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Nurturing Creativity

“... the most dangerous word in all of advertising [is] originality... Here, misty, distant, and infinitely desirable, is the copywriter’s Holy Grail, Unfortunately it has ruined more advertisers than it has ever made , , .”
Rosser Reeves (1961)

“Today, everybody is talking ‘Creativity,’ and frankly, that’s got me worried ... I fear all the sins we may commit in the name of creativity.
Bill Bernbach (around 1960)

The principles in this book provide a structured framework to aide creativity. While it might seem counter-intuitive to use a structured approach for this purpose, there is substantial evidence, that, in fact, structure enhances creativity.

The principles provide only one of the elements in the creative process, albeit a highly significant one. It requires much creativity to bring these principles to life. This chapter provides advice on how to identify creative people. It then provides techniques that can be used to nurture their creativity.

Find Creative People

“The man who thinks he knows how to advertise is born at the rate of one hundred a minute.”
Nathaniel A. Fowler, 1904

What type of person is creative? Most organizations strive to hire people who get along well with others and who are good team players. It’s common to hear such phrases as, “There is no “I” in team.” However, there is an “I” in innovation – *and* in invention -- *and* in creativity.

Jackson and Rushton (1987, p. 143-146) summarized some traits from studies of creative and productive researchers in psychology and related areas:

Less-creative researchers

- fun-loving
- sociable
- meek
- supportive
- extraverted
- aesthetically sensitive

More-creative researchers

- compulsive
- dominant
- aggressive
- anxious
- ambitious
- independent

Gelade (1997) gave a personality test to people in creative jobs (58 individuals in creative departments of prominent UK advertising agencies and small design groups) and compared the results with those from 70 managers in mainstream UK corporations with jobs that were less obviously in need of creativity. The people in the “creativity jobs” scored much higher on neuroticism, hostility, and depression. After reviewing research studies on the topic, one researcher noted in the title of his paper that “ ‘nice people’ are not creative and creative people are not ‘nice’ ” (Kwang 2001).

In a more general review of creativity, Martindale (1989) says that creative people describe themselves as original, emotional, enthusiastic, argumentative, assertive, independent, self-confident, rebellious, and impulsive. People who are not creative describe themselves as gentle, patient, peaceable, contented, and concerned with others. Now here's another interesting thing; creative people tend to be uninterested in details and facts for their own sake. They lack interest in the mundane details that constitute the ordinary person's mental life. On the other hand, creative people have a wide range of interests and can combine ideas from different disciplines.

Very high intelligence does not play a big role in creativity. Even among research scientists, there is little evidence that IQ is important beyond 120. David Ogilvy was widely regarded as a genius – so much so that he wondered if it were true. After all, he reported that he had flunked out of Oxford. He decided to find out exactly how smart he was, expecting to have an IQ around 145. However, he reported that he scored 96 (*Business Strategy Review* 2005). It is difficult to believe this story; after all, he was *admitted* to Oxford. Perhaps Ogilvy was merely trying to make a point that people should be judged based on performance, not on IQ.

Meehl (1956), after summarizing decades of research on personnel selection, said that the most important thing when deciding whom to hire is that you should make your decision *before* you meet the candidate (fact checking: Use his quote MI??) Another half century of research supports that advice (Grove, et al, 2000). This rule forces you to focus on information about a person's ability to perform the job; when you meet the person, you are distracted by features that might be irrelevant to the job, such as height, accent, looks, weight, and gender. Thus, some orchestras have applicants play behind a curtain when auditioning, a procedure that has enabled more women to get jobs in orchestras.

It would seem to be especially important to make a prior decision when trying to hire *creative* people. The best guide is to have them to submit portfolios or other material evidence of creativity prior to a personal appearance. This might necessitate having an administrator who screens out information irrelevant to the job.

Generate Creative Ideas

“The absence of boundaries is not liberating, it is enslaving,
What liberates is the tyranny of structure”
Anonymous

You might have noticed that scientific discoveries usually result primarily from the efforts of one person. For example, Farnsworth invented the TV, while RCA was unable to do so. Major companies have rejected inventions by such individuals as Steve Jobs (Apple), Chester Carlsen (Xerox), and Bill Bowerman (Nike). Great books, paintings, music, and architecture are dominated by individuals, not by committees. David Ogilvy said, “Commercials should never be created in a committee...advertising seems to sell most when it is written by a solitary individual.”

When people get together in groups, creativity is suppressed. Imagine, if you can, how creative Benjamin Franklin would have been had he worked in one of today's large organizations. The half-life of creative ideas in traditional groups is probably less than a minute.

Productivity also drops in what is known to researchers as “social loafing.” Karau and Williams (1993) provided a meta-analysis of 78 studies on social loafing. They show that people in groups tend to slack off, especially when they expect their co-workers to perform well.

Dave Barry, the humorist, was serious when he wrote in 1998:

“If you had to identify, in one word, the reason why the human race has not achieved, and never will achieve its full potential, that word would be ‘meetings.’”

David Ogilvy said,

“Search the parks in all the cities, you won't find statues of any committees.”

Many well-respected advertisers, such as George Lois, have had little love for meetings. Shirley Polykoff, a noted advertiser at Foote, Cone and Belding, wrote that in the 1950s, “big agencies ... specialized in weekly staff meetings of monumental monotony.”

If you cannot abandon meetings, make them small. In the 1960s, Bill Bernbach formed teams consisting of a copywriter and an art director. In the early 2000s, it was common for many advertising agencies in London to hire two-person teams (White 2004). Also, keep meetings short. Some firms use stand-up meetings as a way to keep them brief.

Meetings with clients are necessary, but they can thwart creativity. Bill Bernbach had a suggestion for this. As Glatzer (1970) described, Bernbach told Bob Townsend, CEO of Avis rental cars, “You must promise to run everything we write, without changing a bloody comma ... we don’t like to see it get all mucked up in committees. When good advertising goes up there, it gets uncreated.” But when Townsend saw the “We Try Harder” campaign, he thought it was awful and considered canceling it. Fortunately for him and for Avis, he didn’t. It is still persuading people today.

The solution is to allow people, especially those in jobs calling for creativity to work independently, while remaining able to nevertheless benefit from suggestions of others. Memos and the Internet can provide efficient alternatives to meetings. In some cases, face-to-face meetings are necessary – negotiations, for example. But for creativity and problem solving, face-to-face meetings are typically detrimental, as shown by the evidence summarized in Armstrong (2006).

Expand the Problem Statement Before Looking for Solutions

“Solving a problem simply means representing
it so as to make the solution transparent.”

Herbert A. Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial* [fact check source]

Write the problem statement in alternative ways and ask others to independently do the same. The framework provided in this book can help with this process. It structures the problem by suggesting principles that might be used in designing a campaign.

The way you phrase the problem will narrow your search for solutions. For example, if you phrase a problem as, “How can we convince people to stop smoking?”, you get one set of solutions (e.g., tell smokers about the dangers of smoking). But if you ask instead, “What could be done to get people to stop smoking?” it broadens the issue and raises other possibilities (e.g., persuading nonsmokers to ask smokers not to smoke, or persuading legislatures to pass laws against smoking in public places).

Brainstorming, Brainwriting, and Electronic Brainwriting

Creativity can be hampered by the presence of other people. Some members are reluctant to contribute. Some delight in pointing out problems with new ideas. Others hesitate to criticize, because they don’t want to be labeled as not being part of the team. In 1940, Alex Osborn, the “O” at the BBD&O advertising agency, addressed these issues with a procedure called “brainstorming,” a highly structured means of reducing evaluation – it gets done later, using different procedures, and perhaps even different people.

To remove evaluation, Osborn recommended that a facilitator run the meeting. This facilitator encourages a large quantity of ideas on the topic, independent of quality. The facilitator’s role is not easy; according to Osborn’s suggestions, his primary job is to ensure that no one says anything negative about someone else’s ideas. The facilitator remains neutral and does not contribute ideas. Without a facilitator, groups are rarely able to adhere to the process – as shown, for example, in an experiment by Offner, Kramer and Winter (1996).

Osborn also recommended that someone act solely as a recorder. According to Offner et al, (1996), the recording process should not be visible; it was determined that when it was done publicly, people slowed down to wait for the recorder to post the ideas, which in turn interrupted the flow.

Osborn wrote a book on creativity (Osborn 1953). His ideas on group dynamics received support from research. Experimental studies demonstrated that brainstorming groups, properly run, produced many more ideas – and more creative idea – than did traditional groups.

BBD&O used brainstorming extensively. For example, in 1956, they ran 401 sessions and produced an average of 85 ideas per session. Of these, six percent were deemed “worthy of development into usable ideas” (Fox 1997). In other words, they generated about five usable ideas per session, which based on my experience, is quite a lot.

The focus on quantity was tested by Bergh, Reid and Schorin (1983). They instructed groups of advertising students to generate one, three, five, or eight positioning statements for advertising a hypothetical brand of beer. Ratings were made by a panel of four professionals from a top-twenty ad agency: a creative director, art director, copy supervisor, and senior writer. Twenty-five ideas were generated by the group with the high goal while only one came from the group with the lowest goal. Furthermore, the percentage of good ideas did not wane as the quantity of ideas increased.

The brainstorming procedure was improved some years later by eliminating not only negative but also positive evaluation (i.e., “That’s a great idea.”). Connolly, Jessup & Valacich (1990) found that positive reinforcement was even more damaging than negative feedback because it led groups to conclude that the job was finished.

Research on brainstorming has been conducted since the late 1950s (e.g., Parnes and Meadow 1959). The results show that brainstorming generates more good ideas than do traditional meetings. Offner, Kramer and Winter (1996) found that four-person groups, run by facilitators and trainers who received two hours of training, did almost as well as four-person “nominal” groups (people working by themselves). However, their procedure was expensive as it required two trained people to conduct each brainstorming session.

Interestingly, few firms actually use brainstorming. My career spans many organizations and nearly half a century, yet I have never been in a brainstorming group run by anyone in these organizations. My students tell me that they have been involved in brainstorming sessions, but when I ask them to describe the process, it is clear that they are describing traditional meetings. A similar experience was reported by David Kelly, founder of IDEO, a well-respected consulting company that helps clients develop new products. A detailed examination of their process by Sutton & Hargadon (1996), concluded that IDEO uses brainstorming effectively. [Check with David Kelly of IDEO/]

Brainstorming reduces group pressures, but it does not eliminate them. An even more effective way to reduce pressure is to use “brainwriting” (also called the “nominal group method”). To brainwrite, take a short timeout within a meeting and ask people to individually write as many ideas as they can on the topic for about six to ten minutes. To reduce concerns about evaluation, participants should not sign their list. The ideas are then combined into a master list. You can use brainwriting more than once within a meeting.

Over 20 studies have shown that brainwriting is substantially more effective than brainstorming (Gallupe et al, 1991). In addition to reducing group pressure, less time is wasted on listening, as shown by Diehl and Stroebe (1987). It is also less expensive, as there is no need to use a trained facilitator.

Organizations with a continuing need for creativity should consider electronic brainwriting. With this process, creative people type their ideas. When everyone has finished, the ideas are listed anonymously on a video screen. Four experiments by Valacich et al, (1994) showed that electronic brainwriting is even more effective than manual brainwriting. Gallupe, et. al’s (1992) experiments showed that while the production of unique ideas did not vary for groups of 4, 6 and 12 people, there was a sharp increase for electronic brainstorming groups such that they were about three times as effective [define] as traditional groups when used in 12-person groups. Galupe and Cooper (1993) concluded: “Across five studies involving more than 800 people, productivity [define] advantages have ranged from 25 percent to 50 percent for four-person groups and to nearly 200 percent for twelve-person groups.”

Despite the improved creativity and production that comes from structured meetings, most people prefer unstructured meetings. They feel more satisfied and believe that they have produced more ideas by using the unstructured free-flowing format. But this satisfaction has often been shown to be inversely related to the number of useful ideas that were generated (e.g., Connolly et al. 1990; Paulus et al. 1993; Valacich et al. 1994).

Nevertheless, electronic brainwriting is gaining ground. Briggs, Nunamaker and Sprague (1998) estimated that electronic brainwriting has been used by several million people in over 1,500 organizations around the world.

One useful approach to brainwriting is called “gallery writing.” When done manually, flip charts are set up and group members silently write unsigned suggestions. They then post them on the walls. Others write comments on the suggestions. This is easier to do (and to maintain anonymity) when done electronically. This approach is effective, and is well liked by participants (as shown in the study by Aiken & Vanjani 2003).

The use of analogies can aid the search for creative solutions. Listing similar problems and describing solutions to them, can stimulate ideas for solving the current problem. For example, if the task is to advertise automobiles, one might think about how other forms of transportation (trains or ships) were successfully advertised. David McCall, a copywriter, said “... I find looking at pictures a great stimulus to ideas, and I get the Watkins book ... on the *Hundred Greatest Advertisements*, because I am a great cribber.” I describe sources that contain sample ads on advertisingprinciples.com. To avoid limiting creativity, examine these after, not before, developing your initial ideas.

Groups can enhance creativity with the above-mentioned structured procedures. An alternative is to use virtual groups. In these, people communicate by email, reports, and letters, but do not meet face-to-face. Thus, they are not influenced by factors such as a person’s height or looks, body language, facial expressions, tone and so on that might cause them to be careful about suggesting ideas that differ from the typical ideas in the group. As a result, virtual groups can use inputs from many people. Evidence on the value of alternatives to face-to-face meetings is provided in Armstrong (2006).

The “second-solution” technique offers another approach to generating ideas. This asks the group what the best solution would be if they were prohibited from using their first solution. By getting everyone involved, it also aids implementation. Maier and Hoffman (1960), in a problem involving a change in employee work procedures, found that solutions were of higher quality when groups were instructed to find a second solution after they had presumably solved the problem. The second solutions were obtained in about two-thirds of the time needed for the first solutions, and the groups generally preferred their second solutions to the first ones.

Build on Ideas

*“I have learned that any fool can write a bad ad,
but it takes a real genius to keep his hands off a good one.”*
Leo Burnett, 1950s

Consider what happens when someone in a group has an idea that differs from what the others believe. Initially, the others talk to the deviant member to bring him into line. If that does not work, the deviant person is often ostracized. This phenomenon is easy to demonstrate for nearly any topic.

The “build” technique can be used to nurture ideas that differ. Instead of discussing what is wrong with an idea, focus on how to clarify or improve it. This helps to avoid the feeling that new and creative ideas are wrong. A discussion leader is needed to keep the group on track.

Maier (1963), one of the best books ever on how to run groups, provided the following suggestions for groups (paraphrased). These are especially relevant for face-to-face meetings and virtual teams:

Be problem-centered. Keep all discussion problem-centered and avoid looking for excuses or seeking to blame others for a problem. Avoid saying things like, “That would never work.”

Record suggestions. Keep track of all suggestions for solving a problem so that each may be explored fully.

Explore. Explore a number of suggestions for addressing an issue. Ask probing questions such as “How would that work?” “Do I understand the issue or do I need to search out more information?” “Am I mistaken in my assumptions about the issue?” “What are the advantages of each proposal?” or “Is there a way to combine suggestions to generate an even better solution?”

Protect people. Protect individuals from personal attacks and criticism.

Understand and resolve differences. Understand differences of opinions in the group and attempt to resolve them.

Protect alternative viewpoints. Innovations come from different viewpoints, thus a group leader should nurture rather than ignore such viewpoints. Maier and Solem (1952) illustrate this by using a problem with a correct answer: “A man bought a horse for \$60 and sold it for \$70. Then he bought it back again for \$80 and again sold it for \$90. How much money did he make in the horse business?” The correct answer is \$20, yet 55% of his subjects got it wrong. As expected, group discussion helped, especially when leaders were trained to consider alternative views. In these groups, only 16% of the groups got the wrong answer versus 28% in the leaderless groups.

These are useful procedures, backed up with evidence. However, to my knowledge, these guidelines are rarely used in organizations. I have spent almost five decades in organizations and I cannot recall being in meetings that have used all of these procedures.

Evaluating Campaigns

“In my experience, committees can criticize, but they cannot create.”

David Ogilvy (1983)

Once ideas have been generated, developed, and nurtured, they must be evaluated without undoing creative content. What follows is a discussion of this issue through three perspectives: evaluation through the use of research, expert judgments, and methods to nurture dissent.

Research

Groups are poor at analysis, so do it individually and formally. Have more than one person analyze the same problem and then compare the written solutions – a procedure known as parallel processing. If someone makes a mistake in the analysis, it is not likely that another person would have made exactly the same mistake when the analyses were done independently.

Those who fail to do formal analyses often suffer. For example, in the early 1990s, Maytag’s Hoover unit in the UK advertised that they would provide a free flight from the U.K. to the U.S. for anyone who spent over £100 for a Hoover vacuum cleaner. Although Hoover did not do the numbers, over 200,000 customers did. They concluded that because flights cost more than £100 at the time, they were happy to buy a spare vacuum cleaner. This promotion proved to be a disaster for Hoover. The president of Hoover and other top executives were fired as a result.

Research is often used to assess consumer responses to advertising. It can be applied prior to, during, or after a campaign or –as is frequently the case – during all three phases. Persuasiveness is often examined, and how this is done varies according to the media. For example, with TV or print, which ads most successfully increase intent-to-purchase levels? When researching direct response advertising (such as in direct mail), which ads generate the most response?

Ads can succeed even when they are not likeable. This is truer for certain conditions and for certain types of ads than others. For example, comparative, provocative, and negative ads are often disliked yet effective. Thus, advertisers should not ask customers whether they like ads. The focus should be on persuasiveness.

Focus groups can be used to generate ideas for ads. Individual in-depth interview, are, however, generally more cost effective for this purpose. Do not use focus groups to evaluate ads; they were designed only to generate ideas. For further discussion and for some evidence on the use of focus groups, see the Glossary.

Test whether the ads adhere to principles

The principles in this book can be used not only to develop ads, but also to evaluate ads. By identifying relevant principles that are overlooked or misused, one can then take steps to improve an ad. Structured checklists are provided at the end of the principles chapters in this book. They are provided as electronic checklists on advertisingprinciples.com.

Expert judgments

People tend to fall in love with their own ideas, and advertisers are no different in this respect. At some point, they should obtain independent expert judgments for their advertising campaign. A procedure called “Delphi” can help accomplish this.

Delphi is a formal survey of experts involving anonymous responses for two or more rounds. Details about this procedure, along with software for using it, can be found at “advertisingprinciples.com” under Creating Ads/Improving Ideas.

Nurture dissent

“Rarely have I seen any really great advertising created without a certain amount of bent noses, irritation, and downright cursedness.”

Leo Burnett, 1940s

Groups that nurture dissent produce better decisions. Unfortunately, many organizations cherish agreement and typically act to override dissent. Nearly everyone in these organizations realizes what the rules of the game are. Those that don’t obey these (unspoken) rules often find themselves off to the side of things.

A procedure called “The Devil’s Advocate” (DA) involves gaining a group’s acceptance to arbitrarily select one or more group members whose task would be to find things that are wrong with a given proposal. The idea is to consider problems in a manner that protects the person playing the role of the DA. When meeting face-to-face, the DA session should be short – less than an hour.

DA has a long history. In 1587, the Roman Catholic Pope Sixtus V instituted the DA for helping evaluate whether a person should be canonized. In recent times, it has been recommended for evaluating proposals in organizations.

Much research has been done on DA. Schwenk’s (1990) meta-analysis of 16 experiments found only mild support for DA when compared with decisions made by using traditional meetings. Moreover, a later review by Nemeth and Nemeth-Brown (2003) found little support for its use. Here is why: Those presenting a plan believe that there is no hope of convincing someone who has been instructed to be completely negative (the DA). As a result they are led to reinforce their current plan at the expense of using the criticisms for change.

Experimental studies have shown that *authentic dissent* (that is, when people are arguing for what they believe) is more effective. Partly this occurs because the group realizes that an authentic dissenter might change, whereas there is no hope for this with the DA. Furthermore, the assignment of the role did little to protect the people playing as Devil’s Advocates – they became unpopular. While this also happened to authentic dissenters, people tended at least to respect authentic dissenters for their courage.

Those with authentic beliefs do a better job in arguing their positions than do those who are merely assigned to the role. Based on their experiments, Nemeth et al. (2001) found that authentic dissenters were able to get people to focus more on opposing thoughts than supporting ones, thus contributing to more opinion change.

With authentic dissent, potential dissenters realize that they may become unpopular, so they are usually reluctant to speak up. In addition, a formal process of authentic dissent suffers from problems also encountered with DA. Firstly, it is time-consuming because only one person dissents, while the rest defend. Secondly, it can lead groups to bolster their arguments rather than to think about how to overcome objections. [Nemeth et al. 2001 – say what they did]

These problems can be overcome by a procedure that I refer to as Multiple Authentic Dissent (MAD). This involves asking experts, including those involved with the given proposal, to act as dissenters. Each person independently describes all perceived defects in a proposed campaign. They would type their criticisms and send them to an administrator who would organize, edit, and circulate the list. Each person would assume that each of the objections has merit, and develop ways to improve the proposals. Finally, the suggested improvements would then be summarized and appropriate revisions would be made in the campaign. This process can be repeated.

To ensure that people respond and do so in a timely fashion, the process can be conducted during a meeting by taking “time outs” for each phase. That is, time would be allotted to writing about the defects, then collating and organizing the responses, then writing about ways to address the defects so as to improve the campaign.

In some cases, it may be useful to keep the MAD anonymous. If done within a meeting format, each person could submit typed, unsigned inputs.

Judging from related research on group process, MAD should be effective at improving proposals. Because many people can be involved in finding defects, it is likely that important defects will be discovered. This process is analogous to scientific peer review. As is known from research on peer review, individual reviewers catch only a some of errors when they review papers for publication. In an experimental study on medical research, 68% of the reviewers of a fictitious paper with intentional errors did not realize that the conclusions in the paper were not supported by the results (Baxt & Berlin 1998). [Move earlier?]

Efficiency would also be higher with MAD than with traditional reviews because time is not wasted in defending the original campaign. Instead the effort goes into improving it.

Acceptance under MAD might also be higher because everyone can be involved in finding defects. Acceptance of changes would also be more likely because the process does not lead the group to bolster their arguments for the original campaign.

Keep Options Alive

Develop alternative campaigns, nurture them, and then test them. Many firms do this, especially with TV commercials. The investments in developing the ad and especially in media time are high, so firms want to be sure the ads are persuasive. These commercials are often tested in what is referred to as “rough” or preliminary form. The use of alternatives helps avoid having to “protect” the group’s solution. Instead the group now has a number of solutions to choose from.

The development of an alternative campaign is desirable in the event that the original campaign falls short. Define criteria in advance and have a contingency campaign ready to go. Unfortunately, few organizations use contingency plans.

Exhibit D provides a summary listing of the processes for creativity in advertising:

Exhibit D: Developing and Nurturing Creativity: A Checklist

Find creative people:

- Judge their work, not them.
- Decide whom to hire before meeting them.

Generate creative ideas:

- Use many individuals, working independently.
- Use problem storming.
- Use brainstorming.
- Use analogies.

Use structured methods for evaluation:

- Do formal analyses (use parallel processing)
- Test effects of ads on customers.
- Have campaigns rated independently by experts (consider Delphi).
- Nurture dissent (Multiple Authentic Dissent)

Keep options alive:

- Develop alternative campaigns.

___ Use the second-solution technique

___ Prepare contingency plans

Build on ideas before evaluating them:

___ Create virtual teams or structured meetings.