

Week 1:  
Problem and Idea link

## **Ideation Techniques**

### ***1. Questioning assumptions***

Most industries have an orthodoxy – a set of deeply-held, unspoken beliefs that everyone follows when it comes to “how we do things around here.” This is the functional equivalent of a set of blinders, like horses wear. We continue plodding straight ahead, unable to see what lies to the right or left of us. By questioning assumptions during every point of the product or service development process, we can entertain new ideas and possibilities.

Mattimore tells the story of his colleague Gary Fraser, who took over the oral care business unit at Unilever, and had to take on two much larger, deeply entrenched competitors in the toothpaste market, Colgate and Crest. He couldn't compete with them head-to-head from a product standpoint, and couldn't possibly outspend them in marketing. The solution was for Fraser and his team to question every facet of their business, including product packaging, pricing and advertising. The result was the world's first baking soda and peroxide toothpaste, Mentadent, which was very successful. To use this technique, Mattimore recommends that you first decide how to frame your creative challenge. Next, generate 20 to 30 assumptions, true or false, that you may be making about it. Then pick several of these assumptions and use them as thought starters and idea triggers to generate new ideas. Be sure to consider all aspects of your business, including consumer or customer beliefs, manufacturing, materials, pricing, distribution and product positioning.

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## **2. *Wishing***

For this ideation technique, you start out by asking for the impossible and then brainstorm ways to make it, or at least some approximation of it, possible. The first step is to make your wishes tangible. Work with your team to generate 20 to 30 wishes about your business. Let your imagination run wild – the crazier the ideas, the better. Don't restrict your thinking at all. Next, focus in on several of these impossible wishes and use them as creative stimuli to generate ideas that are novel but more realistic. Mattimore recommends having your team think about the problem or challenge from different perspectives – such as the people who are affected by the problem, or as someone from another planet, who has never even heard of your profession or industry, would view it. This kind of role-playing helps get us out of our well-rutted paths of thinking and enables us to see new possibilities.

## **3. *Semantic intuition***

Semantic intuition is a technique that can inject fresh energy into a group that is starting to feel brain dead toward the end of a brainstorming session, according to Mattimore. It prompts participants to create new ideas by having them combine several categories of key words to create a name for a new idea – even though they have no idea what the newly-named idea IS yet. The first step is to select the three categories of words that are related to your challenge. For a consumer product, Mattimore suggests that three possibilities would be places in a store, kinds of promotional appeals and benefits of the product or needs of the customer. Next, generate variations on each of these category words. Next, randomly combine one word from each list and spend time brainstorming around the mini-story they suggest. Mattimore points out there are no “rules” to using this technique. Don't be afraid to let the keyword prompts take you far afield from them. And don't be concerned if you generated an idea that only uses two of the three words. The point of semantic intuition is simply to get you to think differently.

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#### ***4. Opportunity redefinition***

This ideation technique is deceptively simple, but can generate extraordinary results. First, create a statement that clearly defines what your creative objective is. Mattimore shared the example of working with the Catholic Knights Insurance Company to help grow their business. In this case, the opportunity statement was, How can we sell more insurance to Catholics? Next, pick three of the most interesting words in the opportunity statement and generate creative alternatives for each of them. Mattimore recommends using words that represent the 5W's and H – who, what, when, where, why and how – of your challenge. Once you have generated your three lists of alternative words, place them in a table, with the original words at the top of each column and the alternatives you have brainstormed arranged in columns below them.

Finally, redefine the opportunity by selecting one word from each column at random, plugging them into the original opportunity statement and creating new variations of it. For example, “How can WE SELL more insurance to CATHOLICS?” could become “How can we get FRIENDS OF CATHOLICS to BE INCENTIVIZED to sell life insurance to CATHOLIC GRANDPARENTS?” These crazy combinations aren't necessarily the end result of this ideation technique. More often than not, Mattimore explains, they are used as triggers or stepping stones to generate other new ideas. The bottom line is that opportunity redefinition is a powerful way to help you remove “blindness” you didn't even realize were restricting your vision. In other words, it enables you to see a wider range of possibilities than you may have ever considered before.

#### ***5. Picture prompts***

Visual techniques have a way of surfacing our intuitions, emotions and feelings. This makes them especially valuable for brainstorming solutions to creative challenges that involve people and management of them, or problems that have a deep emotional or psychological root cause. It's also an easy and fast technique that any group can use to generate ideas. Here's how to use it: The facilitator hands out a series of pre-selected images, one to each participant, and asks them to write down ideas that are inspired by what they are seeing in it.

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Mattimore says these images should be visually interesting, depict a variety of subject matter and should show people in many different types of interactions and relationships with other people. Next, participants pair off and spend additional time discussing the ideas they have generated and brainstorming additional potential solutions to the problem at hand. Finally, the teams of two present their ideas to the group. For best results, Mattimore suggests customizing the visuals to the nature of the challenge you're trying to solve. For example, a personnel or corporate culture problem could be tackled using images like the ones we just talked about – depicting many different kinds of people and relationships. For a manufacturing challenge, the images could be of an industrial nature. If you're trying to generate new product ideas, select images that are broadly evocative of your product category. Be sure to include some random or irrelevant images in your selections as well, because sometimes those types of stimuli can lead to the most creative solutions.

## ***6. Triggered brainwalking***

Mattimore characterizes brainwalking as the most flexible of the seven ideation techniques, because it can be easily combined with other techniques. It's also an ideal way to ensure that everyone in your group gets an opportunity to contribute ideas. Here's how it works:

The group first selects several aspects of the problem around which it wants to generate ideas. These become the creative prompts for the group to work with. The facilitator tapes several pieces of paper to a wall. Each member of the group gets a marker. Participants write their ideas on a paper and then rotate, adding their thoughts, own original and ideas to the page as well as building upon those of their colleagues. This can also be done by having a group sit in a circle and have the papers passed one person to the right or left after several minutes of brainstorming. When each "pass" takes place, Mattimore points out, the facilitator can suggest different ideation techniques or triggers. This helps people who may not be able to think of any new ideas and may help them to see the ideas their colleagues have written in a new light. It also helps the team generate a wider diversity of ideas.

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## ***7. Worst idea***

This is another technique that can help to save the day when nothing else seems to be working, and can re-ignite the energy levels of groups that are approaching creative burnout. The technique is simple: Ask the group to create a list of bad, terrible, stupid, illegal or gross ideas. This will get participants laughing and re-engaged. Once you've generated a list, challenge the group to turn those horrible ideas into good ones by either considering its opposite, or by finding some aspect within a terrible idea that can be used to inspire a good one. As the facilitator, be sure to push your group to generate really bad ideas!

This technique works surprisingly well because it tends to mentally disarm brainstorming participants. They may feel under pressure to come up with a really Big Idea, but that often restricts their ability to be creative. By temporarily focusing on really bad ideas, it frees them to relax and have fun. Laughter is also a stepping stone to helping people generate surprising or unexpected connections – the basis of most humor. Plus, Mattimore points out, it's the nature of our brains, when thinking about one idea, to simultaneously consider its opposite. Another helpful way to think about the worst idea technique is “rooted” in nature: Many bad ideas can also contain the “seeds” of good ones. Consider each bad idea with the thought that at least some aspect of it has value, and make it your goal to find it.