

Creativity

From Persuasive Advertising (draft) by J. Scott Armstrong, January 19, 2009

“... 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 provide only one of the elements in the creative process, albeit an important one. Bringing the principles to life requires much creativity.

This chapter provides advice on how to identify creative people, and techniques that can be used to nurture their creativity. The research findings are counter-intuitive and few people use them. So my intent is not to persuade you, but simple to make you aware of this evidence.

While using a structured approach to ascertain or develop creativity might seem counter-intuitive, there is substantial evidence that structure enhances the creative process.

Find Creative People

Most organizations strive to hire team players who get along well with others. Is this wise where you are looking for creativity in an advertising environment?

What type of person is creative? Jackson and Rushton (1987, p. 143-146) summarized some traits from studies of creative 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

In his review of research on creativity, Martindale (1989) found 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. Creative people also tend to be uninterested in details and facts for their own sake. They lack interest in the details of life that most people think about (e.g., the weather, sports, TV, politics). However, creative people have a wide range of interests and can combine ideas from different disciplines. [MI??]

Gelade (1997) gave a personality test to 58 individuals in the creative departments of prominent UK advertising agencies and small design groups—presumably jobs that require creativity; he then compared the results to those when the test was administered to 70 managers in mainstream UK corporations—jobs that presumably needed lesser degrees 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 concluded that “‘nice people’ are not creative and creative people are not ‘nice’” (Ng 2001).

Very high intelligence does not play an important role in creativity. Even among research scientists, there is little evidence that IQs beyond 120 enhance creativity.

David Ogilvy was widely regarded as a genius—so much so that he wondered if it was true. After all, he had flunked out of Oxford. He decided to find out exactly how smart he was, expecting to learn that his IQ was approximately 145. However, he reported that he scored 96 (*Business Strategy Review* 2005). It is difficult to believe this story; after all, he had been *admitted* to Oxford. I suspect that Ogilvy was merely trying to make a point that people should be judged based on their performance, not on their IQs.

Meehl (1956), after summarizing decades of research on personnel selection, advised that when deciding whom to hire, one should make a decision *before* meeting a candidate. This advice leads one to focus on information about a candidate’s ability to perform the job; when you meet a 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 these jobs. Another half century of research supports Meehl’s advice (Grove et al. 2000).

Because of their personalities, it would seem to be especially important to make hiring decisions prior to meeting candidates when trying to hire *creative* people. One recommendation is to have them submit portfolios or other material evidence of creativity prior to a personal appearance. This might necessitate having an administrator who screens out information about demographic factors such as religion, race, age, and nationality.

Might it be useful to have a diversified team working on a campaign? Horwitz and Horwitz (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of the performance of groups on a variety of tasks. They examined results from groups using “task-related” and “bio-demographic” diversity. Task diversity showed a positive relationship to the quality and productivity of team performance (based on 15 and 9 comparisons, respectively). However, bio-demographic diversity did not aid performance; in fact, there was a slight negative relationship. In summary, then, look for people who bring different skills and different knowledge, rather than looking for demographic differences.

Diversity of ideas can also be gained by soliciting advertising ideas from various stakeholders, such as customers, suppliers, or employees. For example, consumer banking revenues at The Halifax, one of Britain’s largest banks, had been slipping during the 1997-2000 period. To let customers know about its benefits (higher interest rates and friendly service) and to motivate its employees, the bank involved its employees in a “Staff as Stars” ad campaign. Over 1,000 employees auditioned for parts in the ads and the bank built the campaign around 20 finalists. The campaign, which won an IPA Effectiveness Award in 2002 (Rimini 2003), motivated employees and attracted new business. It.

Generate Creative Ideas

Many scientific discoveries result primarily from the efforts of one person. Anecdotal evidence abounds. For example, Farnsworth invented the television, while RCA was unable to do so. Major companies have rejected inventions by such individuals as Steve Jobs, Chester Carlson, and Bill Bowerman (which led to Apple, Xerox and Noke). Great books, paintings, music, and architecture are created 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. My guess is that the lifespan of a creative idea in a traditional group meeting is less than a minute.

Group productivity also drops because of “social loafing.” People in groups tend to slack off, especially when they expect their co-workers to perform well. Karau and Williams (1993) provided a meta-analysis of 78 social-loafing studies that supported this belief. 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, including 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 eliminate meetings, limit the number of people who attend them. In the 1960s, Bill Bernbach formed teams consisting only 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). And, keep meetings short. Some firms use stand-up meetings as a way to keep them brief.

While meetings with clients are necessary, they frequently thwart creativity. Bill Bernbach had a suggestion to address this. As Glatzer (1970) described it, Bernbach told Avis CEO Bob Townsend, “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. Avis still used the slogan as of 2009.

An alternative to in-person meetings is to allow people, especially those in creative jobs, to work independently, while remaining able to benefit from the suggestions of others. Memos and the Internet can provide efficient meeting substitutes. In some cases, face-to-face meetings are necessary—when negotiating, for example. However, when creativity and problem solving is important, face-to-face meetings are typically detrimental, as shown by evidence summarized in Armstrong (2006).

Ganesan, Malter, and Rindfleisch (2005) also provided evidence against face-to-face meetings. They analyzed non-experimental evidence on product development in the U.S. optics industry using a cross-sectional survey of 155 firms and a follow-up survey on 73 of these firms. Because some firms were located near to each other, they had more face-to-face communication. Other firms were more geographically distant; therefore, they relied primarily on e-mail communication. Those who relied less on face-to-face meetings were judged as having more creative employees and faster development times. However, the authors also noted the importance of developing strong personal ties; thus, initial face-to-face meetings play a useful role.

Problem-storming

“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]

How a problem is phrased will narrow (or widen) the search for solutions. A problem phrased as, “How can we convince people to stop smoking?” will generate one set of solutions (e.g., tell smokers about the

dangers of smoking). Phrasing the problem as, “What could be done to get people to stop smoking?” broadens the issue and generates other possibilities (e.g., persuading nonsmokers to ask smokers not to smoke, or persuading legislatures to pass laws against smoking in public places).

Write the problem statement in alternative ways and ask others to independently do the same. The framework provided in this book will help with this process, which I call problem-storming.

Brainstorming, Brainwriting, and Electronic Brainwriting

The presence of other people typically hampers creativity. Some members of a group might be reluctant to contribute; some might delight in pointing out problems with new ideas; others might hesitate to criticize because they want to be thought of as good team members. In 1940, Alex Osborn, the “O” at the BBD&O advertising agency, addressed these issues using a procedure called “brainstorming,” a highly structured method of generating ideas by reducing evaluation. (Evaluations of the ideas occur at a later time using different procedures, and perhaps even different people.)

To remove evaluations in a brainstorming session, Osborn recommended that a facilitator run the meeting. The facilitator has a difficult role—to encourage large quantities of ideas on a topic, independent of the quality of the ideas. According to Osborn, one of the facilitator’s primary jobs is to ensure that no group member says anything negative about another member’s ideas. The facilitator should not contribute ideas and must remain neutral. Without a facilitator, groups are rarely able to adhere to the brainstorming process, as an experiment by Offner, Kramer, and Winter (1996) illustrated.

To use brainstorming, you must first gain agreement from the group to try the technique for a fixed interval. Do not brainstorm for long periods. Ten minutes is usually sufficient for a given problem. To make brainstorming work, you need a “facilitator.” This person:

- a) Does *not* introduce ideas (concentrates only on helping the group follow the rules).
- b) Records ideas.
- c) Encourages quantity of ideas.
- d) Reminds group not to evaluate ideas (either favorably or unfavorably).
- e) Encourages wild, outside-the-box ideas.

Research on brainstorming has shown that people get better at brainstorming as they gain experience with this formal process.

Osborn also recommended that one person be appointed to act solely as a recorder. The recording process should not be visible. As Offner et al. (1996) discussed, when recording was publicly done, group participants slowed down to wait for the recorder to post the ideas, thus interrupting the flow of ideas.

BBD&O has used brainstorming extensively. In 1956, it ran 401 sessions that produced an average of 85 ideas per session. It deemed 6 percent of these ideas as “worthy of development into usable ideas” (Fox 1997). In other words, meeting attendees generated about five usable ideas per session—a lot of ideas in my opinion.

Research on brainstorming has been conducted since the late 1950s. The results show that when a brainstorming session is run properly, it generates many more ideas—and more creative ideas—than do traditional meetings.

Bergh, Reid, and Schorin (1983) tested the emphasis on quantity of ideas. They instructed groups of advertising students to generate one, three, five, or eight ideas for advertising a hypothetical brand of beer. A panel of four professionals, a creative director, art director, copy supervisor, and senior writer, from a top-20 ad agency rated the ideas. The group given the high goal generated 25 ideas; furthermore, the percentage of good ideas did not wane as the quantity of ideas increased. The group given the lowest goals generated only one idea.

The brainstorming procedure was improved some years later by eliminating not only negative but also positive evaluations (e.g., “That’s a great idea”). Connolly, Jessup, and Valacich (1990) found that

positive reinforcement was even more damaging than negative feedback because it led groups to conclude that their job was finished.

Interestingly, few firms actually use brainstorming as described here and as tested in research studies. My career has led to experience with many organizations over nearly half a century, yet I have never been in a brainstorming group run by anyone in these organizations. Many people, my students for example, tell me that they have been involved in brainstorming sessions; however, when I ask them to describe the process, it is clear that they are describing traditional meetings. David Kelly, founder of IDEO, a well-respected consulting company that helps clients develop new products, also found that companies seldom use brainstorming. Sutton and Hargadon's (1996) examination concluded that IDEO helps companies by using brainstorming properly.

Brainstorming reduces group pressures, but it does not eliminate them. An even more effective way to reduce pressure is to use "brainwriting." In brainwriting, people individually and anonymously write ideas. The ideas are then put into a master list.

Brainwriting can be done when people are at different locations or it can be done within a meeting by taking short timeouts and asking people to individually write as many ideas as they can on the topic for about 6 to 10 minutes. To reduce evaluation concerns, participants should not sign their list. The ideas are then combined into a master list. Brainwriting can be used multiple times 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 much less time-consuming than brainstorming, especially for large groups.

Organizations with a frequent need for creativity should consider *electronic brainwriting*. With this process, creative people enter their ideas into a computer. When all participants have finished, the ideas are listed anonymously on a video screen. Consider the advantages: Because everybody is writing simultaneously, it takes a lot less time; because of the anonymous nature, everybody is equal – there's no rank; meetings can be held with group members in remote locations.

Experiments by Gallupe et al. (1992) demonstrated that electronic brainwriting groups produced more than three times the number of "high-quality ideas" than traditional brainstorming groups. Gallupe and Cooper (1993), in their research on the quantity and quality of ideas, concluded: "Across five studies involving more than 800 people, productivity advantages have ranged from 25 percent to 50 percent for four-person groups and to nearly 200 percent for twelve-person groups." Four experiments by Valacich et al. (1994) showed that electronic brainwriting is more effective than manual brainwriting. These studies typically showed that the subjects were more satisfied with the electronic brainwriting than with properly conducted brainstorming sessions.

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

A related approach to brainwriting is called "gallery writing." This is done manually. Flip charts are set up, and group members silently write unsigned suggestions about the discussion topic on the charts. They then post them on the walls. Others write comments on the suggestions. This approach is effective and is well liked by participants, as a study by Aiken and Vanjani (2003) demonstrated.

The use of analogies can aid the search for creative solutions. Listing similar problems and describing possible solutions can stimulate ideas for solving a 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. To avoid suppressing 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, participants communicate using e-mail, 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, or other factors that might cause them to be careful about suggesting ideas that differ from the ideas that are prevalent in the group. As a result, virtual groups can use inputs from many people. Armstrong (2006) provides evidence on the value of alternatives to face-to-face meetings.

The “second-solution” technique offers another approach to generating ideas. A facilitator asks the group members what the best solution would be if they were prohibited from using their first solution. It aids implementation because the group’s energy is devoted to finding alternatives rather than defending the current solution. Maier and Hoffman (1960), in a problem involving a change in employee work procedures, found that solutions were of better quality when groups were instructed to find a second solution after they had presumably solved the problem. The second solutions were obtained in approximately two-thirds of the time needed to find 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 a group member has an idea that differs from the beliefs of the other members. Initially, the others will try to bring the deviant member into line by reasoning with that person. If they are unsuccessful, they frequently will ostracize the deviant person. This phenomenon is easy to demonstrate for nearly any topic. There are studies in social psychology that enormous demonstrate to strength of this effect – such as the famous Johnny Rocco study by Schachter (1951) – but I imagine many readers have experienced this phenomena.

A better way to address this problem, however, is to use the “build” technique. Instead of discussing the negative aspects of an idea, focus on how to clarify or improve it. This enables the group to nurture ideas that differ, and helps group members to avoid the feeling that new and creative ideas are to be avoided. This technique requires a discussion leader to keep the group on track.

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

Be problem-centered. Keep all discussions problem-centered and avoid looking for excuses or seeking to blame others for a problem. Avoid negative statements, such as “That idea would never persuade anyone.”

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

Explore. Explore multiple suggestions for addressing an issue. Ask probing questions, such as “Are there alternative to using emotion to convince people?” “Do we have enough information about what the customers want?” “Are we mistaken in the assumptions about the target market?”, “Is there a way to combine suggestions to generate an even better ad?” or “Is there any relevant research on the issue?”

Protect people. Protect individuals from personal attacks and criticism.

Understand and resolve differences. Understand differences of opinions within 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 this problem: “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. I have found that correct answers can be obtained in nearly all groups if group members each solve the problem separately before the group discusses the solutions. This protection of alternative viewpoints is especially important for problems where only a single person in the group has the right answer.

These are useful guidelines, backed up with evidence. However, to my knowledge, they are rarely used in organizations. I have spent almost five decades in organizations and I can recall being in only one meeting that has used all of these procedures. On the other hand, I recall many meetings that used none of them.

Despite the improved creativity and productivity that comes from structured meetings, most people prefer unstructured meetings. They feel more satisfied and believe that they have produced more ideas by using an unstructured free-flowing format. However, 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).

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 a candidate.

Build on ideas before evaluation with:

- virtual teams
- structured meetings.

Generate creative ideas by using

- many individuals, working independently.
- problem-storming.
- brainwriting.
- analogies.
- second-solution technique.