

# Breakthrough!



## How to Run a Fantastic Ideas- Generation Workshop

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Stuart Cross of Morgan Cross Consulting helps some of the world's top companies find new ways to drive substantial, profitable growth. His clients include Alliance Boots, Avon and PricewaterhouseCoopers.

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## Section 1

# The Value of New Ideas

## *Establishing Innovation and Improvement As A Normal Way of Working*

Innovation is a key driver of growth and profitability. Studies have shown that breakthrough innovations help businesses take the lion's share of their market.

In their book, *Blue Ocean Strategy*, for example, W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne studied over 100 business launches. Although the authors found that only 14% of the launches were truly distinctive businesses, these companies accounted for 60% of the profits generated by all the organisations studied.

Yet, despite the importance of innovation and breakthrough thinking, generating new business ideas is derided in many parts of many businesses. In a recent survey of the most detested terms in business the "top 10" included 'brainstorming', 'blue-sky thinking' and 'out-of-the-box thinking'.

What makes people so cynical about something that is so crucial to organisational success? Perhaps it is the result of bad individual experiences, or maybe it is the fear that exists for many who take part. This fear can involve the fear of failure, the fear of looking ridiculous, or the fear of failing to spot a better answer.

My experience of working with some of the world's top companies is that creativity can be found everywhere in an organisation if the appropriate environment exists. I have found three organisational requirements that help drive creativity and innovation:

- **A focus on tomorrow.** These companies are leaders, not followers and are continuously looking for the next big win.
- **A commitment to action and learning.** Innovative organisations learn by doing. They don't spend excessive time in planning, but are open to what is happening around them. They expect failure along the way and are determined to find a way to success.
- **An acceptance of risk.** Innovative organisations don't take reckless chances, but they do take prudent risks.

This booklet is part of my work to help organisations become more innovative and deliver great results. Having better ideas generation meetings and workshops is a first step in becoming a more innovative organisation.

I hope that it helps your business to succeed. Good luck.

## Section 2

# Before the Workshop

## *Creating the Conditions For A Successful Session*

It is essential that the workshop does not start at 9 am on the morning of the session, but is developed at least a week or so ahead of the event. The planning work does not have to be onerous, but these five simple steps will dramatically improve your chances of a successful outcome.

### **1. Set a simple, clear objective**

If you cannot state in simple, clear language, the purpose of the workshop, it will be difficult for your team to engage in the workshop and even harder for you to work out if you have achieved what you wanted.

Ideas-generation workshops are usually focused on new business development, and the goal is generally a desire to *“identify compelling customer-focused ideas that will drive substantial sales and profit growth.”*

You may wish to be more specific and focus on particular markets, product categories or customer segments, but the important aspect is to state your objectives simply and clearly.

In non-sales growth workshops, there is still a need for a clear objective. Cost-cutting (*To identify customer-focused ideas that will dramatically reduce our costs*), team-building (*To identify ideas to dramatically improve the ability of our team to achieve its objectives*) or process improvement (*To dramatically increase the speed and effectiveness of our key business processes*) all lend themselves to a simple, focused goal.

### **2. Establish a diverse, cross-functional team**

A diverse team produces better ideas than an homogenous group. Different perspectives, experiences and challenges help to create the conditions for the creative tension that is critical for effective new ideas.

In a recent new product development workshop, for example, I facilitated a group of 10 managers included members of the buying team, marketing, product development, finance and sales, as well as a trusted supplier and an external category expert.

### **3. Provide some homework**

Rather than coming into the session cold, team members benefit from spending some time considering the objective and the work required. Ideas do not always happen during the day, and providing stimulus ahead of the session increases the chances of a team member having a 'eureka' moment.

For example, in a recent project I asked team members to spend an hour together in pairs during the week before the workshop. During that hour I asked them to consider how a famous brand or company from outside their industry would tackle the issue (I used Apple, Boeing, or BMW), even though the issue at hand was the development of new healthcare products.

The result of this homework was a list of 50 new ideas within an hour of the start of the session, which gave everyone more confidence that they would deliver a great set of new ideas.

### **4. The decision-makers must be there**

Ideas generation workshops benefit hugely by having the key decision makers operate as part of the team. It is possible to run the session remotely and then propose recommendations, but in my experience speed, commitment and effectiveness are dramatically improved by having the budget-holders present.

### **5. Plan to engage customers immediately**

I have found that even in a one-day workshop it is possible to end the day with one or two customer focus groups that can provide initial feedback on ideas and concepts.

Without exception, the workshop team has found extra value from engaging customers early. The team may still pursue an idea that customers do not initially support, but the insights gathered from the customer discussion helps create a clear direction for next step actions.

## Section 3

# The Workshop Agenda

## *Establishing Focus To Get The Best From Your Team*

Ideas-generation workshops typically last one or two days. A two-day session gives more time to develop ideas, but a one-day session can be highly effective.

Set out below is the agenda for an effective one-day session. Approximately 50% of the time is spent on developing raw ideas, 25% on shaping those ideas into more robust concepts and 25% on assessing the ideas.

A critical point is that the emphasis is on participation and involvement. Any of sharing of sales performance, costs or other management issues should be done ahead of the workshop, perhaps as part of the 'homework'.

### ***Example: A one-day new product ideas-generation workshop agenda***

9.00	<b>Objectives and initial thoughts</b>	<i>Create immediate momentum by collating ideas generated from pre-workshop activities (see page 3)</i>
10.00	<b>Ideas-generation session #1</b>	<i>See Section 5 for specific sessions</i>
11.30	<b>Ideas-generation session #2</b>	<i>See Section 5 for specific sessions</i>
12.30	<b>Lunch</b>	<i>Ensure a clean break is given</i>
1.30	<b>Concept development</b>	<i>Sub-teams turn raw ideas into robust, compelling concepts, focusing on their key customer benefits (rather than features)</i>
3.30	<b>Team assessment of concepts</b>	<i>Ideas prioritised based on their ability to (1) offer customers a unique product, and (2) deliver material sales and profit growth</i>
4.30	<b>Customer Focus Groups</b>	<i>Run one or two sessions sharing the preferred concepts (say 6-12, depending on the time available and the level of team preference)</i>
6.00	<b>Next step planning</b>	<i>Using the customer feedback identify priorities for next step development, and establish owners for developing the concepts further</i>

## Section 4

# Managing The Workshop

### *Developing the dynamic for success*

As with the workshop pre-work, ensuring that the session is effectively managed can greatly enhance your chances of delivering successful outcomes. There are five key steps you can take to enhance the workshop.

#### **1. Appoint a facilitator to manage the workshop**

Having a dispassionate facilitator to manage the process of the day enables the whole team to focus on the content and the quality of the ideas.

#### **2. Have products, or other relevant materials, at hand**

Having current products (yours and your competitors) available allows people to share their thoughts more easily and provides the stimulus for further ideas.

#### **3. Create a relaxed, informal environment**

I have found that a constant supply of beverages (tea, coffee etc.), fruit and other snacks helps drive new ideas. Ensure also that the emphasis is on fun, participation and experimentation, and appropriate background music always helps drive the energy of the group.

#### **4. Write ideas down**

There is a risk that idea generation workshops turn into talking shops. People airily discuss concepts and ideas, rather than specific ideas. Quantity of ideas tends to lead to quality of ideas and a key role of the facilitator is to ensure that participants focus on writing their ideas down. A post-it or A4 sheet per idea is ideal, with the idea being placed on a wall for everyone to see and build on.

#### **5. Focus on benefits, not features**

Ideas are more compelling when they focus on benefits rather than features. It is easier to gain engagement and an understanding about a new family car, for example, if you describe the ride as being hugely comfortable for all, rather than focusing on the fact that it will have active suspension.



## Section 5

# Creativity Sessions

## *Unlocking Your Intuition and Provoking New Ideas*

Brainstorming has such a bad name, perhaps, as a result of sessions where everyone is asked to a meeting room and then requested to generate ideas from the top of their minds. This approach can generate some ideas, but for many people more stimuli are needed to really get the creative juices flowing.

I have set out five exercises that will give you greater direction and focus to help you and your team generate more, better quality ideas.

I also find that a few simple rules help overcome some of the nervousness and fear that people have when participating in these sessions. I have three simple rules in my workshops:

1. Focus on quantity, not quality. Ironically, the best quality solutions come from sessions where the most ideas are generated.
2. Every idea is a good idea, and negative comments are banned.
3. Write the idea down. I know I've already mentioned this, but don't let the team just talk through issues. An idea only exists once it is written down.

### **Exercise #1: Brand Takeover**

Identify several brands and organisations, outside of your own particular markets, that excel in the specific areas in which you are trying to generate new growth ideas. For example, you may wish to consider

- Apple for product design and product integration
- BMW for engineering quality
- Ritz Carlton for excellence in customer service
- Ryanair for focused, low-cost operations
- Greenpeace for public relations and campaign management

Select one or more of the companies and ask how they would approach the opportunity you are facing. Start by being literal and build ideas from there. What would the solution look like? Which customer groups would you be targeting? Who would be working to develop and deliver the solution? Where would resources be allocated? What would constitute success?

There are three different levels in which this exercise can take place

1. Workshop session: Allocate a period of time in the workshop – say 45 minutes – to capture as many ideas as possible
2. Pre-workshop exercise: You can allocate the workshop participants into pairs or small groups and ask them to review the organisations you identify (website reviews, personal experience etc.) and bring at least 20 ideas for growth to the workshop
3. Benchmarking review: Establish a full benchmarking review, getting under the skin of the identified companies. This may include formal company visits, process reviews and interviews.

## **Exercise #2: Time Machine**

Going back in time enables you to re-learn what was important when the organisation was formed (or 25 or 50 years ago), and what is at the core of the company. Understanding how you were organised, who your customers were, how you delivered your product or service can help you find ways to take elements from your past and reinvent them for today's environment.

Collect old advertisements, organisation charts, product brochures, customer lists and internal and external literature to generate ideas about how you can solve your current issue or opportunity. What worked before? What was ahead of its time? What could be relevant today with a twist or two?

Using these questions and stimuli can be used to generate new ideas. The fashion industry uses this technique continuously to create new catwalk designs. Even Starbucks has, in essence, simply reinvented the coffee shops that were so popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

## **Exercise #3: Tearing Up The Rule Book**

Most major business breakthroughs – such as Dell's direct computer sales model – involve changing the rules of an industry in some way. As organisations develop they establish rules and ways of working that become almost invisible.

To complete the exercise, list the major rules, assumptions and sacred cows that govern your industry, category or organisation. Select one or more of these rules and generate new ideas based on how you can ignore, get round or break the assumption.

### Exercise #4: Strategic Essence

Unlike the Brand Takeover exercise, this exercise focuses on your own strategy and applying it as literally and simply as possible to the opportunity you are working on. There are three steps:

1. Through a process of discussion and facilitation identify the two or three factors that are at the heart of your strategy. Make sure that you become specific and focused. You should not say *"We wish to be the best in our industry"* (what does *"best"* mean?) but you may wish to say, for example, *"We are the quickest to market with new service solutions"*.
2. Once you have agreement on the specific strategy elements, generate ideas based on how you could simply go totally overboard. Taking the "quickest to market" example, how could you get a new product or service to market within a month, a week or a day? At this stage do not worry about practical considerations or how you will make money. The important thing is to really stretch your ideas from where you are today.
3. Finally, once you have identified some wild ideas that generate wider interest, start to refine the ideas so that you have a chance of making it happen. However, do not lose the essence of the idea.

### Exercise #5: Random Association

New, breakthrough ideas are based on linking concepts in new ways. Randomly bringing together two different concepts creates the conditions for generating new connections. In my workshops I take the following approach

- Identify 5-10 random concept areas. For example, I have used Social Trends, Countries of the world, Sports, Colours, Animals and TV shows.
- Taking an index card for each concept area, list six items within the concept. For Countries of the world, for example, you could list France, China, Mexico, Iran, Australia and Nigeria.
- Ask the ideas generation team to select a card and, once they have done this, ask them to roll a dice. Select the item on the list that corresponds with the number rolled by the dice.
- The team then start to generate ideas that connect the opportunity they are focusing on with the random association. As number of ideas generated start to wane you can roll the dice again or repeat the exercise with a different card.

## Section 6

# After The Workshop

## *Ideas Are Just The Start; Innovation Requires Action*

It is essential that the energy and momentum developed during the workshop is not allowed to dissipate back at the office. Here are five practical steps you can take to ensure that the workshop is the catalyst for ongoing success:

### **1. Make real-time decisions at the end of the workshop**

By having decision-makers at the session you can commit to resources and people to move forward your ideas

### **2. Turn those decisions into actions**

As the final session of the workshop, translate the decisions into specific actions, with an individual (from the workshop) made accountable for its delivery at an agreed future date.

### **3. Hold a follow-up session**

Within a month of the workshop arrange a shorter, follow-up session to check progress, hold people accountable, resolve issues and agree any further actions. Again, the key decision-makers must be present at this session.

### **4. Collect ideas generated after the workshop**

Sometimes ideas will come to people later. At your weekly team meetings ask if anyone has had any further ideas following the session, or have individual or small-group sessions in the week or two after the workshop to check whether any further nuggets have been identified.

### **5. Make these workshops a normal way of working**

It is far more likely that breakthrough ideas will be generated if these sessions are run regularly rather than a special, one-off exercise. As a final thought, ask yourself this question: do you spend as least as much time in meetings focused on new ideas generation as you do on meetings trying to solve the problems of your current business operations?