



# Staying creative

*James Allen* offers ideas to help you reach your creative potential and keep the generating-ideas thrill alive

**T**he opportunity to take pride in your success in the world of PR and marketing is hard earned. You graft for hours to come up with suitable themes, events that fit with brands, partnerships that appeal to consumers and clients and are often faced with rejection and compromise.

So when you find a winning formula, you can fall into the trap of reaching for it again and again. An advertising campaign can be measured and monitored, re-tweaked and refined into within an inch of its life. A press release topic can be shared around several clients, the success in coverage rate a little different each time but it can be considered a hit. It may not be conscious but this rehashing without thinking could be damaging your ability to be creative in the long term, quashing your capacity to innovate within your company, your industry and for the sake of your own experience. And clients aren't stupid. They know when an idea doesn't excite you anymore and hasn't got your full attention.

Faced with the need to produce and present ideas on a daily basis, in the midst of other business demands, the thrill of actually generating ideas can become dulled. We all know the best ideas come from genuine inspiration, which can't be plucked out of air that is thick and stale with time

pressures. There is no reason not to stop this pattern in its tracks. In fact, I'd go further and say there is no excuse not to stop it in its tracks. To have the competitive edge, companies and the people within them need to take equal responsibility for the quality and reach of ideas. That's the case whether those ideas are for a weekly press release or a transformative re-brand.

I learned this after 15 years of working in PR agencies and with colleagues and clients who showed varying degrees of creative aptitude. Creative Huddle was born to tackle this lack of understanding and help companies reach their creative potential. PR and marketing agencies are relatively quick to realise their need for help; the concentration needed for idea generation means you can only go so long before tell-tale signs of fatigue emerge. Brainstorms become more turgid, successes from yesteryear are brought up again and again, the more introvert members of the team say less and less and the vocal ones say nothing of import. Everyone is open to distraction and nobody can stay focused.

So where do winning campaigns come from when the rut is established? Following is a guide to help maintain your momentum when you reach a block in the road:

# How to

## Facilitate

Having the skills to make people enthusiastic is what public relations and marketing are all about. So bring that enthusiasm to your work place. Take the scene of a brainstorming session for a new campaign, for example. A nominated facilitator should know when to suggest creativity techniques and which ones will hit home with the team. They monitor the collective mood and energy levels, allow everyone involved to explore issues associated with the subject and bring them back to the brief if they stray too far for too long.

Facilitators are not power hungry. Their job is to sit within the group and remove any feeling of hierarchy which might stifle suggestions. They need to encourage the flow of ideas, ideas and more ideas. To start with, it's a case of exercising the brain and letting everyone involved know they can share any idea that comes into their head. This removes barriers like 'blocking', where some people – introverts, maybe – have trouble being heard over those in the group who are better known for speaking up.

Alternating between group work and solo idea generation within the session can revive the stream of ideas and is a great way to let people get their thoughts down, in notes or on a computer or a whiteboard or Post-Its. Some thinkers respond better to writing, so this ensures ideas are not lost before they have the chance to be recorded.

**Facilitators are not power hungry. Their job is to sit within the group and remove any feeling of hierarchy which might stifle suggestions.**

## Play

The average daily laugh count for a baby is 400 but adults over 35 years old laugh an average of 15 times a day. This is according to Eric Tsytsylin, who we have written a blog about. Given the physiological and mental benefits of laughing – the way it raises heart rate and releases the 'happy chemical' serotonin – adults could and should do better on this score. Being seen to enjoy work is important for employers and employees, for morale and motivation, so forget the outdated view that having a laugh in the office suggests you are not being productive.

Start with culture. Clockwatching and excessive time management do not make for a creative environment in which ideas are original and free flowing. Time should be allowed for play. Once upon a time this meant having a pool table in the office somewhere. Now, the daring companies out there have run with this and installed slides (Google) and mural walls (Scriberia). The fun part of the workplace doesn't have to be tucked away so visitors don't get a bad impression of your work ethic: put it on show and shout your work ethic from the rooftop swimming pool.

A healthy appetite for play can lead to some ingenious experimentation because it allows the mind to work in wonderful ways that just aren't possible at your desk. Whether you are a new hire or a manager, remember fun and humour have a key place in your role.

**A healthy appetite for play can lead to some ingenious experimentation because it allows the mind to work in wonderful ways that just aren't possible at your desk**

## Produce

It's an ugly phrase but churning out ideas is good for you. See it as exercise. The moment you pump out a good one, the sort of idea with real potential, you'll know it. And that takes warming up, so churn, churn, churn!

If you just can't get the ball rolling, try these techniques:

### • Reframe the question

Ask the question or pose the brief in a different way. Ask questions to start the ball rolling, such as Who, Why, What, When, Where and How? List attributes of the product or problem – really break it down and simplify it. Look at feelings and emotions triggered, and what meanings people attach to it. What assumptions can be challenged? Instead of asking 'how do we get young people who dislike sport to do more exercise?' Ask 'what type of exercise doesn't even seem like exercise?'

### • Connect and combine

Try mixing one idea with another to form a new idea. This means drawing on varied stimulus and often having the confidence and audacity to form unexpected connections. Combining existing ideas is one



**James Allen**

Managing Director, Creative Huddle  
 e james@creativehuddle.co.uk  
 w www.creativehuddle.co.uk



of the most common methods of creating new ideas. As Steve Jobs famously said: 'Creativity is just connecting things'.

**• Welcome constraints**

This means enforcing boundaries. Yes, boundaries. They aren't always the enemy. Constraints are everywhere, so you might as well embrace them. For example poetry has many constraints: words should rhyme, sentences should have so many syllables etc. Or think about Twitter, with its in-built constraint of 140 characters per tweet. Setting constraints helps to focus thinking – proving that sometimes thinking inside the box can be helpful!

**• Too close?**

If you're brainstorming for your own company or product, you'll likely be too 'close' to it. Try and zoom out, look at the bigger picture. What aren't you including? Can you take an industry-wide approach, rather than just looking at your organisation?

**• Different strokes**

Instead of seeing things from your point of view, borrow someone else's perspective. What would a different generation think? Imagine how your grandparents would view it, or a young child. How would their perspective differ from yours? Or think about how iconic figures might view the problem – how would Steven Fry approach it? Or Margaret Thatcher, or Mick Jagger. Take any person you admire (or otherwise!) and view the issue from within their shoes.

Whether it's another generation, culture, a group of sports or music fans, see how their imagined view of things changes the way you look at the task at hand.

**• Switch to manual**

Do you write and edit as you go? Do you list ideas and scrap them all after five minutes? This is self-defeating and you will be making yourself very aware of your 'failed' attempts. Switch to handwriting, with a pen, without crossing out or editing. This way, it's harder to delete or forget early ideas and you can track back to them if some other inspiration appears that can take them forward.

**• Push boundaries**

Let an idea come naturally and then imagine it bigger, brighter, louder, upside down, in another town, country or dimension. Don't limit yourself – this can be a quick way to break out of old patterns.

Another way to do this is set your problem within the context of a different industry and imagine how that industry, with its different sets of specialists and experts, would tackle it. For example, if it's a customer service issue, think how a utilities company could better tackle it. Or the same problem posed to your favourite restaurant, or to the flight attendants on that really scary journey you made. Taking the issue and shining a different context on it can make it come to life in a much more useful way.

Take a component or an idea and exaggerate or distort it. What would happen if it was twice as big / fast / expensive? What would we do if we had twice as much time? What if the market was ten times smaller?

**• Out of nowhere**

Make some unrelated links to what you're dealing with. Imagine how your issue or problem would be impacted by a sudden snowstorm. Can you function the same or do you need to make changes? If you have to handle things differently, you will be forced to see what your priorities are and that can help solve your idea rut. Also, try and remove any context to see if it makes you think any differently about things.

**• Role play**

Creativity flows more freely when you imagine someone else dealing with an issue. Try and think of some personalities or icons to take inspiration from. Be creative with who you choose. What would Business Jesus do when faced with your problem? What if you were a superhero, and could use super strength, speed, or x-ray vision?

**• Make it a gift**

Sometimes we produce our best work or try our hardest when we are making something as a gift for someone. Try and imagine the gratitude and satisfaction experienced by your client or customer when they know they've received something that has been lovingly crafted by your fair hands!

**• Mash it up**

Finally, it's often productive to create a mash-up of all these techniques to offer a different twist – taking your ideas from one technique and then applying another. ■

James will be running an AMA workshop: *A bootcamp for creative campaigns* in London, 16 October and Manchester, 17 October 2013.

For more information and to book go to [www.a-m-a.co.uk/bootcamp](http://www.a-m-a.co.uk/bootcamp)