

Digging Yourself Out of a Creative Rut The Power of “What If...?”

What if the geniuses behind DVRs, the new iPad tablet, or Post-Its had never asked, “What if?” Now there’s a scary thought.

“What if?” is the essence of creativity; asking it opens the door for your brain to respond with creative solutions to nearly any situation.

Some hold the mistaken belief that creativity is a

talent few possess, or that we don’t need to be creative if we don’t work in a creative field. The beauty of “what if?” is that anyone can ask the question and respond in ways that encourage innovation and proactive problem solving. Creativity’s true definition is simple: it’s open-minded problem solving. That’s something we all can do – and something we all need to do.

So, just how do you get those problem-solving juices flowing? We’ve all been there: staring at a blank screen, stumped by a client’s question, or freezing up during a brainstorming session. Fortunately, there are plenty of easy ways to view a problem with fresh eyes. Try these to start:

Build your own inspiration library. Ask yourself “What inspires me? What excites

me?” Look through your collection of mail, trade magazines and other business resources to develop what’s known in the advertising world as a swipe file. You can include anything: a competitor’s latest offer, a clever ad layout, a dynamic color combination, or a quirky brochure fold that piqued your interest. Throw it

all into a folder, and you have an inspiration library you can return to again and again.

Some people even work in 3D, filling a box with interesting objects. When you need a new idea, pull out two or more items at random and see if they trigger a new thought or help you visualize a connection.

In addition to hard-copy inspiration, create a digital swipe file to archive interesting e-newsletters or site features.

(cont’d on p. 2)

Under-the-Radar Marketing on Amazon

Sure, Amazon.com is great for shopping, but this massive storefront also offers powerful research and marketing opportunities. Start with these five tips:

1. Conduct some self-research. Have products for sale on Amazon? Read your own reviews for valuable customer feedback. You may uncover areas for improvement or sources of inspiration for your next blockbuster idea.

2. Dig around for competitive reconnaissance. Search for a competitive product or industry-related term, and take a look at the “Customers Who Bought this Item Also Bought” results. This is a great way to gauge customer behavior, brainstorm possible new product development, and uncover unexpected competitors. While you’re there, take a look at the product reviews to see where your competitor’s perceived weaknesses are, and how you might do better or position your product to fill market gaps.

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in this issue...

**Improve Your Next
Brainstorming Session**

New Faves: E-Tips & Tools

**Off the Bookshelf
Must-Haves for Every
Creativity Library**



E-Tips & Tools

What's the best thing about email newsletters? Sometimes they show up just when you need them. That's often the case with the resources listed below. At the very least, their steady presence in your in-box will remind you to strive for creative greatness every day.

[damniwish.com](#)

Damn, I wish we thought of this title. It perfectly captures that "D-oh!" moment when you read something so darn clever you're forced to smack your forehead. Word-of-mouth maven Andy Sernovitz offers up brilliant-yet-simple observations and examples, like making it easy for a fan to become a spokesperson, or small changes you can make to absolutely thrill your customers.

[justsell.com](#)

Sam Parker's Give More Media is the genius behind books like *212*, which touts the tremendous power of incremental extra effort. JustSell.com delivers daily inspirational quotes from sources ranging from Ray Bradbury to Warren Buffett. A delight for hardcore and non-sales types alike, with tools like "Top 30 Open-Ended Questions" and a checklist for maximizing every customer service engagement.

[learnonething.typepad.com](#)

Mary Gillen's "Learn One Thing" lives up to its billing with quick-read tips on a mixed bag of topics — with one or more always guaranteed to make you go, "Hmmm." For example, wondering how to claim a dormant username on Twitter? Add a logo to the browser window when someone types in your URL? Make the most of your online content from an SEO standpoint? It's all here, and much more.

In a Creative Rut? (from p. 1)

Take a new approach. Follow the same routine day in and day out? Shake things up a bit to see how simple changes can do wonders to jolt us out of our comfort zone. Hate Westerns? Watch a John Wayne classic you never dreamed you'd sit through. Love NPR? Try a dose of country or Howard Stern for a day. Drink black coffee every morning? Grab a chai latte. You get the picture.

Exercise your body, wake up your mind. Just going for a brisk walk can help relieve the stress and tension that block our ability to think creatively. A little fresh air and time spent getting physical lets your mind wander into new territories. Make sure you get your Zs, too. A recent study from the University of California shows that REM sleep enhances our innate problem-solving abilities.

If you think it, write it. Maintain an idea log or journal. Write down thoughts, questions, or facts that intrigue you. Try making a list of questions, all beginning with, "What if?" You may be surprised where they lead you. The problems you ponder in your journal can be serious or frivolous. Almost every innovation can be traced back to a problem — large or small — that needed solving.

Become a trendwatcher. Trends represent what's new, interesting, and innovative. Grab a quick trend snapshot by heading down to your local book superstore. Browse the magazine racks and keep an eye out for recurring themes or common cover subjects across different categories. Note any new categories or those suddenly populated with titles.

Stop while the going is good. Keep up the creative momentum by taking regular breaks, even if you aren't finished with the project at hand. You'll return to your task with renewed motivation, enthusiasm, and sustained inspiration. Hey, it worked for Hemingway, so why not give it a try?

Finally, don't be too hard on yourself. Rome wasn't built in a day, and not all of your creative thoughts are going to be genius material straight out of the gate. What's important is to get your ideas down, then revisit them with fresh eyes to see what further connections you can draw (and determine which ideas you can eliminate from consideration).

By asking "what if..." you're coming up with answers that may just solve the problem that sparked the question. That's creative value that every business should harness. If you don't, you're surely missing valuable insights before they even reach the drawing board.

Say "So Long" to the CREATIVITY KILLERS

Creative thinking is all about mindset. And whether you're orchestrating a brainstorming session or sitting down to write a new tagline, rule one is to banish all critics — inner and outer. No eye-rolling, no dramatic sighs, and no negative expressions.

Which of these dirty dozen creativity killers are you guilty of?

"It's not in the budget."

"Be realistic."

"Been there, done that."

"Don't rock the boat."

"Management will never agree to that."

"Hey, we've gotten this far without it."

"It hasn't been done before."

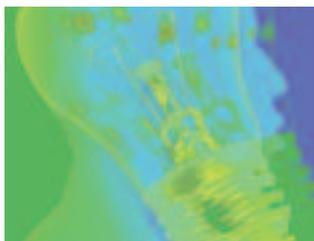
"Yeah, we've tried that before."

"Good point, but..."

"We don't have the time for that."

"The client hates red."

"We've always done it this way."



Better Brainstorming Sessions Start Here

Ready to explore the power of group think?

Here are some proven ways to trigger imaginative solutions in an environment that brings out the best in your team.

Focus, focus, focus. Write a narrow, one-sentence focus statement that outlines what you want to accomplish. Be specific. Some examples: What non-competing companies are trying to reach the same customers we are? How can we get college students to try our product? What core ideals separate us from the competition?

Select the players. Mix it up and invite colleagues who are intimately familiar with your situation, a few with a bit of working knowledge, and some who don't have a clue what you're doing. Include people with varied perspectives — customer service reps, bean counters, even interns.

Have everyone bring something to the table. True creativity stems from a combination of solitary and joint thinking. Sharing your focus statement in advance gives participants a chance to do some private brainstorming before getting together with the team.

Set the scene. Pick a location that's conducive to creative expression. Gather tools for inspiration and expression: white board, markers, poster pads, and tape or tacks to post ideas. Touch-me toys like Play-Doh are critical for getting ideas juices flowing. And don't forget some creative jump-starters: glossy magazines, catalogs, and a computer with online access.

Keep it relaxed. Make it clear that this is a judgment-free zone; you want your team to be able to share their ideas freely, no matter how outlandish. The most ridiculous ideas can be pared down and combined to come up with truly innovative concepts that might otherwise have been overlooked.

Showtime! Get the ball rolling by reading the focus statement and noting some preliminary ideas as examples. About halfway through the session, call a brief timeout to evaluate the ideas you've generated. Take a vote on each and toss the lesser ones. Then examine the remainder, asking the group for ways to improve or expand upon them.

Assign homework. With 15 minutes to go, stop and summarize what's been accomplished, then assign "next step" tasks. Maybe your purchasing guru is checking out prices, or an art director is creating thumbnails for new packaging. Be sure to specify who's doing what, and more importantly, by when.

Last steps: Send a thank-you memo to all participants summarizing the session, and keep everyone in the loop as any ideas you've developed reach fruition. A good brainstorming session is like a good book: you're not satisfied until you know the ending. Hope yours is a happy one.



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Amazonian Marketing Opps (from p. 1)

3. **Raise your social media profile and boost SEO by posting book or product reviews in your area of expertise.** Make a name for yourself by choosing a reviewer name that reflects your business or brand. Reviews should be informative and relevant; any sales language or self-promotion will quickly damage your credibility.

4. **Become a Listmaniac.** Introduce yourself and establish your qualifications with a little self-promotion. Use the Listmania feature to create a themed list of books, films, or anything else relevant to your area of expertise. When an Amazon visitor searches for an item that appears on your list, your complete list will show up to the left of their search results and get your content noticed.

5. **Share your expertise with a how-to guide.** "So You'd Like to..." guides are another way to establish yourself as a resource on Amazon. Flex your marketing muscles with a fun but informative page that teaches visitors how to accomplish anything, from selecting a DVD player to buying a house. Go to Help, then enter "So You'd Like to" in the search box to learn more about creating a guide.

Clearly, Amazon is good for much more than the latest bestseller or electronic gadget. Put its resources to work for your business, and you just might earn back some of the cash you've spent on the site over the years.





Creativity on Call™

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Welcome to The Creativity Issue!



Building Your Own Creativity Library

Listen, we can't give away all our creative secrets, but in our opinion the six classics listed here (in no particular order) are at the heart of every functional creative thinking library:

How to Think Like DaVinci, by Michael J. Gelb (©1998, Dell Publishing) — How can anyone possibly resist a book subtitled, “Seven Steps to Genius Every Day”? Through self-assessments, Q&As, and even recipes, Gelb's bestseller and its accompanying workbook prove once and for all that genius is indeed made, not born.

The Big Book of Team-Building Games, by John Newstrom & Edward Scannell (©1998, McGraw-Hill) — Need to build a high-performance creative team? Use the exercises and activities in this book to build trust, foster collaboration, and stimulate problem solving in any industry.

ThinkerToys: A Handbook of Business Creativity, by Michael Michalko (©1991, Ten Speed Press) — Terrific mix of linear and intuitive techniques for generating ideas to solve even your most vexing business challenges.

Inspiration Sandwich: Stories to Inspire Our Creative Freedom, by Sark (©1992, Celestial Arts) — Don't be fooled by its simplistic feel. This charming, children's book-like collection of 43 ways to awaken your creative self wields real power.

Creative Whack Pack, by Roger von Oech (©1992, Creative Think/Warner Books) — Funky, fun book/card deck combo with hands-on creative strategies for turning your ideas into action. Color-coded cards let you play the role of explorer, artist, judge or warrior in uncovering, generating, evaluating and defending your ideas.

Why Didn't I Think of That?, by Charles W. McCoy (©2002, Prentice Hall Press) — Well, here's an unexpected angle...creative thinking advice from a former superior court judge. McCoy offers insights from the cases over which he's presided to finally debunk the myth that left-brain thinking is limited to artsy types. Terrific “mental aerobics” challenge you to use your imagination in inventive ways.