

Idea Generation

There are several truisms that almost every company trot out: 'People are our greatest assets...'; 'We have a no-blame culture...'; 'We actively encourage out-of-the-box thinking...'; 'We're committed to innovation...'. However, it is sometimes those who are charged with creating innovation that in the end stifle it; undervaluing creative people, tut-tutting at poor outcomes and sticking to tried-and-tested methods. Being innovative is a powerful skill, but it is often perceived as an elusive ability. We all have the ability to be innovative, but we don't always know how. Try this ten-point plan and realise your innovative potential.

1. How do I encourage a positive self-image?

One of the more surprising discoveries of working with marketers on enhancing innovation is how many negative feelings they have about themselves in this context. To encourage an innovative environment a marketer should focus on eliminating aspects of self-punishment and criticism that damage self-esteem and inhibit the innovative process. Focus on what has been achieved rather than what has not to create a positive outcome.

2. How do I make new connections?

One of the key skills that taps into the wealth of resources stored in the subconscious mind is 'connection-making'. We can use specific techniques - wishing, imaging, metaphor and absurdity - to move from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Alastair Pilkington made a big connection. While washing dishes in the late 1950s, he observed how grease floated on top of the water. He realised he could make perfect plate glass by floating molten glass on top of a suitable medium. His revolutionary idea eventually became the float method of making glass.

3. How do I come up with something new?

Distancing yourself from a task can be difficult, especially when you can think of nothing else until the problem is solved. No matter how hard we try, it is difficult to put a weighty problem out of our minds. Some people can block out problems and focus solely on one thing at a time. Most of us are not so lucky. But there are some real advantages to intentionally keeping problems in the back of our minds. When what seems to be absurd comes to mind, this is sometimes the innovative connection we have been waiting for.

4. What if new ideas seem unrealistic?

Everyone experiences times when a problem faced appears impossible to solve, or situations where every solution or idea starts to seem impossible to implement – or just too outlandish to contemplate. In these moments, have you ever wondered, “What if...?” or, ‘If only I could...’ or, ‘I wish...’? When this happens you should never immediately dismiss these thoughts. Instead, you should explore them further, however unrealistic they may seem – and watch what materialises.

5. How can I stay open to new ideas ?

It is vital to suspend the temporary belief that we know whether an answer is right or wrong. If we are constrained so that we can only give ideas which we can categorically prove are right, we are closing ourselves off and excluding a wealth of new ideas. Upon hearing a new idea, as creative thinkers we seek to find value in staying open to new stimuli, not judging and giving guesses as a response.

6. How can I reframe the problem?

Rephrasing a task into a positive directional headline often makes the problem seem less daunting. For example, ‘How can we get more customers to be repeat buyers?’, sounds more manageable than, ‘How am I ever going to be able to persuade repeat buyers’. By reframing the task as a ‘How to...’ using positive language, you can turn what sounded impossible into an opportunity. Rephrasing your task will also force you to focus on exactly what has to be accomplished. This defines the needs of the task more specifically and creates a deadline.

7. How do I identify the hidden agenda?

There is a whole host of reasons why innovative ideas get murdered at birth. People can talk ideas to death, ignore them, suggest they’ve tried an idea before, pretend they are interested, but really aren’t. People often stop innovation from developing because of insecurity and fear. Egos are so fragile that it’s hard to cope with the notion of someone else coming up with something new, exciting and successful. It can be very tempting to be ‘judge and jury’ around new ideas, pursuing a ‘hidden agenda’ and ‘wisely’ killing them off at source.

8. How do I let innovation in?

The fear of colleagues’ negative judgement is one of the greatest enemies to creating an innovative environment. One of the reasons people have trouble creating new ideas is anxiety. The possibility that someone may disapprove or disagree can mean that ideas never get voiced. Creating an environment in which seemingly impractical ideas

are going to be accepted and valued, regardless of their apparent relevance to the problem, is essential to successful idea development. If the marketing director walks the talk when supporting innovative approaches, this helps provide the right innovative climate for the marketing team to experiment with their ideas and ultimately surpass their own expectations.

9. Why do I need to guess?

As marketers gain new responsibilities in their careers, knowing the facts becomes increasingly important. If you don't know the answer, you track down the individual who does and ask them questions to gain clarity. Guessing and connection-making is devalued as a riskier way of developing understanding. Don't shut off your inclination to guess. It is an approach that can enable you to make new connections and form valuable new working hypotheses.

10. How can I take risks?

Listen to your instincts and rely on your gut reactions. These will enable you to take greater risks when looking for innovative approaches. Each person has an experimental self which relies on intuition, while the safekeeping self relies on reason. We naturally lean towards what is safe. This can mean that we impose a form of self-censorship on our ideas. Take a risk and follow instinctive ideas, especially when logic suggests otherwise.