



## 10 ways to be more creative

As a creative professional I am often asked how I manage to keep coming up with new ideas. The truth is I work hard at it just like any other job. There are, of course, several tricks that I have developed over the last 20 years that make the work go a little faster, run a little smoother and end up being a lot more fun.

### 1) Start with the customer

Create a full profile of who your customers are. You might end up with a small group, say three women and two men. Give them names and faces, fill in their backgrounds. Figure out why each one buys or should buy your products. Ask your marketing department to help with this, they usually have lots of information about your customers' preferences—where they shop, average income, age, etc. The more you know about who your customer is the more likely you are to find ways to motivate them to buy.

### 2) Get everyone on the same page

Identify the three most important points you want to be sure your customers get from every communication your company puts out and make sure that everyone on the project has them handy—ideally taped to their computer. A simple post-it note is really all you need but it never hurts to remind the people with the occasional email, voice mail or meeting. Examples might be: Price, Free shipping, 50 years experience, rated best by leading consumer magazine, all natural, etc. By coming up with the top three you focus on what is most important. This keeps your message consistent and helps to build your brand.

3) Make a purchase from your own catalog. This is a great way to put yourself in your customer's shoes. The simple act of actually choosing an item to buy is one we too often take for granted. Make a list of questions you had. (How does it go together? If it doesn't come in 1/2 sizes do I order up or down?) Place your order three ways—from your order form, online and by phone. It's amazing how many times this exercise will end up with an "Aha!" moment that can eliminate a barrier to ordering. By going through all the steps you are forced to look at things like copy, presentation and ease of shopping with fresh eyes and from a customer's perspective.

4) Go to a store that sells your products and watch customers shop. This is one of my favorites. You can really see what customers are attracted to, what turns them off, what questions they are asking and most importantly who they really are: Younger, older, hipper, sportier, more upscale, less upscale etc. It can be quite an eye opener. Do people handle the fabric and then walk away? Do you hear people saying "I'd like it if it came in a different color"? Are the sales people using an effective technique that you didn't think of? The better you know your customer the more you can tailor your creative focus to their needs.

### 5) Change the scenery

Move your creative meeting off site to a location, away from e-mail, phone calls and other distractions. This can be tremendously effective in getting people out of ruts and giving them the luxury of focusing on being creative. Because creative ideas seem to appear out of the ether we forget to give them the right environment to grow in. The stereotypical "temperamental artist" is actually pretty rare in the commercial world but words like "fun", "free spirit", and "unique" are still pretty accurate. Sitting at the same desk, in the same room, looking at the same four walls is not giving yourself the right tools or environment to come up with fresh new ideas. To think outside the box you need to move outside the box.

### 6) Add new team members

P.O. Box 126  
Charlestown, RI 02813

**401.524.6097**

[www.CatalogDesignStudios.com](http://www.CatalogDesignStudios.com)



Invite new people to your creative sessions. A fresh perspective can make all the difference. Creatives from other areas in the company frequently have unique insights that can spark completely new thinking. Sometimes just being forced to explain where you are and what you are trying to do to another person becomes the starting point for a great idea. Dedicate plenty of time to brainstorming, that's where great ideas are born. It will also take new people extra time to get up to speed. Don't be afraid to let things wander and get a little off track, some of the best ideas come from an off the cuff comment that sets the creative juices flowing. Having fun is part of brainstorming, there are no bad ideas, just ones that you choose not to use.

#### 7) Start a swipe file.

Find magazines, competitor's catalogs, ads and books that you like. You don't want to steal someone else's idea, you want to use their creativity to inspire your own. Look for great copy, eye catching color schemes, and interesting layouts. Remember that you are looking for inspiration, so don't narrow your choices. The inspiration for my company logo came from a 1950s parking lot sign. Why did I pick that as a starting point? I don't know, something just clicked. Pictures are great for creating color schemes. Lets say you're doing an office furniture catalog that needs freshening. You go to your swipe file for inspiration and see that you clipped a review of the book Cape Cod Light by photographer Joel Meyerowitz, since the client loves Cape Cod, and the catalog is coming out in summer it really strikes a chord. You sample the colors in your favorite picture and use them to create a palette.

#### 8) Get everyone involved

Designate a wall, room or open area that everyone can use for spawning creative ideas. Hallways or dedicated work team areas are perfect for this. Make sure there are paper, pens, markers and plenty of pushpins available. Keep ideas fresh and interesting by changing the wall's content regularly. Put the best ideas in an "ideas" file and keep it in a place where the creative team can share them. Don't limit creative input to just the team, everyone has creative ideas and if encouraged will usually share them. Think about giving prizes for the best new ideas so that people have added incentive to participate.

#### 9) Don't stop with the first good idea

Explore more than one solution to a problem and/or give the same problem to more than one team. This keeps people from focusing on one solution. It also keeps the ideas coming so that everyone doesn't stop after one good idea thereby increasing the probability of a great idea. Frequently there will be a hands down winner but pieces of the other solutions will be used to improve the final piece. Time is often the enemy of this approach. Make sure that you have prioritized your projects so that you can spend the most time on the things that really matter.

#### 10) Wander through a bookstore.

If I had to pick a single place to go to find inspiration, get new influences and get the creative juices flowing it would be a bookstore. Try sections that touch and inspire people like culinary, home decor, history, children's books, design and travel. Frequently inspiration comes from out of the blue. Don't rush. Your muse for selling table lamps may be found in a map of Florence. A picture of a room makeover may give you the color scheme for a sale flyer, or a description of warm apple pie may give you just the right copy angle for a pair of slippers. You just never know.

It takes a special mind set to come up with good creative for direct mail. The bottom line is that in direct mail, creative presentations are always selling something and great creative presentations are the ones selling the most. One way to ensure you are keeping presentations fresh and selling as hard as they can is

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to change the way you go about developing creative in the first place—by using one or more of the above approaches. But don't forget, the exercise is not about making your presentations more clever, it's about presenting your product benefits more clearly. The litmus test should always be telling the customer why the product will help them, clearly showing what makes it a good product and making it easy to order. If each presentation accomplishes these three things and is fresh and exciting to boot, your clients and your customers will be thrilled.

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