

I is an Other

Metaphor and Innovation - Make it strange

Harriet Monroe, the founding editor of *Poetry* magazine, described Wallace Stevens as “supersensitive to beauty but encased in the protective armor of the business attorney.” Stevens joined the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company in 1916, became a vice president in 1934, and remained with the firm for nearly forty years, until his death at the age of seventy in 1955.

Stevens was a respected and successful businessman. He also happened to be one of the greatest American poets of the twentieth century. Supersensitive to metaphor as well as to beauty, Stevens believed, like his fellow poets Robert Frost and C. S. Lewis, that metaphor was far too important to be confined to verse.

In the essay “Three Academic Pieces,” Stevens described metaphor as “the creation of resemblance by the imagination.” Metaphor is the imagination at work and “its singularity,” he wrote, “is that in the act of satisfying the desire for resemblance it touches the sense of reality, it enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it.”

Elsewhere, Stevens expressed the same thought more concisely:

Metaphor creates a new reality from which the original appears to be unreal.

Around the time of Wallace Stevens’s death, corporate executives William J. J. Gordon and George Prince discovered that metaphors could create new realities for businesses, too. Gordon, an executive with the industrial research firm Arthur D. Little, and his colleague Prince invented “Synectics,” a method for stimulating innovation through the systematic application of metaphor.

At Arthur D. Little, Gordon was in the habit of tape-recording “brainstorming sessions,” a term popularized by Alex Osborn, another great believer in the creative power of metaphor for business. Listening to the tapes, Gordon heard participants use crazy analogies and far-

fetching comparisons to generate new ideas. He realized that these outlandish links among unrelated things changed the way people thought about a problem and that, if used correctly, they could spark practical solutions.

In his book *Synectics: The Development of Creative Capacity*, published in 1961, Gordon describes the process like this:

We noticed that, in launching a series of sessions which culminated in the successful solution of a given problem, we were constantly attempting to “make the familiar strange.” Faced with the all too familiar, without understanding entirely what we were doing, we would attempt at first radically to shift our vision so that the familiar (the codified, the set world of the usual) was made strange and new, and therefore subject to new patterns and new laws of operation—subject to invention.

Gordon made up the term “synectics” just as Coleridge made up the term “esemplastic,” deriving it from the Greek *synektiktein*, which translates somewhat awkwardly as “joining together different and apparently unrelated elements.”

Gordon chose participants in Synectics sessions on the basis of their metaphoric abilities. He and his team listened to candidates talk; the ones displaying the most inventive use of language and analogy were invited to join the group. Synectics members had to have a high tolerance for the irrelevant, a childlike willingness to engage in combinatorial play, and an advanced ability to suspend criticism and disbelief. They also had to perform extended role-playing. If a team was tasked with developing a new kind of unbreakable glass, for example, they were asked to imagine and articulate what it would be like to be a piece of glass, in much the same way that Iowa Writers’ Workshop participants were asked to imagine what kind of smoke Marlon Brando might be.

Personal analogy, Gordon and Prince believed, solved problems. “One identifies oneself with a purely non-human entity which figures in the problem . . . speculating on how that thing would ‘feel’ and act in the

problem situation,” Prince said. “Personal identification with the elements of a problem releases the individual from viewing the problem in terms of its previously analyzed elements.”

According to Gordon, the Synectics process involves two things: making the strange familiar and making the familiar strange. Playing with metaphor, he believed, is the best way to do that: “Ultimate solutions to problems are rational, the process of finding them is not.” Aristotle was on to a similar idea when he wrote: “Strange words simply puzzle us; ordinary words convey only what we know already. It is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh.”

Gordon and Prince probably weren’t familiar with the work of Russian literary critic Victor Shklovsky, but they would have certainly found him very congenial reading. Shklovsky was one of the Russian formalists, a group of theorists active in Russia in the early part of the twentieth century who believed the purpose of art was to estrange us from conventional perceptions. Shklovsky coined the term “defamiliarization”—in Russian, *ostranenie*, or “to make strange”—for this effect, arguing, “Art removes objects from the automatism of perception . . . The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar.’” As art estranges us from the convention, Shklovsky suggested, it reacquaints us with the vividness and originality of life, thus letting us get hold of something fresh.

Gordon and Prince founded a company called Synectics to develop defamiliarization as a tool for developing new products and devising more efficient manufacturing processes. Synectics still exists. Now known as Synecticsworld and headquartered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the company helps corporations invent and innovate through metaphor—new products and services, new strategies, new business models, new ways to gain insight into what consumers and customers want and need.

Connie Williams, Synecticsworld’s general managing partner and chief knowledge officer, used Gordon and Prince’s techniques to help one client, a health insurance company, create new products for the deliberately uninsured, those consumers who could afford to purchase health insurance but consciously decided not to.

The client identified the deliberately uninsured as an untapped market since they were largely part-time workers, self-employed, or sole proprietors of their own businesses, earning roughly \$50,000 a year. Most had previously held health insurance coverage, until a job change or the launch of their own business altered their benefits status. They paid out of pocket, convinced that they obtained care more cheaply by avoiding insurance and paying cash. In the post-healthcare reform market, this demographic is even more attractive, since most will soon be required to have insurance.

Previous efforts to reach the deliberately uninsured, through premium reductions and benefit restructuring, achieved only incremental success. So the client came to Synecticsworld with two objectives: to better understand this group's perspective on health insurance and to develop new product concepts that might induce them to buy coverage.

Over a period of about six months, Williams convened Synectics sessions involving a core team of representatives from across the client's business. She assembled a consumer panel of the uninsured and sent the client team on little ethnographic field trips to observe and interact with them. They conducted in-home interviews with members of the target group and lived their lives for a day, accompanying them to work and on shopping errands. The goal: to understand their values and their reasons for making the choices they made.

"The client team had a negative impression of the group going in," Williams says, "thinking they didn't understand how catastrophic a serious illness could be to their personal and financial well-being if they didn't have insurance." By the time the Synectics exercise was finished, that attitude had been dramatically transformed.

Williams instructed the client team in how to recognize and solicit metaphors while working with consumers in the field. They used the tried and tested personification method, for instance, asking the panel: "If insurance companies were animals, what kind of animals would they be?"

The resulting metaphors were not very flattering to the health insurance industry. One member of the panel said, "Hyenas, out for what they can get, won't cover anything, preys on others." Another said, "Leeches, suck the blood, take your money."

Williams taught them how to fish for analogies through which they might catch crucial market insights. The client team regularly asked seemingly off-the-wall questions, like “What was your favorite toy growing up?” and then encouraged members of the consumer panel to think about how health insurance could be *like* that toy.

One person’s favorite childhood toy was model trains. This person made the link with health insurance via the idea of universal affordability. Model trains are “sold for everyone,” this person said. “You can be a super-high-end hobbyist and spend \$400, \$500, or \$600 a piece for it, or you can be an everyday kid who’s six years old and get a whole thing for \$50. It’s geared for everyone, not just a certain group.”

The client team also asked the uninsured panel members to make visual collages of the health insurance industry, a longtime Synectics technique similar to that used in a ZMET study. One person chose frigid images—two people in a cold, wild place wrapped in fur coats and a polar bear on an ice floe in the middle of the Arctic—complemented by a picture of a man sitting outside a big house smoking a cigar. “Me and mine have to take care of ourselves,” this person explained. “No one is rushing out to help us. [The polar bear] has walked to the farthest point that he has and can’t find the path that he wants, like me trying to find the right insurance.” The cigar-smoking man represented “the industry living a lifestyle off of us.”

In working with this material, Williams encouraged the client team to practice “metaphor mining: Find out what’s below the surface. Pull out things that are surprising, paradoxical, or don’t make sense, things that might reveal what the consumer intended without knowing he intended it.” Or, as Gordon and Prince would say, look for things that make it strange.

One former executive who took part in the Synectics sessions hit pay dirt when a member of the consumer panel described health insurance as “like paying a cover charge at a bar but paying for every drink as well.” This person expected some benefit up front as part of the premium. “That really opened my eyes,” the former executive says. “We realized that though this group could afford to pay the premiums, they could not afford to actually use their health insurance because of high deductibles, co-pays, and out-of-pocket costs.”

Another metaphor that yielded valuable product development nuggets was one retiree's description of healthcare costs as "the bogeyman in the closet that could jump out at any moment." Budgeting is essential if retirees' money is to last as long as they do. But the bogeyman in the closet highlighted how healthcare is the one cost that cannot be adequately budgeted in retirement.

"The metaphors made us stop in our tracks and think of products in a whole new way," says the former exec. The metaphors even became marketing mantras for the group. Whenever new product concepts were discussed, members asked themselves: Who's paying for the first few drinks? Does this let the bogeyman out of the closet without undue fear or alarm?

The metaphors led to specific product innovations as well. To address the "cover charge" concerns, the company came up with plans that built in more coverage up front. The premium was a bit more expensive but it also included more, like paying a slightly higher cover charge at the bar but getting two free drinks. To prevent the healthcare bogeyman from scaring retirees to death, the company devised a scheme that standardized costs over a set number of years, thereby allowing better budgeting.

Having gone into the Synectics process thinking the uninsured were making a strategic and possibly costly mistake, the client team came out thinking they were smart, generally well-informed people who felt they were making an intelligent, cost-effective choice. The Synectics work helped them to understand this target group's perspective on the industry and to develop new product ideas that met their needs while also addressing their worries.

For the former executive, the experience left a lasting impression: "Metaphors are so powerful in helping people see things in a new light. My aperture of sensitivity to metaphor is so much higher now."