



Try This at Work:

18 Ideation Exercises

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I HIT UP THE SCIENCE FICTION BOOKSHELF

Did you ever do difficult maze puzzles by just going in the opposite direction? I mean its effortless to start at the end and then just make your way back to the beginning, isn't it? Sure, you tell me, that's cheating – but you get through the maze, don't ya?

Someone high up at an organization I used to work for used to say that thinking about the future is hard. Of course, it's hard – if you start at the beginning – AKA now.

Luckily, there's plenty of people out there who've given us a clue to where the end is – and those are science fiction authors – they get paid to envision compelling – and sometimes realistic – portraits of the future.

For example, one of the most interesting products I developed – and when launched it was definitely before its time, was a retrovisioning of something I read in Samuel R. Delany's [Stars In My Pocket Like Grains of Sand](#). The product envisioned there was called General Information – sort of a just-in-time learning service – when you born you were implanted with a device which instantly answered any question which popped into your head – it was all controlled by orbiting AIs which gave you the answer as soon as you thought it up. Kinda like that scene in the Matrix where Trinity needs to learn how to fly a helicopter in seconds to escape and Tank downloads that knowledge into her avatar. Work backwards from that end point and you have things like [Quora](#) and [Aardvark](#) (since shuttered by a Google acqui-hire) and one of [my own patent applications](#).

So – if you are looking for new product and service ideas – try the future, then work backwards to today and see if it flies.

One caveat – of course the future that the author imagined may never become known – or it was wrong – or the market might not be ready for that product (which is what happened to me) – the tough part IMHO is not coming up with the ideas – its figuring out if the time too soon.

2 MAKE SERENDIPITY OUR GOOD BUDDY

The Popsicle was invented by enterprising an 11-year-old called Frank Epperson in 1905, who left a glass of soda on his San Francisco front porch with a stirring stick still in it. The next day, after a cold night, the drink had frozen. Frank pulled the stick, and, to his surprise, the drink came with it. Nine years later, he patented them as “Popsicles”.

If you haven't heard the word serendipity, it's time to not only put it into your lexicon, but to live it and breathe it. If you want to be innovative, your culture needs to not only support serendipity, but encourage it.

Serendipity: the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way. “a fortunate stroke of serendipity” Sometimes known as a “happy accident”

Where does innovation come from? Typically, it starts with a problem: someone is having trouble doing something, and there are no solutions, so they put together a solution for that problem, which may or may not be a new, original, innovation.

On the other hand, if you look at several truly breakthrough innovations, they didn't come from someone trying to solve a specific problem. They came out of a mistake, an error, or even more commonly, a juxtaposition of something not commonly juxtaposed. Where things not commonly mixed together are mixed to come up with something new and different. This is the basis of a lot of innovative new products and services.

How do you foster a culture of innovation via serendipity? Well, first you don't force your employees to come to work, work in the same location, day-in, day-out. You don't keep their noses to the grindstone at their jobs the entire time they are at work. You don't have them sit in endless, repeated meetings repeatedly.

You encourage them to have a flexible work schedule. You encourage them to have a flexible location. You encourage them to be open to new ideas which can come from any place at any time. You purposely set up an environment and culture where your people can experience new things and new people all the time.

You can't just sit your people in a room and say “Innovate!” Your people need new experiences, new locations, new connections, to truly build an innovative workforce.

If you asked me today “Chris, I need to start a company with innovation at its core. How would you do it?” this is what I'd say:

1. Don't have an office. I often wonder why anyone has an office at all. If you ask me, a no telecommuting policy, forcing people into an office M-F ends up reducing innovation, instead of increasing it
2. Don't encourage work from home either, encourage work from everywhere. Let your people, no ENCOURAGE your people to work everywhere but in a home office, a coffee shop, the park, a co-working space. But unlike work or school, move from place to place. Move to new

physical locations all the time, even during the day – new places mean new connections and new ideas.

3. Have the fewest possible meetings and conference calls – yes you might need a few of these to keep people on track – but after that, leave them alone – are they adults that you can trust, or not?
4. Make your whole company agile, not just your programming methodology. go back and read my post on [Agile Eating the World](#)
5. Use technology to let people know what's going on – Slack etc. Collaboration doesn't require face-to-face physical connection.
6. Set up a safe place for your employees to report innovative ideas from Day One.

Encourage your people to experience new experiences. Pay for them to go to Burning Man, or Electric Daisy, or SXSW or CES. Let them experience new things, then let them generate new connections and new ideas.

Encourage those happy accidents by strategically placing them in the world and let them roam free. You'd be surprised at what comes back to you.

3 THE UPSIDE OF UPSET

Let's face it – most people just don't like change. We like things being the way that they are – even the word “upset” has a negative connection – to turn over the “set” to break with the established order. The only problem is – there are so many things we can just SOLVE, if only we would be willing to “upset” things.

As I write this, I can hear raindrops on my roof – California is finally getting some much-needed rain. We've been in drought for over 4 years now, no doubt you have seen those pretty scary photos of lakes simply disappearing – boats in the middle of the lake simply beached. Our water is disappearing – it's barely rained here, and we are feeling the pain. Until the last few days, we've had almost never-ending sunny days for the last four years. No one knows if we will see enough rain this year to take us out of the drought.

I thought about that when I read about the [scientist who hadn't showered in 12 years](#). He didn't need much water, only washing his hands just prior performing experiments. Apparently, he had devised a way to stay clean by spraying himself with a mist which combined beneficial bacteria which both destroyed the bacteria which made him smell, and at the same time, supplemented his skin with other bacteria (from dirt, apparently) which nourished his skin. He is now selling the stuff, of course. The story was played for disgust – they even had 3 willing people from their staff try the stuff out and not shower for a week, all but one thought it was awful. The article was interesting – it mentioned that our penchant for bathing was apparently very strong prior to the rise of Christianity, which linked cleanliness with promiscuity.

Wonder when “cleanliness is next to Godliness” became the norm.

After I read this I thought to myself: this is perfect. We don't really need to be using all their water: why doesn't some enterprising entrepreneur develop a shower based on this scientist's formula? Instead of a shower every morning, we'd step into a fine mist of this stuff, dousing ourselves and killing all the bad bacteria without using up our precious water.

When I suggested this people thought I was crazy. What? We are not to bathe now? It may be “upsetting” but if you think about it – it's the future. No matter what you think of climate change, reducing our water use can only be good. Why not come up with a waterless shower that cleans you with science. Yuk, right? No, it's the future. It's INNOVATION.

The other day I heard that my friends at [IFTF](#) had wandered over to the local pub with their [Beam Pro](#) telepresence robot and were screamed at and practically thrown out. Can't imagine what is so scary about a woman and her telepresence robot? But apparently the clientele was highly agitated, and they asked her and her remote companion to leave. And this is in the heart of Silicon Valley, where we literally have a shop staffed only by Beam robots. When I thought about this I realized that the future is very upsetting to some.

However, that only makes me think that we are on the mark. If the futures we are weaving, the innovations we are creating aren't upsetting someone, then are we really doing our jobs? Are we really pushing the envelope? Are we staying in that safe little box when we innovate, or are we making people uncomfortable? Are we upsetting them?

Part of our mandate should be to push the envelope, make people feel a little upset about where things are going. Get them to think about those futures, trigger thinking, trigger innovation, push them to think thoughts a bit out of the mainstream.

There's so much we could do, if we are just willing to be a bit more upset.

4 TAKE THE MAZE BACKWARDS

When I was young, I used to enjoy doing [mazes in paper books](#). You know the kind I'm talking about – thin or thick newsprint paper books which you can even find today in dollar stores to keep your kids amused on long car trips (if you want to do it the low-tech way and not give them a tablet). I used to spend hours trying to traverse the maze, with my pencil, very carefully starting at the START and making my way to the FINISH, slowly moving down the corridors I thought would take me to my goal. Of course, I'd take wrong turns and need to backtrack, carefully erasing the line I drew with the pencil eraser and taking a different path. I would do puzzle after puzzle like this, taking the wrong paths time after time, probably cursing myself and the maze creator in a fitting childish way.

I'm not sure if I figured it out on my own or some smartass older kid or adult showed me that on the super hard mazes, it was WAY easier to start at the end and make your way to the beginning. Of course, that took all the fun out of it, but it worked, I got through the maze, but it was a cheat. But I got through the maze.

I've always been a big fan of science fiction, since I was very young. My favorite show was [Star Trek](#), (the original series). My parents let me watch it even though it wasn't really a kids show – my dad kind of dismissed all science fiction and superheroes (I still remember him watching me watch reruns of [Superman](#) flying through the air and him going “People can't fly!”). Of course I was too young to know the term “[willing suspension of disbelief](#)“, but I knew that's what I was doing. A very [pragmatic guy](#), my dad.) My mom, on the other hand, liked me watching it because she found that everyone on the Enterprise was always very polite (not sure what other shows she thought people weren't polite on, maybe [Kojack](#)?). Anyways, I always loved thinking about the future, and wanting to live in that future. Which eventually drew me to Silicon Valley (arguably the innovation capital of the world, as I say on my [show](#)) and the field of innovation and foresight.

My love of sci-fi and innovation went together. While others I'd worked with constantly mentioned to me that they thought thinking about the future was hard, I felt that I had a knack for it – that it was easy. Why did I think that? Well, I took sci-fi visions, like Star Trek, and other hard sci-fi authors that I'd been reading, and simply used the “take the maze backwards” trick. I'd read something in one of these novels, maybe set 100 or 300 years from now, and think to myself...

“What's the great-great-great-granddaddy of that? How did that start?”

Start at the end and work your way back. If I read about a subdermal implant inserted at birth which listened to your thoughts and whenever any question popped into your head, it was immediately answered in your head by orbiting AIs which had every answer to every question ready for you, and worked backwards, I might have invented Google and/or Quora before they were born.

Try it yourself. Grab a [hard sci-fi](#) novel (not [Game of Thrones](#) or any other fantasy – hey we're working now!) and read it. Think about something that they use in the book. Now work backwards through the maze to *almost* our time, and you may have the next billion-dollar idea.

5 WASTE SOME TIME

A researcher once had a stunning revelation: he realized that he *no longer wasted time*. From the moment he woke up to the moment he went to bed, he was always doing something – reading, responding to emails, working out, eating, writing etc. He noted that he was so busy, that he had every moment of his entire day completely scheduled, and never spent a moment, not even a second, simply doing nothing. He mused: is this what it means to be someone living in the 21st century, an always on, cog in the machine, able to be super productive, every second of every day? I wonder, is this us, now? More than ever before we have the tools, the culture, and the mindset to be **ultraproductive** all the time, as we are forever hyperconnected into the **hive mind**.

I'm sure that this is the case for extremely busy people, CEO's and other executives, celebrities, rock stars, and even some of us regular Joe's who might be part of the **Shut-In Economy** and need someone to do everything for us because Goddammit, we have no time to waste. None.

If you read the prevailing wisdom of LinkedIn, and plenty of other business leading content feeds (you can't really call it journalism anymore, can you?) it's all about being more productive:

- [15 Secrets Successful People Know About Productivity](#)
- [10 Timeless Work Habits to Boost Your Productivity Today](#)
- [Productivity Hacks: 6 Ways to Fight Distractions](#)

It's all about doing increasingly in less and less time. I even wrote my **own 6 Steps to Ultra Productivity**. Shame on me – an innovator giving tips on productivity, when, what we really need to be innovative is the exact opposite. We need unproductivity. We need to waste time. In the language of that last post – we need distractions to help us innovate, not the other way around.

Focused work is great – when you really need to get something done in a short period of time. Maniacal focus in bursts works great if you have a clear, exact picture of what you are trying to do. But what you need to be innovative is the exact opposite. You need to waste time – to let your mind wander – to walk in curves instead of lines – to make connections you may not have normally made – to let **serendipity be your good buddy**.

So here is the problem: you probably have some of the busiest people in your company, typically your top executives, lives so tightly scheduled and productive that they have no time to waste, which gives them no time to innovate – to think about the future – these are the very people who need to be able to have the time to waste to innovate.

So, if you are one of those CEOs, celebrities, or rock stars, if you realize that you no longer waste time, and you want to come up with new business models, product or service innovations, maybe you just need to think about just wasting some time. Who knows what you can come up with.

6 GO OFFLINE AND MAKE

I love [Maker Faire](#) – in fact, I’m a big fan of the whole Maker movement. Now, it’s gone through a few iterations, but I think that the urge to make stuff, to build things, to do things with our hands, is something that’s embedded in all our natures. We have this amazing ability to CREATE, but in a lot of us, we haven’t had the chance to do it. We used to do it a lot when we were kids, [LEGO](#), [Play-Doh](#), [Meccano](#) or [Erector Sets](#). We created all sorts of stuff.

Now I’m lucky, in my role, I get to create, or help others create, nearly every day. There is nothing like the act of creation (although I do remember once some pious fella telling me once that “only God can create” – but personally I believe we were all built to create.)

We may be wired to create, but the very act of creation takes work. It takes energy. And I find that in day-to-day living, a lot of people have trouble creating, because they spend most of their time consuming. It’s so EASY to consume! It takes no energy whatsoever – in fact, scrolling through your Facebook stream and tapping a like (and maybe a reaction here and there) is the modern-day equivalent of sitting on the couch, eating bon-bons, and surfing channels. Even that super light touch of liking something is barely a reaction. There is literally so much, that you will never be able to consume everything, and most of the time, the feed that you are getting, are probably irrelevant to you. And if you’re subject to [FOMO](#), we’ll then forget it – it’s an impossible task – you will miss out on something.

How can you find time to create?

I read an interesting article in my new favorite magazine, [The New Philosopher](#). In this article, they discussed an experiment where they took college students from all over the world and asked them to go offline for 24 hours. No internet, no smartphone, nothing. No access to anything. The reactions ranged from total catatonia – one of the students basically went to bed and stayed there for 24 hours because there was literally “nothing to do” without his connection to the internet, to withdrawal symptoms on par with illegal drug use – many of the students never made it a whole day – after a few hours they just had to boot up their phones again. What were these students doing? They were literally addicted to the connection to others and the consumption of content. While this is probably further evidence that we really have now become [Homo Nexus](#), it gave me another idea.

While the researchers in this study had told the students what not to do “use their phones or connect to the internet” – they hadn’t told the student what to do – therefore driving them to give up or enter catatonic state. But what if the researchers had instead said:

Create something.

Draw something, build something, record something, video something or even write something. Just don’t get on the internet. If you need to connect with people – do it in person – but just create. Express yourself! Disconnect yourself from the ever-flowing flood of content, good and bad, from every source. Once you’ve done that – look inside. Look inside yourself for that spark of creativity. That internal flame of creation – of good ideas – unvarnished by the flow of the world into your brain.

You see, your brain has absorbed so much, that now it’s time to give back. Stop the flow into your brain and start the flow out of your brain. Try this at home – disconnect yourself from the world and when you feel bored, just create. Doesn’t matter what it is, just make something! I’ll bet you won’t believe what you come up with.

24 hours later – feel free to get back online and tell the world. But until then, let your brain create.

7 HAVE BEGINNERS MIND

“In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s, there are few.”

When I was in high school I, as probably many others did, found my families religion a bit wanting and did a little dabbling in several different “ways”, spending most of my time reading up on and learning about Zen Buddhism. There was something about Buddhism that I liked, the human centered approach mostly, the idea that you were the focus of your life and followed your own rules, not ones put down by some higher being we may or may not know exists. Additionally, I loved the meditative aspects of Zen, the practice of zazen which has adherents (or aspirants) sit and meditate, clearing your mind of all thoughts, attempting to attain a completely empty mind, or at least filled with only a single thought or concept, but ideally completely empty. I even wrote a book, way back when I was in sales, about using zazen to help you chill out when the phone wasn’t ringing with orders. (That’s right, I wasn’t always about disruptive innovation.)

One of the most famous books on the subject “Zen Mind, Beginners Mind” starts out just like the above. simply with the statement that when someone comes to a practice, any practice, of which they are unfamiliar, the possibilities are endless. It doesn’t matter what it is: could be Zen, could be golf, could be snowboarding, could be coding. Your mind is fully open because you literally have no idea what is right and what is wrong, when it comes to the practice. Only when you start learning what to do/what not to do, is when you start closing your mind off to what is not possible. That’s when you lose touch with the part of yourself which can lead to disruptive innovation.

In my humble opinion, Beginners Luck is real. When someone has no rules, no restrictions, on what they are doing, no matter what it is, they make moves and decisions which can create amazing innovations. When you come to something completely new, with no preconceptions whatsoever, you can make breakthroughs in areas people who’ve done things for years never even thought of. Once you get into it, that’s when the rules bog you down, that’s when it seems that truly disruptive innovation is out of reach. But it’s not, really.

The fact of the matter is that we can all go back to that moment. We can all “clear our minds” and go back to being a beginner. We can all go back to when we started and bring back that beginner’s mind, bring back that childlike curiosity we had when we first started doing something. Bring back that optimistic, sometimes slightly crazy person who started by believing that anything was possible. This is the way back to disruptive innovation.

For some it may be difficult, but it is possible. Being able to get back to that open state is key to coming up with new ideas.

8 USE THE IDEA BLENDER

You may or may not be old enough to remember the old Reese's Peanut Butter cup commercial – they've refreshed it a few times but if you don't, here it is. They make light of the creation of peanut butter cups by showing one guy walking around the corner eating a giant chocolate bar, and a girl walking around the same corner in the opposite direction eating from a giant peanut butter jar with a giant spoon (yes, she is walking down the street eating peanut butter from a jar – an everyday occurrence, evidently) Anyways the inevitable happens and bam, they knock into each other and somehow, the giant chocolate bar ends up in the giant jar of peanut butter – and of course the conversation ensues “Hey you got chocolate in my peanut butter!” and “Hey, you got peanut butter on my chocolate!” said like it's the worst thing in the world. Of course, when they each taste the blend, it is the most awesome sensation ever. *“When two great tastes taste great together.”*

In our workshops, I don't typically knock two people together to see what comes out of it, (unless you'd like us too ;)) but we do try knocking (or blending, more like) two concepts together to see what happens. The best blend comes from taking two completely different things and throwing them together in the idea blender and see what comes out of it. Of course, you don't need to stop at two – you can throw all sorts of stuff in that thing. Think of it like the kale smoothie of innovation – might not look so good at first, but it tastes great and it full of nutrients.

Here's an example

The other day, I was at an ideation session with one of our clients and someone mentioned that the white board markers smelled like fruit. I'm guessing someone had accidentally bought the wrong kind of markers so those are the ones that we had (yep Expo Scented Dry Erase Markers) so instead of getting a new set of markers, ignoring them, or just randomly complaining about them, I made those markers the trigger for a whole new set of innovative product ideas. While this is a great example of serendipity being a trigger, blending the idea of the fruity smelling markers with the types of products that the company was trying to build (not fruit or food related in any way) enabled us to generate a raft of new, completely out of the box ideas, all around smell and color. It unlocked a whole new set of innovative ideas, where we blended their current products together with the concept of smell. We even threw some Internet of Things devices and sensors into the blender to really fortify our kale shake of innovation. A half hour later, we probably had about 20 new ideas out of that session – some of which were buildable today, others went into the patent pipeline for eventual build out or licensing tomorrow.

This also proves that you really need to be open to throwing anything in the blender. Don't stop yourself from throwing something in there because you don't immediately see the benefits of that ingredient. Some of the best tasting shakes have come out of throwing interesting ingredients never mixed before and pressing that smoothie button.

9 FACE YOUR KILLER

One of the other exercises I use, which I find very rarely used in many companies who have been around for a long time – established, high or consistently profitable companies who don't really need to worry about their customers or their product, imagines what, or who would be your killer.

Startups do this all the time: even if they've been able to gain some traction, revenues, and even profit, they are inordinately sensitive to the possibility of another startup, or even another big company, entering their and space and literally completely obliterating the need for them.

Case in point, when Twitter first launched, it created and encouraged a very healthy ecosystem of apps which leveraged their data. I thought, at the time, that they were being forward thinking in that they understood that to become a completely pervasive global communications medium, that they would need to become a platform as quickly as possible. They focused on providing the platform and allowed others to step in and become the interfaces to the platform. This allowed them to grow very quickly – I remember attending their first developer conference back in 2009 when my startup has built a Twitter and Facebook topic harvesting engine called Tweebus. I looked around at the hundreds of developers in the room, all leveraging the Twitter ecosystem to develop applications using Twitter data (as we were) or as new interfaces to Twitter. I say some very interesting innovative new interfaces which I wish were still around today.

A few years later, there was a management shakeup, and Twitter cut off some access, reduced access to others, and basically hobbled their ecosystem. Many developers lost their businesses completely because they were dependent on the Twitter ecosystem. They died. Twitter was their killer.

Startups are acutely aware of the competition and of the delicate nature of the ecosystem that they play in. In one stroke, you could be worthless.

More mature corporations feel that they are more resilient, that they don't need to worry about their ecosystem collapsing, or that their legions of customers won't suddenly switch to some other competitor. They feel that they are insulated against such stresses.

Welcome to the world of disruption. No one is immune from total collapse from market forces, competitors, and sweeping technological, cultural, and societal changes. Companies deemed “too big to fail” can and will fail. In fact, they are more likely to fail, since they can never think the unthinkable – that they will fail.

How do you alleviate that? Simply come up with a killer, or combination of them, which will kill your company. What must happen for your company to die? Could it be a competitor? A market crashes? Widespread adoption of Bitcoin? Autonomous vehicles? All or some of the above? Remember, in this world of disruption, anything is possible.

Spend time brainstorming and build the perfect storm of competition, technological, cultural, and social changes which may occur which will basically crush your company. Start it like this:

If X, Y, Z occur, then our company will die

Spend half the meeting coming up with the above. Once you have that scenario mapped out, let it sink in with your team. On the same day, or a few days later, pull the team together and think about what you would have to do for you to deal with that possibility. How can you address it? What will you need to do/build/be to stay alive in that perfect storm?

There you will find innovation.



TO KILL THE DRAG

Just got back from a quick trip to LA and I could not believe how bad the traffic is there. Whenever I needed to get somewhere quickly, people just seemed to be driving like complete imbeciles – straddling lanes, going slowly in the fast lane, dawdling here and there – it’s maddening at normal times, and even worse when you are trying to get somewhere quickly. I like to think of this as the concept of drag, which I define as the difference between a customer’s seamless ideal experience, and the experience they get. Some people call it friction.

As an example, and the lack thereof, let’s look at Uber. Pre-Uber, how did we call a cab? We either stood on a corner and waved one down, never being sure of if or when we would be able to get one, or we called one on the phone, never sure of when it would arrive. Once one showed up, we got it, having no idea what it was like inside, or what the driver was like. Once inside, not only were we barraged with advertising, we had to trust that the driver was going to take us directly to where we wanted to go, and not take some circuitous route which would rack up the miles to pad their wallets. Once we got where we were going, how much do we tip? Should we tip? The whole process is just fraught with uncertainty. Today, we press a button, a car appears, we get in, it takes us directly to the destination (we can even confirm it ourselves) and at the other end, we just get out, automatically paying. Drag is practically eliminated. Uber is a pure match of supply and demand, with a seamless transactional interface, hiding all the unpleasanties. (As a side benefit, **the new huge market of introverts**, just eat this stuff up)

In some industries, it makes you money. Who is to say that Google’s relevancy isn’t slightly off enough to make you page through more pages of their ad imbued site more than others, enticing you to possibly click on an ad? The travel business survives on drag – sometimes I think that the main reason that these sites show you so much information is that they are not interested in getting you the best deal, they just want to tire you into picking, something, anything, that’s not horrible. But I digress.

However, you may like or love drag (it may even be your business model) people, in general, hate it. While there may be many browsers out there, when people are ready to make a purchase, typically they want to make it as quickly and seamlessly as possible.

Look at your business: what if you could completely or nearly eliminate drag? How could you devise a set of services which remove all the tiny little, possibly painful processes, which slow your customers down from making a purchase? Or even better, how could you redesign your business model to truly make life super easy and seamless for your customers.

Here is an example. Do you recall TiVo? I used to have one. At one point they created an interesting innovation – they realized that a lot of their customers had a lot of empty space on their DVR hard drives, so they created this service called TiVo Suggestions. Like Pandora (or Tinder) you could give 1-3 thumbs up or down on a show, while you were watching it. Over time, not only did it develop a set of likes and dislikes, it automatically recorded shows that you might like for you in the empty space on your drive. They were set to low priority, so they would automatically be deleted if something you really wanted to watch needed the space. TiVo eliminated the drag of finding and recording a show the customer might like.

In the same way, media has now become software and can be delivered at any time and be deleted just as easily. Do you recall when Apple got in big trouble when it pushed a copy of U2s album down to unwitting customers, without asking them? I bet that they wouldn’t have gotten any backlash if the “free gift” had been seamlessly delivered to only U2 fans? Since media is now software, what’s the real

harm in pre-delivering media that you might be interested in, and then letting you delete it within a period and never get charged?

Think about how your business could reduce or eliminate drag. What can you change about your business model, your purchase process, your delivery mechanisms, to make it simpler and easier for your customers to get the service they want.

II BE INCONGRUENT

To innovate, you must do something different. It's harder than it sounds.

Just read (actually listened to) *Smarter Faster Better*, the latest book by Charles Duhigg, the author of the *Power Of Habit* (also another great book). Great book, highly recommended. In one of the chapters, he describes an interesting experiment.

The experiment pulled together a focus group which had neutral views on a topic, say for example, eating mushrooms (not the example he used in the book). Before the test, they were questioned on the topic to confirm a lack of bias one way or the other.

They were split into two groups: one group was instructed to form a set of reasons for eating mushrooms (health benefits, *full of micronutrients*) and the other group was instructed to form a set of reasons against eating mushrooms (not really vegan, *grown in manure*). They were given time to create a compelling argument for their case.

They were each able to come up with an extensive list of reasons to support their argument.

At the end of the argument creation process, they were each asked about their personal feelings on the topic. Interestingly, the group that did the pro argument now viewed mushrooms more much more favorably, and the group that did the con argument viewed mushrooms less favorably. Makes sense, right? People were asked to come up with reasons for something, and not only did they justify it for the experiment, they also convinced themselves that they were right.

In the second half of the experiment, each group was asked to do the opposite: now the pro group had to come up with reasons against eating mushrooms, and the con group had to come up with reasons for eating mushrooms. In this, the groups struggled to be able to come up with reasons, both groups were barely able to come up with a fraction of the number of reasons they did earlier.

Once your opinion is set, even in an artificial environment like this, it's hard to change it.

When I heard this, the reasoning came to me. Most humans, except for some in the sociopath space, enjoy being congruent. That their words and deeds align. I voice my opinion on one thing, and even if I see a lot of evidence to the contrary, it's hard for me to change my mind. We feel that it is a very bad thing to change our minds – we rake politicians over the coals for being “flip-floppers”, in some cases we take opinions so seriously, that we will defend them at great personal risk, even in the preponderance of evidence against our decisions.

We don't like changing our minds, and we don't like it when people change their minds too often. This is a problem when you are trying to innovate. Innovation requires doing something different – it requires changing your mind and changing your mindset. It requires being incongruent.

Unfortunately, our mind changing muscle has atrophied over time. We tend to make decisions, set directions, make plans, and slavishly stick to them, even if they are not working. This happens to everyone, from managers and employees within mid-market to major corporates, small businesses, and startups. I'm sure you've heard many a tale of startup founders unwilling to pivot in order to survive because they felt that their original idea was so damn good, all it needed was a little more, time, money or audience and it would have been another billion-dollar business.

Fortunately, however, all is not lost – we can work on our mind-changing muscle, stretch it out, make it more flexible. All we need to do is to open our mind and exercise that mind-changing muscle by

making ourselves do new things. For example, decide on a new restaurant for dinner. Order something else you've never done before on the menu. Return something you just bought.

To innovate, we must work to strengthen our incongruency mindset – that we don't always have to do what we say or say what we do. We can, and should, change our minds, our plans, our directions when new information tells us we should. Or even on a whim, as new serendipitous juxtapositions are formed as we experience life.

So, bend and flex your mind-changing muscle. Every now and then be a hypocrite. Argue against yourself. Be the devil's advocate one day, and the angels advocate the other.

Keep your mind nimble and innovate.

12 WANDER AIMLESSLY

It's been proven that rigor and process kill innovation. In one study, they took two groups of college students and gave them a problem. But before they had a chance to solve the problem, they made one group walk in straight lines, up and down the room, back and forth, straight lines. Then they told them to solve the problem. The second group was told to wander aimlessly around the room, but specifically not go straight, go in curves, or whatever shapes they'd like. They were then told to sit down and solve the problem. Can you guess which group came up with the more creative solution?

There is a clear difference between creativity and productivity. When you are looking for productivity, you need laser-like focus and straight lines. When you are looking for creativity, you need your mind and your physical body to wander around, both mentally and physically. Wandering around aimlessly triggers completely new thinking – you could make a serendipitous juxtaposition by walking around a corner you've never walked around before, seeing some new view or angle, some stray thoughts and ideas could just flash into your head, jump into the idea blender, and you could come up with something completely new and different.

Lately, there has been a lot of talk on mindfulness, and living in the current moment. That we are always thinking about the future and the next thing, instead of fully realizing everything about where and when we are in the current moment. The strictest practitioners will basically tell you that you should stop thinking about anything other than the exact thing that you are doing right now, whether its washing the dishes, having a coffee or doing a presentation. While I completely understand where the practice is trying to go, I don't think that pure mindfulness, in a vein of completely emptying your mind of every but that exact thing you are doing, will help you innovate.

What I do agree with, however, is opening your mind to new things. One of the tenets of mindfulness is the extreme opening of the mind to new thoughts, new ideas and new things that can simply pop into your head.

The human mind is an amazing thing. I often stop and look around at our world and marvel at everything that humanity has invented. Try this the next time, for a moment, when you are at a stop light in your car. Look around you and really notice everything around you that humans have created. The car, the traffic light, all the cars around you, the stores, the clothes that people are wearing, everything not natural, so to speak. Think of all the things that human beings have invented – many of these inventions didn't exist a hundred years ago. Now glance over at your smartphone. Everyone has one, right? Instant interconnectivity to every other human being on the planet who owns one of those, and the vast stores of human knowledge, just a tap or a Siri query away. As little as 10 years ago, those didn't even exist. The human mind invented that.

Everything we have today which can be considered innovation, breakthrough and disruptive has an element of randomness within it. Someone put two or more things together which had never been put together before, and likely came across those things as they were wandering aimlessly.

Wander more, and you can take advantage of this as well.

13 MAKE A MESS

Recently, I read an article in the latest Wired magazine about tidying up – there is a Japanese author named Marie Kondo who wrote the bestselling “The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up” which, I hear, is still on bestselling books lists everywhere, it also seems to be in every airport bookstore I’ve been in lately. This and her other books discuss how your life will change if you would only just tidy up. I’m assuming that with this, and increasingly shows like Hoarders, we are seeing a backlash against clutter. She is really against clutter, in fact, discusses in which order you should get rid of stuff (books first, then clothes, then papers, then sentimental objects) and you should only hold onto whatever “brings you joy”. Her method is to take everything in the house of that one type, say books, then pile them up in one place, then physically pick up each book and hold it in your hand. If it brings you joy in some way, when you see the book or hold the book, you should keep it, if not, get rid of it.

Now, as someone who, in probably anyone’s parlance, hoards books, this is tough advice. Simply looking over at my bookshelf while I’m the middle of thinking through a problem, inventing new things, or simply letting my mind wander, might let me cast my glance across a book title, think about that book, maybe grab it, flip through it again, and glean some new (or refresh some old) insight, which would help me solve the problem, trigger a new invention (maybe by throwing it into the idea blender) or who knows what else. My books are thought triggers, conceptual post-it’s in a way, which can be combined with new problems to come up with new solutions. When I’m surrounded by my books, I feel that I can be more creative.

Apparently, there are studies to corroborate this: it’s no wonder why artists, writers, and creatives seem to flourish in cluttered or messy spaces, it turns out that if you want to be more creative, you go into a messy space. Cluttered spaces are good for creativity because they help you to trigger new thinking and new combinations, but they sap energy. The opposite is also true – neat spaces are great for productivity, they might not help you come up with creative solutions, but they will help your team to work faster and longer and more diligently. If you want your team to come up with creative solutions or innovative new products, put them in a cluttered, messy space.

Ideally, you want to have both types of spaces in your offices – a messy, cluttered space with toys and things to play with together (why not have fun and stock with books (science fiction, fiction and non-fiction), toys, LEGO blocks (not the sets but just the blocks) drawing materials, and stuff, like the Stanford design thinking materials where you can get your hands dirty and just build stuff) where you and your team goes in order to do some creative problem solving, and your orderly, neat space, where you take the ideas that you generated in the creative space, and get them built. You need both the messy space and the orderly space, the best of both worlds, to get the benefit of both.

14 CHANGE THE NOUNS

Disruptive new and innovative products need not be created through completely new thinking. In fact, completely new thinking can sometimes be difficult, requiring a completely different growth **mindset, environment, and team**. It's something you may not have access to or be able to whip up at a moment's notice, when you need some innovation to occur, or a challenge to solve.

In these cases, there are some simple ways in which you can innovate, help unlock new thinking, just by doing some semantic shifting, a subset of which I call "changing the nouns".

For example, when the web first started, it was a reasonable size, but it was difficult to find what you wanted. Enter the directory – places like Yahoo! and DMOZ, a type of a home page of the internet, where you could find hand curated websites by traversing or searching a directory. It was a directory, with a search, but just for the engine. Later, via Alta Vista, Google, and other engines, these search engines became the "portal" to the internet. Once the portals got to a certain size, then they got to be a little unwieldy, the system of capturing things that were of interest to you was limited to local bookmarks which you stored on your computer.

Eventually, Yahoo! and others invented the concept of the internet, customized to you. Sites like "My Yahoo!" allowed you to see a customized directory, based on your preferred settings. It was "the internet customized to you".

So how do you innovate to get a something like Facebook? You swap the nouns "internet" and "you" and get "you, customized to the internet". Facebook was all about you – your profile and presenting your profile to the world, to allow you to connect with others. Even the name harkens back to the original concept of a "face book", a paper book full of people's profiles (typically students), helping you to connect with them. Where directories and search engines were all about bringing the internet to you, Facebook is about bringing you to the internet.

There are literally hundreds of startups and apps out there which are the "uber of X", where X is your favorite noun. I came across a site the other day of a company which only develops "clones" of pre-existing services, I'm assuming hoping to capture some of the marketplaces. But I digress.

Just take a typical phrase, and swap out the nouns, and see what happens. Sometimes you will get nonsense, sometimes you will get nothing new, and other times you will get something completely new that you have never thought of before. Use tools like the **Random Word Generator** and create new, unexpected combinations. You will innovate.

For example, let's try the **random noun generator** for "Uber for X"

- member
- extent
- woman
- mom
- attention

How about a "uber for moms", delivering a mom to you when you need a mom type task to be completed? Or a "uber for attention", delivering someone's attention when you need it? Let's try again:

- estate
- soup
- teacher
- desk
- development

Soup delivery? Teacher delivery? Desk Delivery? Development Delivery? Some of those could fly.

The idea here is not to generate the idea – it’s to generate *uncommon semantic juxtapositions*, which can then trigger new thinking.

Blogging, podcasting, and YouTube were born when someone swapped the “professionals” and “public”, when talking about writing, radio, and TV. Swapping “the crowd” for any market which is currently locked down by professionals is one idea.

Try it yourself – take something that you do, or would like to do, and swap out the nouns for new ones, or just swap them around completely. You never know what you will come up with.

15 THINK LIKE A KID

When it comes to new, innovative, out-of-the-box thinking, you can't beat kids. I mean, not all kids, but those fearless try-anything-because-they-don't-know-not-to kinds of kids. I think you know the kinds of kids I'm thinking of:

1. The ones that climbed up to the roof with their blankets to see if they use them as capes to fly
2. The ones that would take electronic things apart and put them back together
3. The ones that always asked: "why?"

While most of the kids who think out of the box don't understand where the box is – similar to having **beginners mind** – there is one key difference between having beginners mind and "kid mind" – it is the unabashed playfulness. The willingness to just try something out, just for fun, to see what happens. It's active, assertive, open-mindedness. And of all the tools in our arsenal of innovation, this one is probably the easiest to uncover.

Once we are grownups, we decide that we need to be "professionals". As professionals, we need to act a certain, adult way. We need to use big words and acronyms and do things like "have meetings" and "operationalize strategy" and "organize deliverables" and "gain alignment".

In the Star Trek Original Series episode, Mirror, Mirror, a team from the Enterprise gets transported through a portal to a barbaric "mirror universe" where the good guys are the bad guys and vice versa. While our intrepid team of good guys can easily act more barbaric to fit into the mirror universe, our Spock can very swiftly see that he's got the wrong Kirk, McCoy, Scotty, and Uhura on board, and immediately throws them into the brig. When our good guys are back on our side of the portal, Kirk asks how Spock was able to tell the difference. He points out that the civilized man can always act like a barbarian since he used to be one, where the barbarian has no experience acting like a civilized man.

We all have a child within us. We all used to be one. We can all tap that inner child.

This exercise does just that. Simply cast your mind back to when you were a kid. Become a kid. Act like a kid. Imagine yourself as a kid – with that active, assertive open-mind – that fearless sense that you can do anything.

Imagine that anything is possible. That you can start from nothing, there are no barriers, there is nothing that you think you cannot do. There is nothing stopping you. What ideas comes into your head? What would you do – what could you do – if there was nothing to stop you – and you had no fear.

- There is no need to show profits since you aren't even thinking about money.
- There is no need to think about the rules because you don't understand that there are any.
- There is no need to think about the "how" of something, just the "why" of it

Try this at home – and see what your inner child can come up with.

16 REPURPOSING

One of the most effective exercises that I use in my innovation sessions is to actively take an object – any object – any object with a current purpose – and ideate around other purposes for that object, other situations that it could be used in.

For example, Tesla's use of an array of individual laptop style batteries instead of GMs and other use of monolithic purpose build batteries for something like the Chevy Volt, clearly show the differences between disruptive and incremental innovation. While the use of a battery array allows Tesla a way to repurpose a common battery form factor, it can also allow for more variations in design, although Tesla has not strayed too far from the very common automotive form factors of sedan and SUV. GM would need to develop a completely different battery form factor for upcoming cars. Additionally, Tesla's design allows the use of those same batteries in home-based arrays, storing solar power.

The basis of many patent applications at the core is the ability to take a concept or object from one sphere and transpose it into another.

This is more than just Uber for X, but to move something which is common in field A, apply it to Field B, and then see what shakes out. I liken it to an author creating characters, placing them in situations, and then allowing the characters to deal with the situation at hand. For example,

I liken it to an author creating characters, placing them in situations, and then allowing the characters to deal with the situation at hand.

For example, let's take common whiteboard markers and place them into a context of food. Maybe develop flavored (not just scented) markers which can draw flavors onto food? If the markers were developed with sufficiently high-end materials, I see no reason chefs would not be able to use them in haute cuisine.

Or apply the Uber model to garage band musicians – maybe those band would love to start to build an audience of followers by inviting them to their garages to listen in on practice and jam sessions. There is no limit to the interesting juxtapositions and combinations which you may be able to generate during this exercise. However, I can already sense many of you suggesting that this would not be a useful exercise, generating unprofitable ideas and wasting the ideators time. Taking objects which are common in one field and brainstorming how they can be used in other fields is an effective way to generate new thinking. They may not directly lead to new product ideas, but they do succeed in opening your people's minds to new ideas.

Postscript

While Tesla may have innovated in its use of batteries, it has not innovated in the types of vehicles that it has created, simply creating typical vehicles which fit directly into the expected molds. Personally, this tells me that Tesla is in a similar position to Apple – they may have innovated to get their flagship products off the ground, but after their initial disruption, they maintained a core steady-state of incremental innovation. As innovators, we all know that there is no such thing as a steady-state, and both Tesla and Apple will need to generate some disruption in the short term (as is rumored with Apple) to maintain or regain their position on innovation.

17 ASK “WHY DO WE STILL...”

With all the new technologies and ways of doing things seemingly better and faster, do you ever wonder why we sometimes cling to the old ways of doing things? Why even if much better options are available, we still do things a certain way? Why do we hesitate to innovate?

I get hired to moderate and facilitate a lot of workshops, meetings, and events. Sometimes, they are [innovation focused workshops](#), centered on developing products and services which can be developed and launched today. Sometimes they have [targeted IP generation sessions](#), expressly designed to generate protectable IP, in the form of patent applications (and hopefully patents). Sometimes, they are [far future strategy sessions](#) which can generate all the above. In all our sessions, we also generate [massive improvements in employee engagement](#).

We tend to use repeatable, useful, and mind-expanding session formats, to generate the biggest return in the shortest period. One of the most useful tools in our arsenal is the “Why do we still...” format, which we find fun, engaging and helps to open the team’s minds to new possibilities.

In this game, we spend a few minutes generating the end of the question “Why do we still...” – typically first using individual ideation, then group ideation, then dot voting to select the top three sentence ends. We then randomly split the team into two, and have each team argue for and against this assertion, looking at cultural, social, technical, and other markers to answer the question. We also ask the team to develop a sales pitch for their viewpoint and have the teams compete against each other to determine a winner.

Here are some examples:

- Why do we still buy DVD players? (electronics manufacturer)
- Why do we still use websites? (bank)
- Why do we still use remote controls? (virtual audio assistant developer)

A good example question for a book retailer might be “Why do we still read paper books?”

The pro side could argue that the physical manifestation of a book is still important to the customer, that tactile sense of the book itself, the feel, the smell, the ease of viewing, all contribute to an all-around pleasurable experience. That side could also argue that the quality of eBooks is sub-par, screens are difficult for some to read, and that for some eBooks, especially those with charts and graphs, they translate to electronic form very poorly. Additionally, they can discuss how to encourage those who prefer eBooks to instead to try to use paper books, by highlighting those elements, targeting that market. Finally, they develop a paper book pitch, to be delivered to eBook customers, convincing them to try paper books.

The other side could argue that the electronic delivery of books can be much more rapid, the price of the books is much cheaper as there are no physical elements to the book. They could argue that eBook reader devices are getting better and can present the book in a much more flexible way than just as an analog book. They can argue that paper books are heavier and use up natural resources in production (even if they use recycled paper) so that it is much more environmentally friendly. In the same way as above, the pro-eBook team builds a pitch for eBooks.

When the pitches are complete, they present to each other, and the sides then pick a winner. The exercise is to focus on why, when technology and culture can move us in one direction, they tend to

keep us moving in the same direction. It's a great exercise for companies in distress, looking to decide of a pivot or a way in which to redefine their current offerings.

Who knows – you may even be able to discover your next unicorn.

18 THINK FURTHER OUT

When we ran our first enterprise-wide innovation program, we were gathering all sorts of great ideas from our client employees, but there was something missing. After launching the program and running it for a while, it became obvious that most of the ideas which were being generated were incremental features which were simply new add-ons to existing products – extensions which would make products better, improve the customer experience, make a little more money and refinements, so to speak. There was a category for out-of-the-box ideas, and mashups (where they would blend two or more ideas – see the [idea blender](#)) but we didn't get a lot of really hugely disruptive breakthrough ideas. They didn't think further out.

So we needed a new plan – some way to get people thinking about truly new, [disruptive](#) and game-changing ideas.

Right around that time, the company was celebrating their 10th birthday. Part of that was a yearlong celebration of all things about the company, they had told stories about the company's history, and printed up a large commemorative photo book detailing the history of the company, from the early days when the founders would have to sleep under their desks in their cubes at their first office in Mountain View, all the way to getting into the Guinness Book of World Records, all the way to the present day, where 12,000+ employees were creating cool new products. The photo book ended with a montage of everyone who currently worked there, and then at the very end, a blank page. A blank page, for all the employees to complete. An empty space to map out the next ten years.

When I saw that blank page, I had a thought myself: while it's great to look back 10 years over the course of history, what if we took ALL employees and asked them to look 10 years forward instead? What if we ran an internal, crowdsourced, innovation program (which would more accurately be called a foresight program now) asking people to put their minds into the year 2017, and try to envision not only what the company would be like in 10 years, but what the internet would be like, what interfaces would be like, what the industry would be like, what their customers would be like, and finally, what would the world be like? After pitching this to the CEO directly, we got the go ahead, and built out a program which we literally “set” 10 years out – we developed what we called a “Futurist” program. With the assistance of the [Institute for The Future](#), we came up with “artifacts from the future”, styled all of the materials in a cool, fun retro-future way, and during the course of the month-long program, posted blog posts from the year 2017. We were able to help them think further out.

The program was a huge success, generating a ton of excitement and ideas, and we had a lot of fun running it. In the end, a lot of the ideas ended up being almost perfectly suited for induction into the patent program we were running, so not only did we fire up the organization to think with more of an eye to the future, we built out a lot of interesting new product ideas, many very disruptive. In fact, some of the ideas we came out with back in 2007 ended up in products like Google Glass.

Since then, we've run this exercise several times and I can tell you that we always have great results – even though you ask people to think 10 years out, most of the time the ideas end up in that sweet spot between fantasy and what you can build today, probably about 5 years out, which is great for setting your future strategy.

Fun and useful, what more can you ask for?



IDEATE

What is Product Management? There are many answers to this question. For me, it is the full end-to-end process of developing a profitable new product, from inception to launch and beyond. And the first key step in any kind of product development is IDEATION, tempered by DEEP RESEARCH and DESIGN THINKING with your potential and current customers. What does your customer want? Is it a want or a need, and what are they willing to pay for?

EXECUTE

John Doerr said, “Execution is everything,” and he was right. You can have the best product idea, the most engaged prospects, and a primo business model, but without flawless execution, it’s all for nothing. I’ve repeatedly successfully launched products and projects for major banks, hospitality companies, and tech firms: a single overqualified, experienced product manager who regularly over-delivers is the dividing line between success and failure.

CONTACT

If you need expert product, program, or project management for your product, from ideation to launch and beyond, contact me today:

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