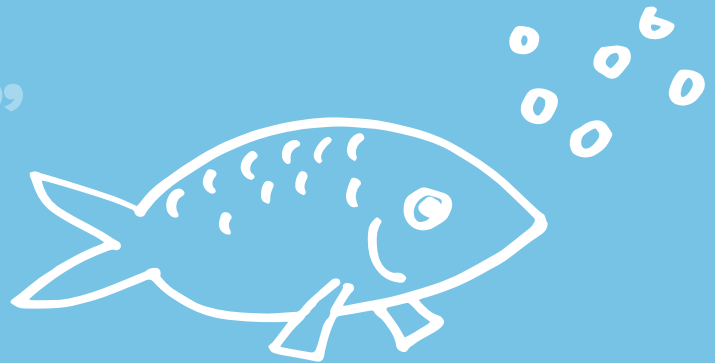


Essential Ideation Skills

“How to catch a big fish

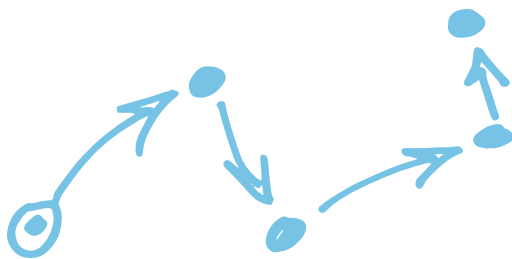
1. CATCH A LOT OF FISH.
2. THROW BACK ALL THE LITTLE ONES ”

LINDA CARSON



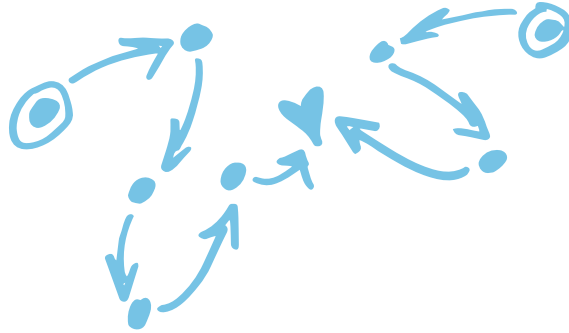
SKILL: FREE ASSOCIATION

Free association is a divergent approach to thinking. Start with a keyword (or an idea, a problem or even a proposed solution). What are the first things that come to your mind when you think about that starting point? Choose one of those things. What are the first things that come to your mind when you think about that? Keep wandering, exploring the space of everything you can think of that is even remotely associated with that first keyword. Free association is that “thinking outside the box” that everybody talks about.



SKILL: FORCED ASSOCIATION

Forced association is a convergent approach to thinking. Start with a pair of keywords (or a pair of ideas, or a problem and its proposed solution). If you think about them both—often by freely associating outward from each starting point—what connections can you eventually find between them? Forced association is how we uncover relationships or fit between things.



SKILL: EXTENSION AND COMBINATION

Extend and combine ideas, using them as seeds or building blocks or stepping stones to new ideas. Rather than judge and discard ideas one by one, ask yourself questions like “How might we make this idea bigger?” or “What happens if we try both of these?” and “Where does this idea lead us?”

SKILL: MINDMAPPING (TONY BUZAN)

You will need big paper and coloured markers.

Mindmapping is non-linear visual note-taking with lots of directionality and links between elements. Start with a node in the middle of the page representing your central theme. Use arrows to branch out to new related nodes, which might be words or diagrams. Surround each with other nodes that represent sub-themes and other new ideas. Arrange a collective mind map so that everyone in the group can reach in to add arrows and nodes. Regularly step back and review what’s happening on the mind map to see if you can make a new connection from (or between) two previously unrelated nodes.

If that’s not fruitful enough, extend your reach by adding a totally random new node and inviting everyone to find ways to connect it to other parts of the mind map.

Ideation Techniques

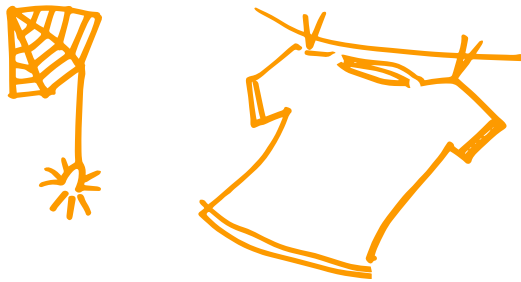
You will come up with some of your best ideas quickly or even by accident. However, when you have a tough problem to solve or you are working in a team, it can help to be more systematic. Here are some of our favourite ideation techniques. Use one or more of these generate lots of possible answers. Then do some forced association work on your answers to see how they might connect to your problem area and to solutions. Extend and combine those ideas to come up with some unexpected solutions to your problem. Remember: At this stage of the creative process, we're looking for fish of all possible sizes.



Forced Analogy

(ROBERT OLSON)

When you force an analogy between two things, you identify unexpected likenesses between them that may lead to solutions. List the attributes of your problem area and compare them to the attributes of some unrelated item. Robert Olson gives the example of saying “a corporation is like a matchbox.” When he lists the attributes of a matchbox, e.g., sliding centre box, and looks for ways it parallels a corporation, he gets the insight that the heart of the organization should be mobile and responsive.



Choose one of the items below and try to think of ways that its attributes are parallel to those of your problem area.

- Box of donuts
- Hockey
- Spider web
- Egg beater
- Giraffe
- Laundry

If that's not fruitful enough, choose a second item.

Random Input, Text

(ALSO KNOWN AS BIBLIOMANCY)

You will need a thesaurus (or some other book).

Using random input can trigger lots of ideas. It helps if your source of input gives you unexpected words you can freely interpret in the context of your problem. Bibliomancy is an ancient style of fortune-telling by selecting random words of passages from books.

Open a book at random and point to a word at random. Do it again a few times to generate starting points for free and forced association about your problem.

If that's not fruitful enough, choose a sentence or phrase and spend some time brainstorming how that might somehow be related to your problem.

Random Input, Visual

You will need tarot cards (or some other richly detailed source of visual input).

Using random input can trigger lots of ideas. It helps if your source of input gives you rich but ambiguous images you can freely interpret in the context of your problem. Channel-surf, look at the stars, "read" your tea leaves or ink blots or your dream diary.

Pick a card. That bit there looks like a _____ or a _____.

Gather a list of several visual details from the card, and things you associate with those details.

If that's not fruitful enough, extend your reach by drawing another card.

Assumption Smashing

Make a list of assumptions that underlie your challenge. Be thorough. Now take each assumption and think about what happens if you smash it.



For example, if you wanted to get people to clear their sidewalks after a snowfall, the assumptions might include (1) homeowners clear their own sidewalks, (2) sidewalks have to be cleared, (3) they have to be cleared in a day, (4) clearing means shoveling. Smashing assumption #1 might lead to ideas about who else can clear sidewalks (the city? Volunteers?) and why someone might volunteer (to be nice? To get exercise? To earn volunteer hours? Hatred of snow? Competition?) and suddenly you're planning an athletic competition with medals for snow-shoveling.

If that's not fruitful enough, extend your reach by inspecting the question word by word for assumptions to smash and rules to break.

Trigger Questions

(ALEX OSBORN)

If the answers to your challenge were right on the surface, everybody could solve it. One good way to get into the problem is to mentally remodel the object, or the problem, or the situation. Ask yourselves these idea-trigger questions [based on *Applied Imagination*, by Alex Osborn] and find ways to apply them to your problem:

- **Adapt?** *What else is similar to this in my experience that I might copy/emulate/adapt?*
- **Modify?** *Change meaning, colour, sound, form?*
- **Substitute?** *Who else? What other ingredient? Other place, voice, process, power?*
- **Magnify? Maximize?** *More time, greater frequency, higher, thicker, multiply, exaggerate?*
- **Minimize? Eliminate?** *Smaller, condensed, lower, lighter, split up, understate?*
- **Rearrange?** *Change pattern, layout, order, pace, cause and effect?*
- **Put to other uses?** *New ways to use as is? Modify for other purposes?*
- **Reverse?** *Positive/negative, opposite, backwards, upside down, other hand?*
- **Combine?** *Blend, alloy, ensemble? Combine purposes, materials, ideas, markets?*

Scamper

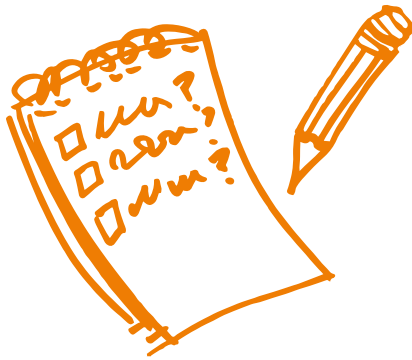
(BOB OBERLE)

Bob Oberle re-imagined these prompts as the perhaps more memorable SCAMPER, which is often used to analyze an existing product or service:

- Substitute
- Combine
- Adapt
- Modify
- Put to another use
- Eliminate
- Reverse

Universal Questions

As every cub reporter knows, there are six fundamental questions: who, what, where, when, how and why. Start generating ideas about your problem by asking yourself questions about it. Rephrase the questions to fit the character of your challenge.



- What is it? What should happen?
- Where does or should it happen?
- When does or should it happen?
- How does or should it happen?
- Why does it happen? Is it necessary?
- Who makes it happen? To whom does it happen?

Five Levels of Why?

(CHARLES "CHIC" THOMPSON)

Sometimes the problem you think you need to solve is just a symptom of an underlying, undetected problem. One good way to get deeper under the problem and discover its roots is to ask a lot of "Why"s. Try five levels of "why," as in this example [based on *What a Great Idea!* By Charles "Chic" Thompson]:

1. Why has the machine stopped?

A fuse blew because of an overload.

So a naïve solution might be to replace the fuse, but . . .

2. Why was there an overload?

There wasn't enough lubrication for the bearings.

So a naïve solution might be to top up the lubricant, but . . .

3. What wasn't there enough lubrication?

The pump wasn't pumping enough.

So a naïve solution might be to replace the pump with a more powerful model, but . . .

4. Why wasn't the pump pumping enough?

The pump shaft was vibrating because of abrasion.

So a naïve solution might be to repair the shaft, but . . .

5. Why was the pump shaft abraded?

Chips of waste material get into the pump.

Aha! How can we solve that problem? What if we installed a filter in the pump to keep the grit out? Or pulverized the chips so they'd be too fine to damage the shaft? Or changed to a material whose waste was soluble in our lubricant? Et cetera

Rephrase your levels of "why?" to fit the character of your challenge. Then ask "why" again and pursue different answers.

Problem Reversal

(CHARLES “CHIC” THOMPSON)

Trigger new ideas about your problem by systematically reversing aspects of it. For example, think about how you could make customer service bad and then use those insights to figure out how to make customer service outstanding. State your problem in reverse. Generate ideas. Turn those ideas upside down.

If that’s not fruitful enough, extend your reach by applying other pairs of opposing actions to your problem. What if you... stretch/shrink it? Make it romantic/scary? Combine/separate? Freeze it/melt it? Tie it/untie it? Raise the price/give it away? Simplify/complicate? Fill it/empty it?

Sense-able Creativity

(MIKE FOX)

The television commercials make it seem like car buying is about fuel efficiency, fold-down seats and safety. But let’s be honest. It’s not a rational decision. It’s about the sensations that a car offers: how it feels rounding the curve, how it looks in the passing lane, and, of course, the New Car Smell.

Start generating ideas about your problem by asking yourselves questions about the senses: vision, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. What ideas can you trigger by thinking about the “flavours” of the problem? What would you “see” if you looked at the problem in full sunlight? Moonlight? Ultraviolet light?

If that’s not fruitful enough, extend your reach by asking questions about the senses from the viewpoints of others. How does the problem “smell” to a puppy?

Personas

(CAROLYN MACGREGOR)

One way to understand your problem better and notice less-than-obvious solutions is to consider it from viewpoints other than your own. What would you notice first about your problem if you took on the persona of a scuba diver? Or a piano tuner? How does this problem look to somebody working in their second language? Try out of a few of the following personas to generate some ideas.



- Gardener
- Skater
- Five-year-old
- Recent immigrant
- Elderly cyclist
- Teenaged driver
- Beginner guitarist
- Someone who's chronically late
- Someone who's overworked
- A nursing mother
- Someone wearing hiking boots
- Someone using bifocals
- Ski instructor
- Synchronized swimmer

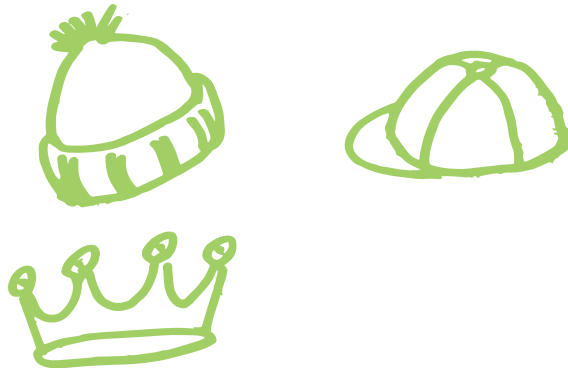
What if the persona isn't human? How does your problem look to these critters?

- Puppy
- Parrot
- Elephant
- Giraffe
- Star-nosed mole
- Eel

What if the persona isn't even alive? How does your problem look these things?

- Digital camera
- Wristwatch
- Dumpster
- Red Mazda Miata
- Bonsai
- Magnifying glass

Invent some personas of your own, too.



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