

Look at More Stuff. Think About it Harder.

East African Breweries (EABL) is the subsidiary of Diageo in Kenya, where it is by far the most important player in the local beer market. The challenge facing EABL was not competitive but socio-economic, since most of the population of this country could not afford to buy the product, consuming homemade or illegally brewed beer instead.

EABL's innovation people came up with a groundbreaking solution—cutting costs by eliminating the bottle for one of its brands of beer. At the same time, they convinced the government of the health risks of illegal brewing. As a result, the government drastically reduced the consumption taxes for this specific brand of beer.

And so, Senator Keg was born; “the only beer that does not come in a bottle” (it is only sold in siphon form), with its own tax structure, and distributed through a network of informal establishments that sell beer glasses to consumers. By late 2009, Senator Keg was supplying around 40% of the Kenyan beer market.

Marketing managers continuously search for their own Senator Keg: a groundbreaking product or service, something different that generates tangible benefits for the business and its customers.

Some people claim that the best way to come up with groundbreaking ideas is to have them developed by creative people; but the reality is that creative thinkers are usually not the main work force in big corporations. Also, considering outsourcing the company's innovative thinking does not sound like a viable long-term proposition.

So how do you get “ordinary” company employees to develop new ideas, products, and services? How do you make them innovative?

First, it's important to understand the equation behind innovation: Inspiration + Creativity = Innovation. This means that it is necessary to find sources of inspiration that can be applied in a creative process to produce innovation.

Our innovation theory is based on the search for inspiration in non-traditional sources and contexts, and

applying them to our products and services. You need to look at more stuff and think about it harder: LAMSTAIH. We need to go outside into the world and look further afield, since the your desk is most likely not the most appropriate place to find inspiration.

Once this inspiration has been found, it must be transformed into specific ideas. This involves applying various creative and critical thinking techniques to exploit all the potential that may have remained dormant within the company employees until now. This produces some surprising results.

It may sound a bit pie-in-the-sky to believe that a company's employees will be able to become inspired by non-traditional sources and turned into creative thinkers that produce transformational ideas. However, there are techniques that can obtain very good results from small groups of participants who have the potential to become catalysts for creative thinking in the company.

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Turning the company's workers into sources of innovation requires a constant search for inspiration, which is then transformed into ideas by applying a process of divergence and convergence.

Divergence seeks to gradually “open” participants' minds during the innovation exercise. It usually involves stimuli from non-traditional sources that help participants to start thinking in a different, unstructured way, developing ideas that are not associated (at least in a direct way) with the specific business objective. During the divergence process, participants are not aware why they are being asked to think about certain things. It is difficult to directly associate observations to the development of the “great idea,” which can lead participants to feel uncomfortable

and frustrated. It is at this point that the power of convergence comes into play. Once the divergence activities have been successfully completed, convergence helps to synthesize their observations into concrete ideas.

Many exercises can be applied throughout innovation sessions to help generate those elusive groundbreaking ideas. Exercise selection depends to a significant extent on the type of final product hoped for and the company's innovation objectives.

These are some of the exercises we use to foster innovation:

Inspiration Safaris

This is one of the most commonly used tools in innovation sessions and represents the essence of the search for inspiration from non-traditional sources. It requires participants to leave the office and explore the city in search of inspiration.

We were working recently with a consumer goods company that wanted to develop premium propositions because its category was becoming commoditized. So we sent the employees on an "inspiration safari" to the high-end shopping street Ortega y Gasset (Madrid, Spain), where we asked them to focus on the colors, textures, smells, and packaging that make up the experiences provided by luxury articles.

When they returned, participants discussed their observations and then applied them one by one to their own category, thereby developing potential products that would command more of a premium than the current ones, inspired by their observation of the city's luxury stores.

Human Libraries

The origin of the human library has nothing to do with the world of business. It started out in the Swedish city of Malmö, where a project was underway to eradicate prejudice towards certain groups of individuals. Individuals from these groups volunteered to be a human library—that is, have conversations with strangers in order to change perceptions.

We use a similar approach in our innovation sessions. We bring together a variety of in- and out-of-category experts to encourage our clients to talk to each other and become inspired by those who would not initially be common sources of research.

In Moscow, we worked with a client that sought to develop a range of products more relevant to women. We conducted the "human library" experiment with a female stylist, who shared her vision with the group on what elements comprise femininity, what her clients wanted, the way she interacted with them, and so on.

For another client (US Private Bank), quantitative market research had shown that the bank was failing to be viewed as a real partner by its customers. The bank had hit a wall in terms of what to do to change perceptions, so we planned a session in which its executives interacted with a ballroom dancer, for whom trust in the dancing partner is a fundamental requirement. This conversation shed an entirely new light on the concept of partnership and on how to establish trusted relationships with customers.

Thief and Doctor

This exercise is designed to obtain inspiration from an object outside the category.

One of our clients wanted to develop products targeted at a younger audience. We selected a series of objects from other categories geared to this segment, and asked the client to order them in terms of their perceived success in meeting this audience's needs. That prioritization was the basis for identifying elements of packaging, colors, shapes, flavors, use, price, etc. that made up these offers. These ideas were then "stolen," enhanced, and applied to their own products, thereby developing new proposals better adapted to the new target segment.

The Worst Idea

During a meeting with a leading U.S. toy manufacturer, we were trying to develop new product lines for a famous doll. The company managers were skeptical because they thought they had exhausted all ideas, and consequently the session ground to a halt.

To break the deadlock, we asked ourselves the question: “What would be the worst idea we could possibly have for a new line?” One of the managers answered: “The prostitute doll.” Working from that bad idea, the group realized that it had not yet exploited nighttime as a usage occasion for the doll. That led to the concepts of pajamas, sleepovers at a friend’s house, and so on, and the development of a highly successful new product line. This shows how a bad idea can be transformed into a compelling working proposition and ultimately, a commercial success.

It is important to keep in mind that this philosophy of innovation is based on the search for inspiration from non-traditional sources, observing objects and experiences in greater depth, talking with people, stealing or borrowing ideas from other categories, and turning them into new products and services.

Finally, innovation is about striking the right balance. While there is absolutely a need for process, rigidity is one of its main enemies. For example, it has been shown that some people think best when there are short periods of distraction. Something as simple as alternating work with browsing leisure portals on the Internet can be very inspiring. Given that most corporate settings are not all that inspiring, it is a good idea to take people out of their regular environment from time to time and give them the right space and the right stimuli to inspire them and help them innovate. Creative thinking isn’t dependent on creative people, but it really does need a creative environment. ☺