

## Ignite Innovation! The Art of Turning Ideas Into Action

**David Saxby**

**T**he terms ‘*creativity*’ and ‘*innovation*’ are often used as *buzzwords* when trying to solve problems. Many of us confuse in the two. ***Creativity*** is the development of ideas, while ***Innovation*** is the implementation of new ideas. The two work hand-in-hand. Creativity is a tool of innovation. The end result — whether they create a new product, service, or process — is to deliver real value to our customers, our company, and to the bottom line.

Early in my life I believed that being creative came naturally only to certain people. I grew up in an environment where creativity was an essential part of life. My father was an architect (now retired), and my mother, to this day, plays piano and is an artist.

Two of my favorite TV shows were *McGuyver* and *Mission Impossible*. It seemed that no matter what situation they got themselves into they could always find an innovative way to get out. My Dad was the *McGuyver* in my life. He didn’t let me quit when I faced a challenge. He would simply ask “*Have you thought about it this way?*” or “*Is there another way you can look at the problem?*” Many years later that I realized that creativity is an acquired or learned skill.

After 30 years owning my own business, 20 of those as a Creative Director and President of my own advertising agency and marketing firm, I know the difference between creativity and innovation. Nothing inspires both creativity and innovation quicker than knowing that at 5:00 pm today there will be a blank page in the newspaper, or 30 seconds of dead air on TV or radio, with your name on it, unless you come up with a creative idea and produce the final ad, on time.

Each of us have great ideas, but we get stuck in the process of taking them from idea, to implementation and ultimately, to results. Here are some strategies that may help spur creativity and assist you in implementing your ideas - getting results quicker and with more ease.

**Five I's of Innovation:** Inspiration, Incubation, Illumination, Invest and Implement

### **Stage 1: Inspiration**

***Faced with a variety of challenges today, how can we stay inspired and how do we inspire others to create results?***

From the first discovery of a problem to a solution our brain naturally goes through a series of stages. The first stage 'Inspiration' is where we discover a challenge or problem and decide to look for solutions.

If we are not inspired we will not perform at our best. To succeed in today's economy we need to fire up that right half of the brain - the artistic, creative, big picture thinking, or inspirational side. We need to put it to work along with the left side – the logical, linear, bottom line side - the one that has ruled the business world so long. In today's business world we should recruit new business leaders from schools of fine arts. The MBA of today should be an MFA - someone who is capable of using both sides of the brain –whole-brain thinking.

Successful businesses are the ones that nurture creativity and provide the investment of time and resources to implement ideas. Creative thinking is admired and (in principle) generally encouraged in organizations. Although interpersonal and organizational changes can help unleash creativity, psychological barriers can arise during each stage of the creative process. These barriers often stem from our own uncertainty – we feel, to some degree, insignificant and/or incompetent. These uncertainties typically distort our creative abilities since they lead us to try to avoid being ignored, humiliated, embarrassed and rejected. Recognizing, and acknowledging, these feelings is the first step toward removing the barriers to creativity, and ultimately, being empowered to generate and implement great ideas.

In the Inspiration stage, avoid judging ideas; and more important, avoid judging your teammates. It's like driving a car; if you

simultaneously put one foot on the gas pedal and the other on the brake you'll go nowhere. If you judge the ideas while generating them you risk killing the ideas. You will have greater success by setting an idea quota and a time limit. Then, quickly generate as many ideas as possible. When you reach your destination (time limit or quantity) put the brake on and review the ideas.

**Focus on Your Passions:** Researchers followed a group of 1,500 people over a period of 20 years. The group was divided in two:

**Group A:** 83 percent, who were embarking on a career chosen for the prospects of 'now' in order to do what they wanted later.

**Group B:** 17 percent, who had chosen their career path to pursue what they wanted to do now and worry about the money later.

At the end of the 20 years, 101 of the 1,500 had become millionaires. All but one - 100 out of 101- were from **Group B**, the group that had chosen to pursue what they loved! **The key to success is loving what you do.** When you love what you are doing getting paid for doing it seems like icing on the cake.

As a speaker I often invite audiences to "look for the catalysts in your life that ignite your creativity and fire up your imagination!" I enjoyed the creative aspect of the advertising business, that was my passion.

## **Stage 2: Incubation**

The second stage is the 'Incubation' period where our brain consciously works on the problem and sends it to our subconscious searching for connections to past experience and knowledge. Scientists have told us we have two sides to our brain and that these two hemispheres of the brain provide two distinctive thinking modes. Though left brain/right brain lateralization is a well-established fact; documented by the "brain-mapping" research of Nobel prize winner Roger Sperry. Most people have an over-simplified view of what this really means. Though separated from each other, the left and right hemispheres of the brain are kept in constant communication and coordination via the *corpus callosum*, a thick cable-like structure containing thousands of information channels. For the sake of simplification when looking to develop innovative solutions to a problem, **think of it this way:** the right hemisphere is for change, the left is for implementation.

More recently neuroscientists have discovered that we have four quadrants and that the brain is like putty, we can mold it by exercising it. Numerous studies of individuals who have suffered severe brain injuries and have trained their brain to re-develop lost skills including; learning to walk or speak prove this concept.

**Avoid the fight or flight syndrome.** This occurs when we find ourselves in fearful or threatening situations. The brain engages in a defensive maneuver and abandons the area of the brain where language, creative thinking and decision making capacities reside (the Neocortex), and reverts to more to the first or primitive brain of which the primary purpose is survival.

If we want to create new ideas, we need to reduce stress and to feed our brain new stimuli so that our brain moves from operating in the primitive (fight or flight mode) to a mode of openness, trust, and receptivity. Stress often causes us to operate at the primitive level because we feel threatened. There are two forms of stress – positive and negative. How we see stress, our perception, will often determine the results we create.

### **Stage 3: Illumination– the big AHA moment!**

**Avoid looking for one right answer.** We are conditioned from the moment we enter primary school to believe that there is only ‘*one right*’ answer, and when we find it we quit. When we are given multiple choice questions, even those questions are *baited* with one right answer. We become ‘*narrow minded*’. For the most part we have a one track mind. As **Charles Shultz, author of “Peanuts”** stated “*Life is like a ten speed bicycle, most of us have gears we never use.*”

‘Creative’ people look for multiple right answers. Multiple solution thinking can help you strengthen your creative muscle. Open your mind to the possibilities, make a commitment to generating multiple ideas and put all your energy into it.

**Give Yourself Some Mental Floss.** Daily flossing breaks mental constipation. Take time to clean out your “*mental plaque*” by flossing

daily. Look for opportunities to learn. Develop a beginners mind – be curious. Take time out to relax – by allowing yourself time to quiet your mind each day, solutions will pop up.

The AHA! will occur much easier if there is some HA! HA! in the process of generating ideas. People underestimate the power of humor. Laughter releases endorphins in our brain that stimulate new thinking. A study on the effects of laughter, conducted by William Fry, M.D., of Stanford University determined that adults laughed an average of 25-45 times a day while children laughed over 300 times a day. There is a reason why children have such vivid imaginations!

**Record your ideas** in a place where you can access them when you get stuck for fresh thinking. When you begin generating ideas capture the ideas as quickly as you can, don't rely on memory to recall the ideas. Earl Nightingale once said, "*Ideas are like slippery fish.*" This means that you must write down your idea immediately to prevent it from getting away. In the advertising business I had file cabinets full of ideas, and I carried a sketch pad around with me. You too can create your own personal 'Tickler file' or 'Brain bank' or you can use a 'journal' to capture your thoughts.

**Take Periodic Naps.** In the early stages of sleep our brain uses more free-wheeling, imaginative Theta waves. These brain wave patterns tend to occur most frequently during the HYPNAGOGIC STATE, a twilight zone bordering on sleep where dreams and reality mix. Meditation can produce the same effect. Edison often rested in a chair with his arms draped over the side, a ball bearing in each hand he would doze off, the ball bearings would drop and awaken him, and he'd jot down any ideas that popped into his head.

I have developed many a creative ad campaign at the wee hours of the morning as I wake, or at night just before I go to sleep. I still keep a pad of paper and a pen by my bed and in my living room just in case. I keep a tape recorder in my car in case an idea pops into my head when I'm 'not' working. You can do this too. Keep a pen and paper near your bed. Just before you fall to sleep, in the Theta Stage, if you get an idea write it down.

**Visualize** – Engaging our visual sense, our most powerful sense, we will be able to more fully picture our results. Visual motor rehearsal is a technique that NASA uses to train astronauts. Muscles react the same way when athletes visualize as when they actually perform the sport. Our mind cannot distinguish between visualization and reality.

Many of us naturally doodle, but we don't give much credit to doodling as a way of creating solutions to problems. Doodling engages both hemispheres of our brain. Techniques like 'Mind mapping', 'Storyboarding' (a process used in the advertising business to create TV commercials) and creating 'Visualization Boards' are great tools for solving a problem. They engage all of your senses in the process.

#### **Stage 4: Implement**

Once you have generated a number of ideas it's time for making decisions for implementation. Remember use Right Brain thinking for change and generating ideas. If you are ready to implement your ideas you need to engage the Left Brain – the analytical, structural, process oriented side of the brain. When you enter the implementation phase don't take the safe approach or the easy approach, look for the ideas that will create the biggest and best results.

One way to stretch your comfort level is to consider becoming a **Disruptive Company**. Southwest Airlines and Westjet did it in the airline industry. Google, YouTube and Twitter have done it in the internet world. Apple has done it several times; first in the computing world, then the music world, and now the telecommunications industry. If you want to make huge leaps and bounds over your competition, look both inside and outside your industry for other points-of-view.

#### **There are three Innovation models that I've shared with clients:**

- **The Integrator:** These are companies like Apple. They do everything in-house and they cross-train their teams so the process is fully integrated from beginning to end.
- **The Orchestrator:** These are the organizations like LiveNation, an event promotion company. They do more than sell tickets to events –they look at every aspect surrounding event promotion.

- They don't necessarily do all the work, they orchestrate it just like the conductor of an orchestra.
- **The Licensor:** This is a company like Microsoft. They create the idea and then farm out the work to contractors.

When I aimed at growing my company again, after surviving the 1983 recession here in Alberta (I had been in business for 5 years), I looked at the market trends, and realized that advertising agencies were in trouble. Agencies traditionally got paid on commissions for media purchases, that covered their overhead, paid for the creative concepts and their profit. At the time Media started to sell directly to clients and cutting the agencies out or drastically reducing their commissions from 15% to as low as three percent. Not a good formula for success. A second trend was that market research firms, ad agencies, PR firms, graphic design houses and desktop publishing companies were all independent operations; there were very few firms that housed all of the services under one roof.

The third trend was that laws governing professional practice marketing had changed that year. For the first time professional practices (legal, financial and medical) were allowed to market themselves with more options than a directory listing.

Our strategy was to create a full-service marketing firm with advertising, PR, graphic design and desktop publishing all in-house. We adopted the model of a law firm or accounting practice (fees for service) rather than the agency model (commission based) and pursued the professional services market becoming the experts in the market. We grew the company from 6 to 20 plus people in less than two years.

I have used the "disruptor" approach for several of the companies we've built over the past 30 years. There are risks and rewards.. As I have often told my clients and audiences "*The only people who like change are babies with wet diapers*". You won't win friends taking this approach, your colleagues will ridicule you, your staff and partners will try to control you and keep you from taking those risks. But, you will have a better chance for success if you take this approach.

To begin implementing your ideas use the SPARK FORMULA<sup>©</sup>;

Ask the questions: **Can I?**

**S** = Substitute or Combine?

**P** = Put to Other Use?

**A** = Adapt? Modify? Add? Magnify?

**R** = Reverse? Rearrange? Reorganize?

**K** = Keep Eliminating or Minimizing?

## Stage 5: Invest

To succeed at innovation we need buy-in from management for the allocation of resources – time, money, and a process for implementing the ideas once they are generated.

- Hire creative people and build a culture for innovation; an environment where ideas are welcomed, assessed fairly and equally, independent of an individual's position in the company or title. If the idea has merit, it is implemented.
- Build a culture where self-respect and mutual respect flourish, and everyone strives to continually increase their self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-esteem. Develop an environment where they can take sensible risks, tolerate ambiguity, celebrate diversity and allow flexibility.
- Train each of your team to be cross-functional so that they can understand and appreciate each others role in the organization. Teach the principles, processes, tools and techniques to generate ideas and then focus on innovation. Have as Jim Collins, author of ***Good to Great*** says set "*Big Hairy Audacious Goals*". Create guidelines and expectations instead of rules. Communicate regularly. Think long term and track short term.
- Lastly, have a little faith...there will be disappointments and failures. That's part of the journey. Look at the lessons learned and apply them to the next opportunity.

Today I am the president of four businesses built from the start up phase. I've learned some lessons the easy way and some the hard way. I have shared these concepts with thousands of people, from entrepreneurs and professionals, to government and executives of Fortune 500 companies.

*“Start by doing what is necessary, then do what is possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible”.* St. Francis of Assisi, the Italian Friar and Founder of the Franciscan Order

Innovation applies to everyone and every business no matter what path you're on. I learned from my father, who had run his own architectural practice from the early 60's until he retired at age 70, that there were few problems that couldn't be solved if you use the right kind of thinking.

Nothing is more risky than not innovating, with the possible exception of confusing innovation with something that fails to create value. No matter how powerfully an idea is, the question must be, in service of what? What value will be created with this new idea—for the customer, the organization, the community, the world?

Find out more about **inspiring Creativity or the Five I's of Innovation** – email us and put **20 Ways to Ignite Your Thinking** in the subject line or sign up for our e-newsletter **“Ignite Ideas”** at: [www.sparkcommunications.com/e-newslettersubscription.html](http://www.sparkcommunications.com/e-newslettersubscription.html)

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