities across Canada - and in rural areas as well - can help advertising, branding and design organizations share resources and knowledge, connect with a larger concentration of customers, and engage with more opportunities for collaboration.

## Moving Forward

The advertising, branding, and design sectors in Canada are a crucial component of the country's creative industries, contributing significantly to the economy, cultural innovation, and talent retention. These sectors play a pivotal role in shaping consumer engagement, brand identity, and the broader media and cultural landscape. However, as these industries evolve with technological advancements and shifting employment structures, it is imperative to implement strategies that ensure their sustainability and growth. While the industries face challenges such as automation, changing employment models, and evolving consumer behaviour, they also hold immense potential for innovation and economic impact. By fostering a resilient creative workforce, ensuring fair working conditions, and investing in professional development, Canada can maintain its position as a global leader in the creative industries – attracting new and exciting talent and thriving as a creative community.

To secure a sustainable future for these industries, stakeholders—including policymakers, industry leaders, educators, and creatives—must work collaboratively to

build a sustainable ecosystem that supports both emerging and established professionals. In doing so, Canada's advertising, branding, and design sectors will continue to drive economic and cultural success well into the future.

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