EPISODE 1: DAN GILBERT

**0:00:07 Host**: Hi and welcome to the very first episode of A Little Bit of Genius, a podcast brought to you by Nord Anglia Education students. In our first series we’ll be speaking to special guests from the worlds of Hollywood, the Financial Times, the world’s leading digital marketing agency and much, much more. We’ll be exploring why creativity is at the heart of everything they do. This week our fantastic hosts are Eli in year 12 and Hala in year 10, so thanks so much for listening, and now, over to you Hala.

**0:00:35 Hala:** We’re honoured today to be joined by Daniel Gilbert, the CEO of Brainlabs.

**0:00:40 Eli:** After spending two years at Google, Daniel founded Brainlabs, a digital marketing agency that specialises in pay-per-click advertising. The firm has received many awards for its unique marketing strategy including the Agency of the Year at the Masters of Marketing for two years consecutively.

**0:00:56 Hala:** Daniel, we’re so glad to have you on the show today, welcome.

**0:00:59 Daniel:** It’s an absolute pleasure and honour to be here thank you so much for having me.

**0:01:02 Eli:** Yeah, thank you for being on. I understand that you carry the nickname Superhero of Pay-Per-Click, and you frequently dress up like Superman when you’re giving keynote speeches. I find it really fascinating to see how much you’ve taken on the name. What would you say that the name means to you, and how important do you think it is to maintain a personal brand, if you…?

**0:01:21 Daniel:** I don’t know where you got this from or who’s set me up.

**0:01:25 Eli:** Your Twitter.

**0:01:26 Daniel:** Oh god yeah! Um, the superhero of marketing, I have, I mean I must confess, that has happened once or twice, maybe not in the last year, but if we ever meet, I promise to whip out the costume. I think it came from my son who thinks I’m a bit of a Superman, maybe, he’s the only one. I think on a personal brand level, perhaps my personal brand has unfortunately matured a little bit in the, in the time in between. Maybe with types of businesses or type of profile that I’m trying to build, well maybe I just got more boring and less fun as I go on, you know, which is a tragic shame, so maybe I have to work that back out for the next, so the next podcast that we do together. But certainly, on a personal brand level, these days I think there’s an expectation that a CEO of leadership within a business has a personal brand that people, you know, consumers and customers, can relate to so I think it’s a, it’s a smart strategy for any growing business to have, you know, to bring a kind of face or a personality to the overall kind of corporate brand.

**0:02:32 Eli:** So, our quote for discussion today comes from Edward de Bono, and it reads “Creativity involves breaking out of established patterns in order to look at things in a different way”. So, what would your initial reaction to this quote be?

**0:02:44 Daniel:** Well, I love it, first of all, and I think you could link creativity to entrepreneurship in a sense, I think that describes exactly what starting a business actually means, which is doing things differently.

**0:02:57 Eli:** related to that, what would creativity mean to you, especially into your, in relation to your work in marketing.

**0:03:04 Daniel:** I think it’s a really interesting question. Like in marketing, you’d think of as creative agency work that produces great ads, so if you think about the Mad Men era and all of the incredible advertising that they produced, that’s typically what we associate with creativity, but actually to the quote, and to a wider set of marketing principles, my belief is that creativity can apply to how you approach business and how you attack problems in a slightly different way, so in the sphere of digital marketing, a lot of the work that we do is more data driven that it is necessarily about creating 30-second ads or funny trailers, that kind of thing. It’s more about how we segment audiences and speak to different people in different ways with different ads. So, there’s a creativity that comes from how you use data and how you use technology in order to target people with advertising.

**0:03:57 Eli:** Yeah absolutely, it’s a really good point. Now, before we go any further, some of our listeners may not fully understand what some of the industry buzzwords mean, so if you could describe what digital marketing means to our audience?

**0:04:07 Daniel:** Sure. So, digital marketing is the highest wrapper and that just describes marketing that you do online, so if you think about all the different ways that people behave on the internet, there’s adverts that we show them at different phases of their online journey. So, when you’re on Facebook, for example, there are ads that come up in the news feed, when you’re on google searching for something, there are ads that come up with the top of the google search results. So, you would have all seen these ads, just using the internet, and its agencies or clients like ours that are responsible for placing those ads.

**0:04:45 Hala:** So, on a scale of one to ten, how would you say your job is creativity-wise?

**0:04:49 Daniel:** I would say that it’s 10 out of 10.

**0:04:52 Hala:** Oh wow.

**0:04:52 Daniel:** My job is to think of new ways to run a business and to approach some of the marketing challenges and some of the business challenges that we have, so it’s breaking out of the conventional box of how maybe other agencies do it or how clients would typically think about doing it, and that’s how you push the boundaries and drive forward as a business. Without that level of creativity, your business is really nothing.

**0:05:13 Eli:** Yeah, that’s great. How do you think the digital age has affected in your nature of marketing, not just in the medium, but in the way in which marketing or advertising campaigns are created, start to finish?

**0:05:23 Daniel:** That’s a really great question and it’s a really important one because there’s been some fundamental shifts in the way that marketing actually works and so if you just think back to 1978 when none of us were alive, there were three TV channels in the UK and the way that advertising worked fundamentally was that you had a had a creative agency and a media agency. So, the creative agency, like you might have seen in the show Mad Men, they would create really interesting ads and mostly TV ads, let’s say, and then the media agency would buy up the space and serve those ads up against, to try and target one audience. But the audience segmentation at that time might have been split between families, women, and men. So, the level of segmentation would have been relatively narrow. But with the age of, or with the advent of digital coming along, marketing kind of changed almost overnight. So, in 15 years, Google, or biddable auction based digital advertising, went from 2% of the total media landscape to more than 50% and any analyst that you look at will predict that digital advertising will be a hundred percent when that’s in 5 or 10 years, the market ecosystem has fundamentally shifted. And it’s within this digital landscape, or within these digital platforms, that we can target ads to a far greater degree than you would ever have got in that kind of TV based advertising. So, if you relate that back to today, you’re probably too cool to use Facebook, but Facebook itself, as an advertising platform, allows us to segment and target ads to people based on their age, their demographic, which pages they’ve liked, which other pages on the internet they’ve visited. All those data points and segmentation layers are opportunities for us to be more targeted with our advertising to try and target different messages to different people and different times. So, it allows us, when used properly, to be hyper targeted and hyper relevant, and to serve different messages that appeal to different people at different times.

**0:07:16 Hala:** Well can you tell us what do you look for when hiring someone?

**0:07:21 Daniel:** These days, when we hire, and this has changed within my business, we used to look for a scientific mindset because a lot of what we do is built around experimentation, so running lots of campaigns and split testing what works, so not just assuming that one marketing strategy will work about testing two different strategies and seeing which one through data actually works better. And that's still an important part of how we hire but, more than ever before, and this is part of our own learning experience over time, is looking for behavioural traits as a better predictor of someone's long-term success within our business. So, one of those things is to what extent are they growth versus fixed mindset, so what extent do they see problems as challenges and opportunities to learn, versus you know, and you might have observed this in within your classroom or within your peers, is that for some people it's too difficult or they can't do it or it's beyond their capability, and for other people it's just something they haven't learned yet.

**0:08:24 Hala:** True.

**0:08:24 Daniel:** Those are two fundamentally different mindsets that for us is one of the biggest single predictors, there's many more, but it's one of the biggest single predictors of whether or not someone will be able to adapt and grow with this business as we've been through quite a vast growth trajectory ourselves which requires a huge amount of change.

**0:08:44 Hala:** Well, what you just listed I kind of fit so in a few years’ time, if you see me right at your doorstep, you’ll know why.

**0:08:54 Daniel:** You know, on that the it's some of the behaviours and you're in a fantastic institution and we see this for sure, but in conventional school systems it's often the technical skills that are emphasized and the learning of technical knowledge, when actually, in the world that we operate in now, because of the pace at which the markets are moving, and the skills are changing, and the code language is adapting and all the rest of it, it's the behavioural traits that are more important. So it's how you grow as an individual, and how you grow as a person, and how you can focus on yourself and your own growth, and how you collaborate with other people that are far more important indicators of long-term success than ‘have I acquired this technical skill and can I do it proficiently’.

**0:09:39 Hala:** Definitely agree, by the way.

**0:09:41 Eli:** Moving towards, also related to employees but more towards Brainlabs itself, I'm aware that Brainlabs has set a very high standard in regard to gender equality and maintaining a positive work environment, so how do you think that companies today especially those in engineering/technology related fields can improve upon their own workplace equality?

**0:10:00 Daniel:** I think the first step is, well, personally it doesn't relate I don't think to engineering or technology relating fields, it relates to all businesses, and for me the businesses that succeed will be the ones that really get this right, which is how do you create a positive work environment. And I guess the simplest way to describe this is the first step is recognising it's something that you can work on and change, so you don't get equality, a positive work environment without actually setting out to deliberately create a positive and equal type environment, and there are loads of different strategies that permeate everything that you do one of the important ways to control this is to actually write this down in a, we call it handbook, and having process in place so you know even in our recruitment we deliberately have blind CV’s so that we're not we're not biased by the names or the some of the background of the people that were interviewed. The interview process itself is designed to remove more and more bias as we as we progress our function. And once people are here the same is, the same is true we have performance management systems and assessment systems that are data-driven as opposed to qualitative otherwise you end up with all kinds of imbalance based on, not just gender for example, but also personality so introverts versus extroverts, and we want to control for all of those things, and create equal environments based on newer diversity as well which, I think, is a fancy word for explaining that different people have different behaviours and go about their business in a different way, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they're more or less valuable for a business.

**0:11:40 Hala:** So, can you explain to us, in depth please, what your day-to-day responsibilities are?

**0:11:46 Daniel:** In depth, Hala, wow.

**0:11:48 Hala:** Really curious, so.

**0:11:51 Daniel:** My first responsibility is to my family, I've got four kids and I have to look after them, second responsibility is myself, so I have to look after myself make sure that I'm mentally and physically prepared for the day, and that's taking note of what I have to do, it's working out, it's looking after myself, and then when it's to the office, no day, no single day necessarily looks the same but it's about circling through all of the key roles of a CEO in a growing business, which is defining the vision and strategy. Where do we want to be in three years’ time, what are the best routes for us to get there, making sure that I've got the right team and the team are motivated, meeting with important stakeholders and partners of the business. My day varies between an internal and external focus, at the moment more internal than historically, because we've got quite a new team in different areas and bringing them up to speed to kind of coach them along to help them become better leaders within the business. So, no single day the same but I think that's what keeps it interesting and even versus a year ago my role has changed significantly. That's a fun part of the job is that it gets to change as you as you grow.

**0:13:04 Hala:** It sounds like you have such a colourful life so you should be thankful, it's really, really, great.

**0:13:10 Daniel:** Yeah indeed. That's part of it, it's also no matter what you have, is being thankful and grateful for what you have is a skill, not a personality trait so something that can be trained and grown, and I'd say that's been the most important part of my development. And the funny thing is when you learn how to be grateful, you find so many more things to be grateful for.

**0:13:34 Hala:**  Yeah what type of difference do you want to bring to this world? Everybody wants to put their fingerprints somewhere where's yours?

**0:13:42 Daniel:** Um, I think I'm still on the path to figuring that out personally actually, I know that one of the areas of opportunity for me is to drive this message that a business for good is good for business, and the two don't necessarily have to conflict or actually shouldn't conflict in the world that we live in now. And we've seen that throughout our business in a number of different ways which is, being transparent with clients as in the long run served us best, and being good to our people, so really looking after the people in the businesses has just allowed us to grow because of how we've looked after, and grown our staff, and then having some sort of wider impact on the community and the wider environment, not necessarily that you need to track the results that come back from it, but have this sort of warm, fuzzy feeling that the more and more that we that we contribute and give to the community, the more that comes back, and we can't track it but we feel it, and that's kind of my mission ultimately is to be more than a business, but to give to, be a kind of force for good that creates a positive impact on the world.

**0:14:51 Hala:** Such great intentions, Daniel.

**0:14:55 Eli:** What would you say to people who are looking to pursue a career that might be similar to yours, what would you say to people who may want to study at Oxford who may want to pursue a career in digital marketing working at Google, Brainlabs etc.?

**0:15:09 Daniel:** I think those are three quite different things. Listen, I think on each of those, individually, there are different there's different advice that I would dispense or counsel for each of those things I think there are a couple of overarching themes that I think you could apply to each of them which is focus on what's going to make you happy, first and foremost, because if you can find that then your work actually spans out from there and will be the very best that you can produce, and I think the second part is that, for whatever it is, have a strategy. I often find the people, while they might be strategic about certain things at work or on behalf of their clients and that sort of thing, they don't tend to take that same strategic approach to their life, they don't organize their time in order to decide what's most important to them and what they want to achieve. Maybe people think it's uncreative, or uninteresting, or they just kind of want to go with the flow, and I was probably like that once upon a time. I think there's great power in really deciding what you want to do and what the best way to get there is, and even how you structure your day. If you have a kind of overarching mission then it helps you sort through what's important and what's not important to you, so deciding what you want to do and deciding what the steps to get there are quite important; on a personal level, for me, that means that family and myself and my work are my priorities and that makes it quite easy to say no to extra external engagements that people are trying to pull me into. And I kind of wish I'd known that when I was younger because you get places much quicker when you're fully dedicated to that and not in a kind of conflict mode where you do things that your heart knows you don’t want to do, you know you do, and what I'm hoping you actually further, get closer to what you want to achieve.

**0:16:48 Host:** You're listening to a little bit of genius a podcast run by Nord Anglia Education students. on our next episode we're talking to award-winning author and philanthropist Deborah Ellis, on everything from her work supporting women in Afghanistan, to making a movie out of her book with Angelina Jolie; “The things that divide us are smaller than the things that bring us together”.

**0:17:11 Eli:** So, it's mentioned on the Brainlabs website that you have people working there with degrees in anything from humanities to rocket science, and it's a very broad spectrum of people working at your company. So, what did you personally study at University, and what would you say is important for people to study if they're looking to pursue a career in digital marketing?

**0:17:30 Daniel:** I think the website hasn't been updated in a while, if I were to read, if I were to rewrite that it would look a bit different because, to the earlier point about behaviours over technical skills, whether or not someone has a university degree has actually become less and less important to us over time. Like we used to be so scientific and quant, that we kind of hired engineers to do what we needed to do, and exclusively hired people with that kind of technical background at university level. But the world is changing, and so is our attitude to what works, and this is only through experimentation and the humility to understand and recognize what works and what doesn't, is that our most successful people aren't necessarily the ones that have the highest level of technical achievement from University, the ones that have the right behaviours attitude and growth mindset. And I would emphasize that more than anything else is that in this day and age, particularly in the way that the economics of university attendance are changing, I don't know if this is really off key for the for the type of audience that you have, I just think that we're going to see more diverse routes to success than previously, and I welcome that not discourage it.

**0:18:42 Hala:** Speaking of success how did you get a job at Google?

**0:18:46 Daniel:** How did I get a job at Google? At the time they did 15 interviews or something, they've subsequently improved their process. I think they realized that the decision-making, I read a piece about this, that the decision-making matrix post for interviews didn't actually change, so they didn't need to do that many like, it didn't get any more data. But I mean you know part of believing in destiny or the right fit, I applied for 40 or 50 other graduate schemes and didn't get any of them, it was only really Google, and at that time Google was hiring for a kind of entrepreneurial mindset so they had spotted something in me that really wasn't appropriate for some of the other and graduate schemes that had applied for, so call it fate, destiny, good match, I was the right fit for Google at the time, and had an amazing time, and it really worked out for the best.

**0:19:36 Hala:** Do you know how to write code? Just gonna fill that in there since we're interested.

**0:19:38 Daniel:** Not anymore, I don't. My technical capability in virtually every part of the businesses has reduced quite substantially, and I don't say that with any regret, my job has just changed, and you know on a day-to-day basis my work is more focussed on external relationships, and on financial structures, and corporate structures rather than technically executing any work.

**0:20:05 Eli:** Linking in from that, how do you think that learning code can have a positive effect on someone's mindset in terms of problem solving?

**0:20:12 Daniel:** Well, I like, we like to teach people how to code here, because it's the language of logic, and it's another language, and it's not the only way to think, but it's a useful way of training people to think. And when you think about the beginnings of code, not everyone needs to be a world-class programmer, when you think about what code is doing is its expressing a series of commands in sentences that built up through kind of units, so it's like if statements like, if this is true then do this, but if that's not true then then do this, and it's lots of conditional statements, that are kind of a language of their own, regardless of the technical language that we use. And I think that's really powerful, like it creates some clarity of thought that can be applied to a much wider business context, even outside of programming itself. And that's a nice discipline, I think really should be taught from the youngest age, not as an exclusive way of thinking, just as another way of thinking about problem sets.

**0:21:11 Eli:** Jumping around a little bit, as technology is an ever-changing field, it's obviously quite hard to predict, but as a self-described techno optimist, what are the largest technological changes you expect to see in the next decade, and how will the role of marketing change as a result?

**0:21:26 Daniel:** Well, I think and the first thing to say is that technology has always been changing the way that we do things, and it's perhaps a symptom of current society, or any society at any given time, to have this element of fear about what technology is, and what it might do. But even going back to ATM’s, or cash machines, once upon a

time there were bank tellers and they distributed notes and handed out, and counted out money when you went to the bank, so there was, if you read any of the material from the time, there was a great fear that ATM’s, or cash machines, would replace all of these people, and how tragic was that. We know from today that it's quite a convenient way of withdrawing money from the bank, and that also there are more people employed in the financial sector today than there ever have been, proportionately or relatively, so it’s had the opposite effect of removing the need for people working in the banking sector, it's increased it because they're now focused on more strategic tasks, like inviting you on which accounts to open, or which products to buy, or which mortgages to take out. So, the next phase will look not that different, like it's happened many times before, we'll just start to automate things that are currently part of our day-to-day interaction, or that are currently jobs. So, it's incumbent upon us to work out how to develop with that, not fight against it. It's almost inevitable, I don't take great joy in it, but some of the jobs that we see today, won't be jobs in 10 to 20 years. We'll have different jobs, and that part I think is a good thing, and many of those jobs we don't even know the titles of them yet, and we'll find them out. And I think likewise many other jobs that we all have today, our grandparents would find quite amusing, or possibly a bit ridiculous. You know, podcast engineers, podcast interviewers, like the two of you are doing, I'm sure that your grandparents, or great-grandparents, would struggle to understand precisely what that is. A new version of a theme, it's a great job, and you're doing a great job of it as well.

**0:23:26 Hala:** So, as a CEO, is there something within technology that you hate doing, something that if you need to do, you're like, I think I'm gonna procrastinate about that?

**0:23:36 Daniel:** Hala, you underestimated my level of growth mindset, I don't hate anything that I do. I find a way to either enjoy it or take advantage of my very privileged position as the founder and CEO of a business and delegate it to someone else. You’ve got to enjoy some parts of being CEO! On a serious note, if there is anything I dislike, or I find I'm procrastinating around, this is part of my personal power, is assessing, like asking myself why, like why do I keep leaving this, why do I not want to do it, what is the mental barrier that's stopping me from doing this, is there someone else that could do this better? But it's really having that self-awareness to understand why you're procrastinating, and you know I used to do it as a student, for sure, I used to leave everything to the last minute and cram, you know, in the last minute.

**0:24:27 Hala:** So do we.

**0:24:28 Daniel:** Well, you know, good things can come, and you know there are great people that cram. Now I'm in trouble with all of your teachers! But I think, you know, if I'd had the self-awareness at the time then and understood the why behind that, and enforced myself to kind of think about it, then I could have developed that to a level, and been more self-reflective, and to understand why I was doing it, and understood, you know, if that was because of the work or how the work was being done, or accepting that that was how I best operated and that's okay too.

**0:25:00 Eli:** Yeah, that’s certainly a good mindset to have to sort of figure out what exactly it is that's preventing you from doing something. I think it links back to that logical thinking that you were talking about.

**0:25:11 Hala:** What are some stereotypes in this industry people usually put you in? Like stereotypes for people who work in this industry.

**0:25:17 Daniel:** Oh gosh.

**0:25:18 Hala:** There could be none.

**0:25:22 Daniel:** I saw an interesting article the other day that said, it was a survey of the general population, and the extent to which they trusted different industries or people, I suppose industries rather than people specifically in those industries, but the astonishing thing was that advertising as an industry, scored below politics, it had like the lowest out of any field. People are hugely distrusting of advertising, and want to avoid it at all costs, and I think they probably have every right to be, right? There's a lot of advertising noise in our industry that doesn't help us, some of it is misleading to consumers, or forces them to, kind of, encourage us to buy things that they don't need and creates this kind of false economy. So, it's a very important and not unjustified stereotype, necessarily, but our job really is to fight against that and show what the power of advertising really can do to help people identify with and connect with great brands.

**0:26:19 Hala:** Daniel, if you could know the absolute and total truth to one question, what question would it be?

**0:26:26 Daniel:** Whoa! Hala, talk about finishing things up with an intense one.

**0:26:29 Hala:** I know, right.

**0:26:32 Daniel:** If I could know one thing, the truth about one thing, and one thing only? I think truth is an elusive concept, like everyone has their own version of truth, and it's almost dangerous and damaging to our society at the moment to have this assumption of a single truth. If anything, learning to progress as people and as a nation is understanding the dignity of difference, and recognizing that, you know, you can frame this in our current political environment; you can disagree with someone but they can still be right, and you can both be right, and there's not necessarily only one answer or only one way of getting that. I think the sooner that we, that we show the humility to understand that there's not only one right answer, or not only one version of the truth, the quicker that we could be to embrace our fellow people, listen, learn and engage with them, as opposed to this; what I feel is an increasingly polarized society where you have to be on one side or the other, you have to be one thing or the other, behind one person or another, actually I think it's okay to be a bit of both. And it's okay to respect those that, and understand, and be friends even, with those that maybe don't share the same version of the truth, and the world would be a much better place if we could get there.

**0:27:42 Hala:** Can I just say that you are so wise, every single question, we want one answer and you give us like four! Wow, setting such a great example for your children.

**0:27:54 Daniel:** Ah, they’re not old enough to understand yet!

**0:27:57 Hala:** Yeah that's okay they will, they will.

**0:27:59 Eli:** So, we're running a little bit short on time, unfortunately, but we've been really, really, glad to have you on the podcast, it's been great talking to you.

**0:28:07 Daniel:** My pleasure

**0:28:08 Eli:** Thanks to everyone for listening and we hope you've all enjoyed this episode. If you want a little bit more genius, subscribe to this podcast.

**0:28:14 Hala:** This podcast is brought to you by Nord Anglia Education students. If you want to learn more about Nord Anglia Education, you can visit us online at nordangliaeducation.com. We'll be back again soon so thanks again for listening and have a great day, goodbye.

**0:28:30 Eli:** Thank you.

**0:28:31 Daniel:** Great questions.

**0:28:48 Daniel:** I hope it was useful and you can spread the message for doing something. What a cool institution that you've got that lets you build a podcast.

**0:28:56 Eli:** Yeah, thank you for being on super great to have you on, really insightful.

**0:29:00 Daniel:** My pleasure.