

HEAD TO HEAD: BRAINSTORM FOR BRILLIANT RESULTS

By Claire Sykes

As a retailer, you're always needing answers to questions, some of them pretty challenging. Maybe you need to figure out new ways to attract first-time shoppers, or how to better spend your quarterly budget. So you scribble down thoughts of your own; search the Internet; and ask employees and others for their suggestions, via formal surveys and casual conversations, suggestion boxes or blogs. Sure, you're getting ideas, but you know there are more, and maybe better ones. That's when you need a change in the weather. That's when it's time to brainstorm.

Gather a group of people in one place to toss out ideas, without criticism, aimed at an action plan, and you're brainstorming. It's been around since 1941, when advertising executive Alex Osborn got tired of the constraints of conventional business meetings and decided people needed to "think up," as he put it. Eventually, the process became known as brainstorming.

"If there's an unresolved issue, disagreement over which action to take, or no fresh ideas from anyone, individually, then you want to brainstorm," says Dev Dion, business marketing strategy consultant and principal of Management Tools & Information Services, Inc., based in Boston.

"You can brainstorm alone with productive results, but it won't be as effective as when you have two or more people," says Ginger Johnson, brainstorming consultant and

owner of, Snap! Creative Works Brainstorming, in Ames, Iowa. “Brainstorming together helps everyone steer clear of stale ideas and getting stuck, and look at things in a new light.”

THE PERFECT STORM

A communal thought-swap like brainstorming gives you more than great ideas that prompt great solutions. The process also:

- * **Prods your brain.** Head to head, you hurl out a tempest of fresh ideas.
- * **Encourages quantity.** The dynamic interaction increases the possibilities.
- * **Broadens the view.** Ideas teem with a variety of vantage points.
- * **Stimulates solutions.** Group input leads to answers and opportunities.
- * **Builds team spirit.** Thinking together creates a sense of camaraderie.
- * **Engenders enthusiasm.** Everyone is inspired by each other’s input.
- * **Strengthens morale.** You know your ideas are welcome.
- * **Empowers people.** You feel your contribution will make a difference.
- * **Invites humor.** Throwing ideas around together is just plain fun.
- * **Impacts other areas.** You can apply this creative thinking to anything.

BATTEN DOWN THE HATCHES

For the most effective brainstorming session, come prepared:

* **Know your objective.** Be clear and simple about why you want to brainstorm, so you increase your chances of achieving your goal. “A good session is one where the problem itself, not the problem’s symptoms, are addressed,” says Jay Hamilton-Roth,

owner of Many Good Ideas, a creative marketing consulting firm in Mill Valley, California, USA.

* **Choose your people.** Select a variety of people from different backgrounds and departments, involving everyone from the top ranks on down. “You want a mix of life and occupational experiences,” he continues. Four to ten people is large enough to cull a decent quantity and quality of ideas, and small enough to allow for everyone’s participation.

* **Appoint a facilitator and a recorder.** The former (you, an employee or an outside consultant) leads the group, managing the brainstorming process, maintaining its direction and keeping track of the time. The latter takes notes, only, like a stenographer, so he or she can concentrate on and accurately document people’s words, for future reference.

* **Choose the best environment.** Begin with your attitude: Leave behind any competitive or critical tendencies, and come with an open mind. Select someplace, such as a conference room, coffee shop or company cafeteria—without distractions or interruptions. Or go outside. “You smell, hear and see things that can help you draw different connections,” says Johnson.

* **Send an invitation.** A few days ahead, inform all participants of the session’s date and time, duration (60-90 minutes max) and location. “Tell people the purpose, if you want to give them time to start thinking of ideas,” says Johnson. “But sometimes not knowing beforehand makes people more spontaneous.”

* **Gather the right tools.** Provide a flip pad and marker, overhead projector, whiteboard or chalkboard, so the facilitator can take down the best ideas. Keep paper and

pencils on hand for those who like to jot ideas or doodle while they think. Also, carafes of coffee and tea and plates of cookies can help keep people going.

A GOOD DOWNPOUR

Wherever you meet to brainstorm, sit in a circle, to encourage active and equal participation. Then follow this basic sequence:

1. Introduce the session. Start by telling everyone how valuable they are and why it's important that they contribute. When they know that their opinions matter, they're more likely to share them. Write the session's objective where everyone can see it, so they remain focused on it.

2. State the ground rules. Stress that all ideas are valid and should be respected. So don't squelch, criticize or dismiss them. "Think happy," says Hamilton-Roth. "Support everyone's thoughts and validate them as good. Negativity shuts down not just the person it's directed toward, but anyone in the room because they could be next. It's important to feel free and uninhibited enough, so unusual ideas will come."

3. Go with the flow. "Throw out ideas whenever they arise," says Dion, "or go around the room one person at a time." To get the best ideas, encourage quantity; it fosters quality. And keep in mind that humor is fertile habitat for breeding ideas. Emphasize creativity. No idea is too crazy. Embrace each one to see if there's something innovative in it.

4. Encourage balanced participation. People think and respond at different rates. Some ramble on and others remain silent until their idea is well-formed. Be assertive and, if necessary, interrupt the talkative ones and ask the quiet ones for their

thoughts. If it's clear someone isn't comfortable in a brainstorming session, let the person be. His or her wonderful ideas may surface afterwards.

5. Stay on track. Push your objective's boundaries without straying too far from it. Says Johnson, "If someone's idea shifts the focus, then shift." You never know where that idea may lead. Meanwhile, as facilitator, keep your eyes on the clock and your ears turned toward the group. And be careful not to guide their thinking too much. Announce it when you're session is close to reaching its goal.

CLEAR SKIES

The brainstorming session may be over, but that doesn't mean you're finished.

* **Show appreciation.** "Thank everyone—as a group," says Hamilton-Roth, "because everyone contributed to each person's individual ideas." Send a written thank-you note, versus verbal, one that's heartfelt and personal, and that tells the person how important their contribution was. This way they'll more likely participate in future sessions.

* **Invite suggestions.** Often, ideas can spill over, after the brainstorming session. "That's when people often come up with all kinds of great things," says Johnson. "Sometimes they just need more time to think." Also be open to their comments about their experiences at the session; as well as their praise for and criticism of it, and suggestions for improvement.

* **Write up a plan.** Decide, as a group, your criteria for which ideas are critical and which ones are important, but not critical. Put the remaining ideas on a list for future consideration. Dion suggests, "Write out the ones to act on, how you'll measure them,

who and when you'll implement them, over what timeframe, and what resources you'll rely on." Then send to everyone who brainstormed.

* **Take action.** "The biggest problem with brainstorming is analysis paralysis," says Hamilton-Roth. "Ideas are easy. Doing things about them is hard." Dion offers this: "If you do brainstorming right, people come up with a solution as a team. Because it's a group effort, people feel that they own the solution, which gives them the focus and determination to put it in place."

When you brainstorm with others, you muscle up your mind in a way you may not have otherwise. Just as a thunderstorm unleashes rains that nourish the earth and give new life, the bursts and flashes of an effective brainstorming session leave you drenched with ideas that only nurture the most fertile results. Make the most of those results, and let yourself thrive.

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