

Guide to Creative Thinking

By Nick Fitzherbert MIPR, Magic Management

We all have creativity within us and we can all learn how to awaken it, so proving that it is not the sole preserve of so-called creative 'types'!

The trouble is that few of us have ever been taught how to think creatively, but by following some simple rules and taking a structured and disciplined approach anyone can generate a multitude of ideas to make a real difference to their business. The starting point is to understand a few fundamentals:

- Creative thinking is difficult – it runs contrary to our natural habits of recognition, judgement and criticism
- It's work! Edison said creativity is 5% inspiration, 95% perspiration
- It's not just for the 'promotional' end of communication. Creativity can and should be applied to communications strategy, media strategy, client relationships, internal communication, even crisis communication – and beyond

Effective brainstorming

Creativity starts with brainstorming, but to be effective you need to go back to basics with the strict rules and techniques originally invented by the American advertising executive Alex Osborn in 1941. We all think we know how to brainstorm, but few have actually been taught how to make it really work for us.

Alex Osborn said:

- Objectives must be specific
- You must have a clear definition of your problem / opportunity
- Example solutions are unhelpful
- Brainstorming is very good for generating lots of ideas, but not for analysis or decision making
- Stick to the rules of brainstorming:
 - No criticism of ideas
 - Encourage wild and exaggerated ideas
 - Build on each others' ideas
 - Equal status for all

I underline Osborn's rules by issuing participants with a list of 'idea killers' – typical everyday phrases that are simply not allowed in a brainstorm session. Examples include "We tried that before and it didn't work", "We'll never have time to do it", "What will they say upstairs?" and those two apparently innocuous but fatal words "Yes, but...".

Organising your brainstorming session

Preparation

- Go steady on numbers. Six is probably ideal, but a good mix is the main priority. If you have the same people you are likely to end up with the same ideas!
- Think carefully about who to invite. A round robin email is probably the worst way to recruit. Ideally you need some members of the group you are targeting (bring them in!), and some 'Hunters and Gatherers' – people who get out and about and keep in touch with what is happening. You also need some 'non-experts' i.e. non-PR people. The trouble with experts is that they know too much about what can't be done, which does not stimulate free thinking. Above all, your brainstormers must feel selected and valued
- Choose one person to chair and record the meeting
- Stick to the time you have allocated as this will help to create momentum
- The most important equipment is Blu-tack – you should be planning to paper the walls with flipchart sheets full of ideas. NB: you should expect to discard 90% of these eventually, so you need to create lots initially
- Beware alcohol and too much comfort – neither is likely to be conducive to generating lots of ideas, though the former could be successfully promised as a reward at the end

Getting underway

- Introduce everyone to each other, then set simple, clear objectives, without giving too much background
- Keep ownership of ideas broad. Avoiding the use of individuals names will help and you can draw contributions from others so as to muddle the ownership
- Spell out the rules

Four levels of brainstorming

- **Level One – Word Associations**
Move to your flip chart and write down the left hand side all the words or thoughts that people immediately associate with the key word in the objectives. E.g. if the objective is to build customer loyalty, then among the words associated with Loyalty might be: Returning, Warm Feelings, Familiarity, Affinity, Habit etc
- **Level Two – Free Thinking**
Once you have a list of Word Associations, see what thoughts any of these might spark. Fill up your flipchart with these thoughts and ideas should start emerging
- Note all your thoughts, however ridiculous. Follow the 90/5/5 rule: expect to throw away 90%; 5% you would probably have got anyway; it is the remaining 5% that contain the gems
- **Level Three – Tested Strategies**
Apply whatever principles have worked for you in the past to the challenge in hand. I run through a checklist of 'PR generators', each of which is designed to make news. These include Familiarity with a twist (thinking of the obvious solution, then turning it on its head); Goldmining (looking for gems that might exist in terms of backroom expertise, history or quirky stories) and Riding the coming news agenda (what is coming up that the media will be looking for different angles on and how could we exploit that?)

➤ **Level Four – Lateral Thinking for additional ideas if needed**

For this you need to force yourself to consider the challenge from completely different perspectives so as to spark ideas that would never have occurred to you otherwise. This is difficult for most people because our brains naturally click into what we already know about the topic and provides us with a list of expectations. The brain automatically rejects what does not fit naturally with those expectations, so we have to force the process. I use a system called Magical Mindset that I have developed with Magic Management to replicate the ways that magicians think

Brian Eno, the Roxy Music keyboard player, record producer and acclaimed creative 'guru', also has a system called Oblique Strategies. As with Magical Mindset he uses a set of cards, each with a instruction that must be applied to the challenge in hand, however ridiculous it may seem at the time. These systems force us to address the challenge in a manner that would never have occurred to us otherwise.

Examples of Magical Mindset that I have used in recent sessions include 'Reversal', where you imagine for a moment you are trying to achieve the opposite of your stated objectives. In a scheme to encourage greater take up of Broadband, one Reversal suggestion was to 'increase jargon'. This helped to pinpoint the fact that jargon was already so rife that there was little scope for any more! A peculiar concept had taken us straight to the real nub of the problem. Another example is 'Passion Piece', which encourages you to apply the rules of your personal interest - football for instance - to the challenge. When you start considering options such as 'changing the manager' and 'resting key players' you know that not only are you addressing some thorny problems but you have found a much easier way to 'say the un-sayable'!

Concluding the meeting

- Stick to time, unless you're really flying
- Thank everyone and plan how to take the ideas forward
- Tell the team how to feed in additional ideas they have post-meeting
- Maybe set them a 'bath time challenge' – a related, but completely new challenge to consider during quiet moments
- Then, it's time for refreshment!

Post session

Organise the ideas into:

- Excellent / Interesting / Back burner
- Assign responsibilities for development
- Consider using De Bono's 'Six Hats' technique for analysis

Six Hats helps to overcome the Western approach to creativity, which is that ideas should be hammered into shape by argument. This introduces a mix of emotions, information, logic and hope, so leading to confusion. Six Hats simplifies the process by organising everyone into thinking in one direction at a time – a time for criticism, a time for looking for benefits, a time for expressing emotion etc. For each of these you metaphorically wear a different coloured hat, so that it is completely clear in which direction the discussion is currently moving.

To reiterate

- Brainstorming needs organisation and structure if it is to work
- Follow and apply the rules
- Then go wild – you need quantity rather than quality
- Use the levels as required

Finally...

Remember that bad brainstorming is (much) worse than no brainstorming!