



CREATIVITY

8 WAYS TO BRAINSTORM BETTER

Idea-generation is the lynchpin of our work. So why are many of us terrible at it? Experts offer tips for improving your creative sessions.

The team gathers in the conference room, white board at the ready, pumped to come up with some cool new ideas. Ten minutes into the session, the group's strongest personality starts to dominate the conversation. Ideas get dissected, evaluated, kicked around, criticized. The quietest staffer shuts down. The creative director loses energy and relinquishes control over the meeting. An hour later, the team leaves the room deflated and unconfident in any of the concepts they shared.

Why do most brainstorm sessions resemble this scenario? Brainstorming is supposed to be one of the activities that we love most—and that our friends in non-creative professions envy most—about our jobs. We think of brainstorming as the wild-blue-yonder,

out-of-the-box, free-flowing development of ideas—a literal turbulent storm of creativity.

And this, according to the experts, is exactly the problem with most idea-generation sessions: They lack focus, structure, discipline. We'll take a look at what typically goes wrong with brainstorming and learn ways to improve this essential element of our work.

WHY IDEA SESSIONS GO WRONG

"There's a lot that people get wrong about brainstorming," says Stefan Mumaw, creative director at ad agency Callahan Creek in Lawrence, KS. The biggest mistake, says the co-author of the "Caf-feine" series of creativity books and popular HOW Design Live speaker, is that designers miss the whole

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point of brainstorming: “They think that the general goal is to leave with a solution, one that’s thought through and vetted and right. That’s not the case. Brainstorming isn’t to solve the problem. It’s simply to offer possibility.”

Setting the wrong goal for a brainstorm session leads to another common problem: Evaluating ideas as they emerge. Teams that focus on finding the “right” solution, especially when they’re under tight time constraints, move too quickly from sharing ideas to critiquing them. Instead of riffing and expanding on one another’s ideas—a process that can lead to unexpected possibilities—participants feel they have to justify and defend their ideas. Soon, they simply stop offering them, and the meeting caves in on itself.

“The original definition of brainstorming, where you take everyone, throw them in a room and they’re all shouting over each other, has two problems,” says David Sherwin, author of “Creative Workshop” and “Success By Design,” and interaction design director with frog design’s San Francisco studio. “One, when you come up with ideas as a group, people immediately enter into discussion instead of dialog—defending, steering, blending open-ended idea-generation with thinly veiled critique.”

He also notes another common problem: “You don’t often have any idea of how to focus your attention.” While many brainstorm sessions are free-for-alls, Sherwin advocates for structure and parameters. “Cleverly considered constraints can yield more far-out ideas than free-form brainstorming,” he says. “You have a real target to shoot for.”

If creative teams commonly gather to find the perfect solution, start to critique each other’s ideas and ignore meaningful constraints like business goals and audience needs, then surely there must be a better path toward breakthrough ideas. Are there more effective—and more fun—ways to brainstorm? You bet.

BUILD A BETTER BRAINSTORM

Our experts contend that improving your team’s idea-generation efforts starts well before you schedule the meeting. And these methods and strategies can work with teams and with individuals (freelancers, single-person creative departments) who have to come up with ideas on their own.

Create unified expectations. Mumaw and Sherwin agree that the team leader’s job is to make sure the team agrees on guiding principles for the session. What problem are we trying to solve? What parameters do we need to consider? Can we relinquish ownership of our ideas? Can we speak freely? What criteria will we use to evaluate ideas when we move into that phase of discussion?

Frame the problem. Mumaw notes that focusing on the wrong problem—one that’s too broad or too narrow—causes 90% of brainstorm sessions to fail. “As a creative director, my role is to generate problems that are solvable,” he says. “So a client says, ‘We want a new website.’ My role is to listen to what they say and ask questions: Why a website? What’s

the real issue here? Can we break the problem into solvable chunks?”

If design can be defined as “art that solves a problem,” creative pros are naturally solution-driven. Often, we jump too quickly into fixing the problem and don’t step back to consider the problem itself.

Let’s say a client needs an identity for a natural foods company. The creative team might brainstorm different visual ways to represent the concept of “natural.” But the client’s real problem might be bigger. Perhaps customers are confused by the term “natural.” Maybe they don’t understand the health benefits of whole, unprocessed foods. Or they think those products are inconvenient or expensive. Viewed with a wider lens, the team’s charge isn’t just to come up with a logo—it’s to communicate clarity, benefits and value. “Don’t take the problem for granted,” Mumaw says. “Don’t be afraid to break it down, to separate it into parts, to solve a part of it and then assemble those solutions into something bigger.”

Sherwin, too, stresses the importance of properly framing the problem, and suggests that, especially for complex and challenging projects, this process can be the first stage of the brainstorm session itself. In a three-hour session, Sherwin might spend the first 90 minutes discussing—and agreeing on—the core problem or a set of smaller ones.

One helpful exercise is to pose “How might we ...?” questions. “It’s part of a process of articulating what the problem is,” Sherwin says. “A well-crafted ‘How might we?’ question is an invitation. It immediately generates ideas, inspires solutions and gives you a sense of the range of possibility that exists.”

For example, rather than asking, “What visual symbols represent natural food?” ask, “How might we create an identity that helps customers feel that the food is naturally made?”

Preliminary research plays a big role in defining the problem and the parameters around it. Bruce Grover, managing director and strategy lead for Suka Creative, a 10-person strategy/content/design agency in New York City, says his team goes through a research and discovery phase—the results of which they verify with the client to be sure they’re on track—before they assemble to brainstorm. “Once the research has been shared, the team has to agree that this is the information that we’re working with—so the team doesn’t argue over the facts.”

Bring in some tools. Not surprisingly, since they’ve both authored collections of brain-strengthening exercises, both Mumaw and Sherwin use these tools to kick-off a session to get the group limbered up; they’re also useful if you’re working by yourself. “I’ll use a challenge to warm people up at the beginning of a session, something that gets them into a lateral thinking mind-set,” Sherwin says. “I call it the ‘sacrificial problem’—like, in 10 minutes, come up with 100 uses for a brick. The constraints, limited time and the extreme number of ideas, force people to move from the literal to the unreal.”

Remove judgment. Have you ever experienced brainstorm bliss—when the ideas are flowing like water

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STEFAN MUMAW

and the group is reaching outside its comfort zone to discover new concepts? That flow happens because people are sharing ideas, even crazy ones, without fear of criticism or self-doubt—two sworn enemies of effective brainstorming.

There are two make-or-break rules to removing judgment from brainstorming, Grover says. “One, there’s no ‘yeah, but ...’ in the session. Every idea is a good idea. It’s always ‘yes, and ...’ That way, everyone feels empowered to contribute. Two, when an idea is expressed, it’s no longer the property of the individual; it’s the property of the group. If I’m no longer attached to my idea, others can add to it and riff on it.”

Anticipate a lull. Mumaw charts a sort of bell-curve that represents idea-generation. “The low-hanging fruit ideas that are easy to generate, that come from things we’ve already done or seen elsewhere—that flood of early ideas leads the graph upward. Then the line starts to dip as the ideas start to diminish. And the only thing that can turn that around is a spark—usually, the ability of someone to say something ‘stupid’ [and he means stupid in a good way].”

The easiest way to find that spark, he says, is to alter the perspective of the problem, to change point of view. For example, you might consider what a food looks like from the point of view of the fork. “That’s the ‘stupid,’ the stretch mechanism that allows you to turn the corner to develop ideas that have novelty.” If you’re working solo, then it’s on you to make that perspective shift.

Ditch the scribe. It’s common for one person on the team to record ideas on a white board, large sticky notes or notebook. But having a scribe means that every idea passes through that individual’s personal biases, assumptions and perspectives. She may use different words to capture another person’s idea, subtly altering its meaning. Instead, Sherwin suggests, provide lots of paper for each person to write or sketch their ideas on separate sheets of paper. Collect those as the record of the creative output.

Separate generation and evaluation. All three of our experts advocate placing distance—a change of office, a few days’ delay or simply a shift during the brainstorm session—between ideation and analysis. There are different ways to do this (and this process can be replicated if you’re brainstorming solo):

Mumaw shares what’s anecdotally believed to have been Walt Disney’s three-step creative process. First, a group gathered in a huge room with a chalkboard and round table (to emphasize equality) to freely generate ideas for an hour. The point was to generate possibilities. Next, in a smaller room with chairs arranged in a semicircle, a group (some participants from the first session and some new ones) was charged with breaking ideas down and reducing the list to two or three solutions. Finally, in a small room set with three chairs, Disney and two colleagues would throw darts at the three final ideas; anything that survived the “Kill Room” would be developed.

At Suka, this evaluation process takes place over several days. After the session, each participant has two days to refine their top two or three ideas. As

creative lead, Grover gathers those top ideas and culls through them, choosing the strongest four to six ideas. Meeting again, the group reviews those and narrows them to about three.

A key part of Suka’s process is that this is the point where they share ideas with the client—rather than presenting three design directions. This preliminary step allows clients to feel invested in the process. Suka shares these ideas in words only—no visuals—and gets the client to OK one. Then, the design team gets to work.

The typical agency process, Grover says, is that “the client gives the firm a download, the firm writes a creative brief, they agree on it—and then the firm disappears for a couple of weeks, only to return and present two design options. During that radio silence, the client feels unheard, and the design firm doesn’t want to listen. We thought, ‘We have to be smarter than this. Why are we disappearing? Why not add in a couple of iterative steps?’”

When Sherwin teaches brainstorming techniques to his colleagues, fellow designers or students at Cal Arts, he breaks the session into phases. In blocks of 8 to 10 minutes, the group moves through a sequence of individual brainstorming (sketching and writing on paper), then shares ideas one by one in turn, and then secretly votes to identify the strongest ideas. The group reviews the top dozen or so ideas, discussing their merits and looking for similar strengths among the discarded ideas. They then collectively choose a direction. “As a group, they have a shared frame of reference for what makes an idea great,” Sherwin says, “and they’ve explored enough ideas to have a sense of the potential range.”

Gather the right people. Finally, Mumaw says, it’s important to consider the makeup of the group—or to adopt the right frame of mind if you’re generating ideas solo. Embrace diversity of experience and expertise. Open your mind. Get silly, and allow others the freedom to share offbeat ideas. “The key is having people who will say ‘stupid’ things,” Mumaw says, noting that five to seven people is ideal. “Without that, you’ll never grow beyond the obvious. Even if it really is stupid, it opens a door that hasn’t been open before. If people are comfortable enough with the environment, each other and themselves to say stupid things, then they can share new ideas and riff off one another.” **HOW**

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