

Kick Starting Creativity . . . Especially in a “Not-So-Creative” Environment

Society for Marketing Professional Services – Houston

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November 6, 2007

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Thinking is tough enough. Thinking creatively is tougher. Thinking and feeling creative in a less than favorable or not-so-creative environment can at times really be a stretch, and a challenge to anyone.

Ever had an idea stomped on? Ever been thwarted in developing what you think is a really cool approach to solving a problem or touting your company’s message, only to be told it will never fly? We all have.

I was a senior writer/producer at Halliburton for a few years. I know what it’s like and how it feels to almost have every sense of creativity sucked out of you; to sort of wonder “why did you guys hire me in the first place?” Working in a traditional, conservative, staid engineering environment was no fun – at first. Then I learned to adapt and have some fun. More on this later.

When is that next great idea is going to hit you or how are you going to handle it after it hits? Can’t think clearly? In this “Lunch & Learn” we’ll explore how to get your brain rejuvenated, your imagination tingling and your creative juices flowing again.

Regardless of what aspect of the creative process you’re involved in, creativity is a state of mind. And when the mind is having fun, creativity is boundless. Today we’re exploring thought and mind power. It doesn’t matter whether you’re an artist, wordsmith, media planner, financial planner, business development manager, support person or even involved in

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architecture, engineering or construction. Each one of us represents a different perspective, a different creative slant, if you will.

But what is “creativity?” Let me offer some views. Creativity occurs when people perceive there are no limits; it’s the ability to see, feel, touch, think and imagine what one has not seen, felt, touched, thought or imagined before; it’s solving a communications or marketing problem in order to stimulate demand; and my favorite, creativity is intelligence having fun.

But beware. From a marketing perspective, don’t confuse “creativity” with being “cutesy.” Cutesy doesn’t necessarily convey “smartness.” Sometimes I think we get too complex in our attempt to be creative. The idea should be simple and the execution done in a way that a 9-year old can understand it. As my reminders, I think of Peanuts (Snoopy) and Dr. Seuss. Both are alive and well in my office.

If you’ve been to my Web site or have seen any of my marketing materials, you’ll notice I have a thing about crayons. Well, there’s a method to my madness. Crayons are the essence of creativity. Visit my Web site and read *The Crayon Story* and you’ll understand better. Lest you forget, I have some magical crayons with me for those wishing to enhance their creativity. I said there’s a method to my madness . . . More on the madness thing a bit later.

In order to innovate and create, move beyond the conventional. Albert Einstein once said “*Imagination is more important than knowledge.*” Whether you believe that or not, *never underestimate the power of your mind – or your imagination.* Don’t ever be afraid to ask, “ Why, Why not or What if . . .?”

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Another caveat: You can't turn creativity on and off like a power switch. The mind will work on what it wants to work on. Say you intend to work on Project A but you begin on Project B. Don't fight it. Let your mind tinker on what it chooses to do – be that for ten minutes or two hours. Your intelligence wants to play. And, your imagination wants to take advantage of that.

Under a deadline and don't have time to “play?” . . . Then do something, anything, different than that which you have to do now. Do it for at least 10-15 minutes. Give your mind time to adjust. This could be as simple as taking a walk down the hall, outside your building and back again.

Creativity needs to become more synonymous with that often under-rated four-letter word, “FUN!” Ideas foster creativity and vice versa. When imagination is thrown in, ideas can be nourished through the creative process so they'll resonate with personality.

Okay, it's time for some fun. Based in part on my handout article from the Houston Business Journal, here are some winning and wacky ways to kick start your creativity:

Ye Olde Creativity Survival Kit – Get any sort of container (old, cleaned out paint can is great) in which you place whatever makes you FEEL creative and THINK creatively. A music CD, crayon, gum, Post-it Notes (for that next, great idea) are all wonderful examples. If you're thinking this is just silly, well you're absolutely right. When it comes to creativity, silly is sometimes serious business. I proudly had this on display in my office at Halliburton and

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chuckled every time someone came in and looked at it. Needless to say, I got some “interesting” reactions.

Halliburton Poster – “For a good time, Call . . .” – An example of creativity in a not-so-creative environment. The problem was that the IT Help Desk had an image problem and most times the callers were not having a good time when discussing what was wrong with their computers. Our challenge was to lighten things up a bit and convey the Help Desk as a reliable and enjoyable resource.

A graphic designer found this photo of an elderly woman but needed some copy to go along with it. Irreverence and tongue-in-cheek intended, this was our initial version, with the headline reading, “For a Good Time, Call 1-800- . . .” While reaction ranged from laughter to “really being original,” it was also labeled as being sexist and the internal client would never go for it.

While I didn’t agree with them, I was forced to come up with an alternative. The main thing changed was the headline. It became “Mother wouldn’t steer you wrong” or something to that effect. I may have lost that particular battle but not the war. Be selective when you decide to do battle, and never fall in love with an idea so much that you lose sight on alternative ideas that may have as much if not more punch than your original did.

Shortly after that episode, the department manager came into my office and complimented me on the poster campaign, having just proudly showed them to his boss. Putting things into perspective, he told me that a year ago, they wouldn’t have been able to even present something

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like this to other areas of the company. This was a number of years ago. They had indeed come a long way.

Thinking at Warp Speed – Generating ideas at breakneck speed is a great way to capture ideas on Post-it Notes (one idea per note, 1-2 words per note) in answering a specific question to solve a problem (like, “How will we increase membership by 10% by end of calendar year?” or “What would constitute the perfect trade show booth?”).

You don’t have time to analyze and judge and, as such, you circumvent fear (of a bad idea).

When you do this, remember it’s a timed exercise, but plan to shoot for 30 ideas in 5 minutes or 50 ideas in 10 minutes. Each group should have 4-5 people and have an alarm clock or timer.

If you have a facilitator, this would be his/her job. But don’t think too hard. You’re just generating ideas.

Drill Down Technique – How do you know when you’ve hit THE idea? In somewhat of a continuation from Thinking at Warp Speed, there are two different approaches: (1.) Choose the top five ideas, then the two best of the five, and then the “best.” Before you would begin either of these two approaches, rid yourselves of any duplicate ideas.

The other approach goes the opposite direction and may uncover something to which you might not give a second thought. Again, choose what you consider to be the best five ideas and **ELIMINATE THEM.**

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Workshops in which I’ve participated actually had staff come down the aisle with a trash can collecting the discarded notes. Needless to say, there were some surprised and bewildered attendees. They made the point that these ideas, for the purpose of this exercise, don’t exist anymore.

Choose five more and ELIMINATE THEM, and so on in increments of five until you have five left. Then eliminate three, then one. Maybe this last idea you have is the best one (it may not be but you don’t know that yet), or one to which you may not have paid much attention . . . but now you should.

What would be fun and interesting is to take these two divergent ideas you’ve just discovered from both approaches and develop them simultaneously but separately. This is where two different color Post It notes would come in handy.

Jekyll & Hyde Approach – See the same problem/challenge from different perspectives to arrive at several solutions. A designer invents a logo; he then re-invents it, not looking at all like the first one. A writer composes a draft for an ad or speech. One may be humorous, the other serious. Either way, the objectives were still met but the solution was not limited to just one version.

Jolly Green Giant-sized Yellow Wallpaper – Giant Post-it Notes are great for brainstorming. Ideas, words, thoughts, sketches, silly stuff, serious stuff, whatever, can all be included. As you

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finish with one, post it on the wall. Don't take it down. Let them cover a designated “Idea Wall” in your office or some place you can easily refer to them.

I did this at Halliburton. It was understood that whenever my office door was open, folks were welcome to drop in and write or draw whatever on the Idea Wall. At the very least, take your smaller Post It notes and put them up on your office door; now you have an “Idea Door.”

The point is to always have them in plain sight. Even when you're thinking or working on a different project, you look over at the ideas and something may just trigger something else.

A bit of a reality check: You may not be able to get your colleagues to appreciate the value of creativity, but you can certainly do some things that will help convince them that what you're doing matters.

Listen, listen, listen! Be aware of your surroundings and learn what your clients and colleagues, both internal and external, want and need. How do you do that? Start by asking probing questions beyond what is normally asked. Nothing is out of bounds or closed to discussion until someone says it is. Then, ask why, respectfully, but pointedly. Eventually, you'll discover new and different points of view.

You're also discovering a new paradigm: Provoke conversation. Think of it as a new mindset, of being like an investigative reporter. You're constantly refining the questions. The

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more you get your colleague or client to converse, the better informational foundation you lay for idea generation.

Remember, though: An idea can come from anywhere and anyone. And, for best results, it should be media and discipline neutral. Otherwise, you limit yourself. It’s what we do with the idea that matters. In other words, how will it work and how will it be relevant?

In an attempt to sway your “less than creative” colleagues to better appreciate where you’re coming from, you need to make sure they understand you. As ideas are developed, refine their essence. That is, make sure your ideas are clear and that you can explain their basic value in about 20 seconds. This makes it easier for the idea to gain acceptance.

If up to now this presentation could be deemed “winning and wacky” insights on creativity, this next section might possibly be viewed as just odd or mysterious, but true.

I said earlier there was a method to my madness. Well . . .

Several years ago Harvard University did a study on the relationship between creativity and madness. Ignoring what seems irrelevant to your immediate needs may be good for your mental health but bad for creativity.

Focusing on every sight, sound, and thought that enters your mind can drive a person crazy. It interferes with a busy person's efforts to sleep. Psychologists have a term for ignoring

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the irrelevant; they call it "latent inhibition."

A team of them at Harvard has discovered that students who score low in this seemingly vital trait are much more likely to be creative achievers than those who excel in putting things out of their minds.

Notes Shelley Carson, a Harvard psychologist, "Scientists have wondered for a long time why madness and creativity seem linked, particularly in artists, musicians, and writers. Getting swamped by new information that you have difficulty handling may predispose you to a mental disorder," Carson says. "But," she continues "if you have high intelligence and a good working memory, you are more likely to be able to combine bits of new information in creative ways."

You may be interested to know that studies suggest a good working memory and the capacity to keep in mind many things at once, can protect creative people from going nuts. ☺

Carson notes, "Highly creative people in our studies showed the same latent inhibition patterns found in other studies of schizophrenics. “ (*I’m not sure how comforting that’s meant to be.*)

She further points out, "Both madness and creativity must involve many different genes. It's my hope that future research will help us progress toward silencing the demons of mental disorders that often coexist with the traits of creativity."

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Until then, the situation is cogently expressed by this old joke:

A man is driving past a mental hospital when one of the wheels falls off his car. He stops and recovers the wheel but can't find the lug nuts to secure it back in place. Just then he notices a man sitting on the curb carefully removing small pebbles from the grass and piling them neatly on the sidewalk.

"What am I going to do?" the man asks aloud. The fellow piling the pebbles looks up, and says, "Take one of the lug nuts from each of the other wheels and use them to put the wheel back on."

The driver is amazed. "Wow!" he exclaims. "What a brilliant idea. What are you doing in a place like this?" he asks, nodding toward the mental institution.

"Well," the man answers, "I'm crazy, not stupid."

To that end, Carson adds, "That's exactly what our research is about. It shows that, to be creative, you can be bright and crazy, but not stupid."

WRAPPING UP

Creativity really shines when a focused and simple message is conveyed in a visually and mentally stimulating form that gets results. There is no finer feeling than when the creative idea and execution kick butt!

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However, a renewed effort into and education as to how to attain a higher caliber, smarter level of creativity must preoccupy our industry. Clients and colleagues, both internal and external, must be willing to trust their creative consultants; yet, we should demonstrate through professionalism and marketing savvy why this trust is well earned.

We lose respect for our “dearly-loved” creative product when the creative is too cute, too complex or just plain dumb. There is absolutely no excuse for presenting creative that makes no sense or doesn’t follow or illustrate the marketing strategy behind it. We must convey the message as straight-forward and interesting as possible.

In fact, if you want to generate interest, you need to be interesting. True innovation springs from the collision of different experiences and perspectives. Let your imagination have fun and think in terms of *no limits*. When you can do this, your creativity knows no bounds.

Regardless of what you do or how you do it, remember: Trying to satisfy everybody never got anybody anywhere.

And somewhere in the process, risks will be taken. In a recent AdAge interview, Lee Clow, the global Chief Creative Director of TBWA Chiat Day had this to say on taking risks: *“So it comes with being daring that you're going to screw up. But I'd rather apologize than to be so timid as to not try and do anything smart or brave.”*

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Will there be mistakes made? Sure. According to Scott Adams in The Dilbert Principle,
“Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.”

So keep your creative juices flowing by unleashing your imagination. Even if you’re in a “not-
so-creative” environment,

have fun . . . listen . . . provoke conversation . . .

And these wacky creative ideas may just not seem so wacky after all.