



## CREATIVITY

## FEEDING THE IDEA MACHINE

‘Aha’ moments happen when we least expect them, but they’re not totally random. Experts reveal how you can coax your creativity when you need it most.

In that blissful state between sleep and wakefulness. During a long run or bike ride or swim. In nature, the garden, an art museum. During jury duty, or even, yes, while skydiving. An extremely unscientific poll of the HOWies Facebook community reveals that designers come up with new ideas pretty much anytime, anywhere—especially when they’re not at their computers wrestling with the creative problem at hand.

There’s a reason why “the back of a napkin” is such a powerful metaphor for idea generation. The phrase invokes a particular situation—where collaborators are outside the office, perhaps at a restaurant or bar,

likely having an adult beverage. It represents the notion that our best ideas don’t hit when we’re tapping keys or moving a mouse. There’s something loose, exploratory, unencumbered and serendipitous about sketching an idea in words or images on the back of a cocktail napkin.

Most of us can recall a time where a killer idea struck while we were in the shower or in the car. It seems like these brainstorming come out of the blue. But do they?

“Is it really random, or are we truly influenced and inspired by everything that we’re surrounded with,”

asks Sheri Gaynor, a Colorado-based registered expressive arts therapist, life coach and author of “Creative Awakenings: Envisioning the Life of Your Dreams Through Art.” “Is it random, or is it that we’re gathering all this information and suddenly there’s this perfect storm in the moment when the inspiration comes forth?”

In fact, Gaynor suggests, these unexpected ideas aren’t out of the blue at all. She says ideas result from a sort of “simmering” process, as the brain subconsciously chews on a problem even when you’re not intentionally thinking about it.

## THE SCIENCE OF IDEA GENERATION

Gaynor describes a seesaw motion of the left and right sides of our brains: The logical and analytical left hemisphere takes in critical information related to a creative problem, then the intuitive, subjective right hemisphere takes over as that information whirs around in our subconscious blender. Ideas emerge when the left brain is on hiatus—when we’re taking a shower or washing the car, for example. “The subconscious has the freedom to let that stuff bubble up,” Gaynor says. “That’s why it comes when we’re walking or driving, when the left brain isn’t at the forefront. It’s the left brain, and then the right brain, and then the left brain and then the right brain,” she says, explaining how we work through a particularly challenging problem.

If the process relies on the analytical mind to absorb information, then the quality of the idea reflects the quality of this input. Everything we do up front—developing a creative brief, researching the client and their competitors, browsing online for relevant information, gathering visual inspiration, producing a mood board, doing the work “around” the work—feeds the idea machine.

“Most ideas come from something—you saw a picture, you smelled a candle, you tripped over a wire—then BAM! the idea is there,” says Toronto-based independent designer Dave Gouveia, coauthor with Chris Elkerton of “Creative Stuff.” “But if it weren’t for those triggers, you wouldn’t get there. So if you’re sitting in a blank room in the hopes of coming up with something, you won’t. You need that catalyst to start it.”

Then you need distance—both time and space—to allow your brain to process those inputs. “Sometimes the input and the idea are so far apart in time that they seem unrelated,” says Los Angeles-based designer and illustrator Stefan Bucher, who’s known for the ink-blob monsters that inspired his book “100 Days of Monsters.” “The same is true of the distance between the original intent and the final manifestation. Input for an animation might turn into a piece of writing; sketches for a poster can become a book.

“I used to feed myself input all the time so that I’d always have a surplus of ideas,” Bucher continues. “The problem with that was that I constantly felt that I was letting those ideas down if I couldn’t make all of them real. Right now, I’m learning to slow down, to let myself breathe for a while, so I

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can see new ideas beyond those that were born from old inputs.”

Inputs can be all kinds of things: data, visuals, text. “I need to feed my brain words,” says Chris Elkerton, a Toronto-based independent designer and author. “I can’t even begin to look at design solutions in a graphic way until the words and concepts are solid. Delving into the world of research, such as looking into the project, the client and the competition, involves taking notes and circling words and ideas. Once I’m able to look at all of these words and begin to see ideas, then my brain starts putting visuals in place. I need to feed my brain information. Then I step away and let it all float around. A lot of my ideas seem to come out of the blue—but usually only after I’ve been thinking about the project.”

Getting up and away from the desk seems to be key. According to our informal HOW survey (and personal experience), ideas rarely come when we’re sitting in front of the computer. Note the two critical words: ‘sitting’ and ‘computer.’ Motion seems to improve creativity, too. A 2005 study of a small group of college students, published in volume 17 of the “Creativity Research Journal,” noted that the students performed better on a test of creative thinking after moderate exercise. And often, when we’re doing some kind of repetitive motion like walking, running or swimming, the left brain quiets down, and our thoughts wander into creative territory.

The computer seems to interrupt the left-right-left-right percolation process, too. “Art Chantry always comments on the direct connection between the brain and the hand vs. computers,” Elkerton says. “[With pen and paper,] your mind controls your hand; therefore, the ideas come through more naturally. So when I’m away from my desk, my mind isn’t focused on the pixels, to-do lists and e-mails, so it can do what it’s supposed to. You can doodle, sketch, write anything and everything down. From here your mind relaxes and off you go.”

## SETTING CONDITIONS FOR CREATIVITY

What Gaynor calls “shower thoughts,” those that happen when you’re not focused on the problem, aren’t entirely random. They stem from thoughtful,

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SHERI GAYNOR

purposeful inputs. From there, though, you have to get out of your own way; ideas don’t come on demand. “You can’t tell yourself, ‘I’m going out, and I’ll get an idea when I’m walking the dog,’” Gaynor says. “That’s the left brain speaking.” In other words, while you can’t force good ideas, you can set the conditions for them to develop. Here are a few strategies:

**Be systematic about gathering inputs.** Build a research phase into your creative workflow, and develop a checklist for the information you need before you can begin designing. “Most ideas develop because problems need to be solved,” says Sunny Bonnell, coprincipal of the Myrtle Beach, SC, branding agency Motto. “For client work, I like to begin with research and discovery—researching the client, their purpose, trends, culture, vision, etc. It provides a strategic foundation, an intellectual output that can help drive the ideas behind the creative decision-making.”

**Increase your self-awareness.** Pay attention to those moments when ideas come to the surface. Where are you? What are you doing? What’s your state of mind? If you recognize that walking the dog is an activity that allows your mind to wander and settle on new insights, then that’s a good thing to try (without expectations) when you’re stuck.

**Get out of your zone.** Bonnell and her business partner Ashleigh Hansberger have taken Motto on the road this year to experience and explore new things. “We’ve always talked about driving cross country, but one day in early April, we decided to jump in the car and go. With computers and Pistol (the chihuahua) in tow, we set out to see some of our clients, go to business conferences, indulge in great food, meet new people and just saturate ourselves in the journey,” Bonnell says. “To say we’ve been overstimulated is an understatement. And it’s reflecting in our work: We’re pushing boundaries and just feeling truly inspired. Each time I create something, I’m pulling from the mental notes I’ve taken along the way.”

**Exercise your brain.** “Creativity is like a muscle,” Gaynor says, “and it has the possibility to atrophy. The more we’re exercising that creative muscle, the more juice there is for us to pull from.” When you’re stumped,

pick up a brain-building book (HOW has plenty of them, including Gouveia and Elkerton’s “Creative Stuff,” David Sherwin’s “Creative Workshop,” and Stefan Mumaw and Wendy Lee Oldfield’s “Caffeine for the Creative Mind”) and work through the creative problems and brainstorming exercises to keep your brain limber and open to seeing new connections.

“[These books] force you to switch off from whatever it is you’re doing and focus on something more creative,” Elkerton says. “Let’s face it: No one is knee-deep in a creative mind-set and picks up a book on ideas and creativity. They do this when they need a distraction. And that’s what these books provide. Not just any distraction, but a creative distraction of simple things to make your brain break free.”

**Use tools to capture inputs and ideas.** Serendipitous ideas are awesome. Forgetting them sucks. Know that brainstorms—and the inputs that feed them—can come anytime, anywhere. Keep notebooks in your gym bag, your glove compartment, your nightstand, your bathroom cabinet. Gaynor notes that your smartphone is your best idea-capturing tool: Use it to record a voice note and snap photos of stuff that catches your eye. Evernote is another great digital creativity tool—it’s like Pinterest meets Post-It notes, allowing you to clip web pages, snap photos, record audio and type notes, then organize and tag all these inputs you find on the fly.

**Build percolation time into your workflow.** When you’re estimating or planning a design project, allow time for idea generation. Gaynor notes that creative blocks happen when we’re under pressure and that deadlines are the most frequent cause of pressure. If you’re in a time crunch and need to develop ideas fast, she recommends the mind-mapping technique, where you write a key word in the center of a huge piece of paper, and then surround it with other related words, branching outward like a tree. This kind of brain dump helps you quickly spot connections and concepts.

**Do whatever it takes.** Creative roadblocks can be self-fulfilling; when we feel stuck it’s hard to get beyond that. Do what you’ve gotta do to get around the block. “One time I was incredibly frustrated over an idea that wasn’t coming together, and I decided to go to the Tractor Supply Store to hold little baby ducks,” Bonnell says. “It sounds crazy, but on the way back, the answer revealed itself.” **HOW**

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