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Learn to think inside the box



Step 1: Analyze the complete characteristics of the product. Ask, "What is a teabag?"

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Rick Spence, Financial Post · Monday, Jun. 14, 2010

At a communications workshop this month, I gave my class of rookie entrepreneurs a tough assignment: I asked them to draw a cat. As they sketched, I told them the average North American consumer sees 3,000 commercial messages a day. To survive, we learn to filter out dull, routine ads, which forces marketers to package their messages in creative ways.

Inevitably, someone in these workshops protests, "But I'm not creative." So I ask everyone to draw another cat -- this time, a creative cat. An imaginative, eye-catching one that everyone in the room will remember when they tell their partners what they did at work today.

After some eye-rolling, these people suddenly become creative. The cats they scrawled in the margin of their notebooks morph into giants, with teeth the size of axe blades. Everyday cats suddenly become tigers, cat-dog hybrids and even a Caterpillar front-end loader.

When I ask participants to compare their two efforts, all agree the second drawings are much more compelling. My message: Simply by striving to be more creative, we can all produce more memorable ideas. We are all creative.

Clearly, I don't think big enough. Last week, I attended a guest lecture at Toronto's Rotman School of Management on "How to Unchain your Super Creativity." [Shlomo Maital](#), senior research fellow with Israel's [Samuel Neaman Centre](#) for Advanced Studies in Science and Technology, says "super creativity" means being able to develop innovative ideas every day. "Everyone is super-creative," he says.

Maital, a Saskatchewan native, describes creativity as "breaking the rules intelligently" in order to create "useful, novel things." It has to be a structured process, he adds: "Creativity is thinking in the box, because you are always restrained by people, resources and time."

Through years of studying innovation management, Maital believed the biggest stumbling block wasn't developing ideas, but implementing them. More recently, he has changed his mind. "I've come to realize creativity itself is the problem. Most people don't think they're creative, and they work for organizations that extinguish the spark of creativity."

How do you become more creative? Shun routine, says Maital. ("Habit is the enemy of creativity.") Be curious. Cultivate the art of asking "laser" questions. How does this work? How did you get that idea? "Focus your questions to get the answers to the things you really want to know about."

Creativity also requires passion, Maital says. "People will laugh at you. They will shoot down your idea with a machine gun. Passion will be the rocket fuel that drives you through those barriers."

It also requires empathy, to identify unmet needs. "Empathy means feeling the ways other people are feeling," he says. As an example, he cites inventors working on products for older people who put on blurred glasses and rubber gloves to better understand their market's problems.

Maital's big concept is the need to Zoom In-Zoom Out to reach creative solutions. First, learn all you can about the product you want to reinvent. Then "zoom out" to identify relevant ideas that might be helpful.

"Great creative people are imitators, adopters," he says. "They see what's going on around the world and incorporate it into their own projects." Then you zoom in again to adapt the right solution to your problem.

This alternation, says Maital, "helps ensure that wild creativity is always tempered by strong business practicality. It is this blend between super creativity and business pragmatism that ultimately creates change-the-world inventions."

Here's how Maital would reinvent the teabag:

Step 1: Analyze the complete characteristics of the product. Ask, "What is a teabag?" You might say a teabag is a gauze bag that puts tea leaves in contact with hot water.

Step 2: Parse the sentence to zoom in on the part you want to innovate. Where do you detect opportunity? For example, you might focus on the word "contact."

Step 3: Ask a breakthrough question: "How can we improve the flavour transfer between the tea leaves and the water?"

Solution: "Most teabags today have multiple chambers to enhance the contact with water." This is the zoom-out stage. Your inspiration may come from other countries or other industries.

Step 4: Determine if your solution can be produced effectively. Unlike the first three steps, which are all about rule-breaking, this is a more rational process where you zoom back in to make sure your business model will work.

Finally, don't confine innovation to products. Creativity can also reinvent services and processes. Maital insists the iPod wasn't Apple's key innovation; the game-changer was "the 99¢ download on iTunes."

"Build a new ecosystem, recombine knowledge, create new partnerships, increase connectivity," Maital says. "Learn to love creativity as a process, not just the inventions you come up with."

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