

IN SERIOUS NEED OF INNOVATION? PLAY SOME GAMES!

The speed of change today is creating a crisis requiring top-notch innovation. Not just the front-end of idea generation, but the back-end of execution as well. To survive, companies today need not just to perform standardized routines but to generate creative, innovative results that will delight customers and colleagues.

The challenge is that “we know what we know,” and “we know what we don’t know.” But, and here is the real opportunity, we “don’t know what we don’t know.” There is a big space of new ideas that are awaiting us, if only we had a way to capture them and turn them into impactful innovations.

The research on this is very compelling. The more ideas you have, the more likely you will have “great” ones. You just don’t know which they are. And often they come at the intersections where they collide and then turn into even bigger ideas.

Where do those big ideas come from?

Most often, ideas seem to bubble up by looking in places where you normally don’t pay much attention. You might pick up a great idea by looking across different industries, not just within the one you know so well. That big idea might be sitting in the unmet needs of a different market segment than the one you currently focus on.

If you are a premium product, what could a mass market audience teach you that could be applied in innovative ways? Or perhaps those ideas are residing in the needs of different buyer groups. Pharmaceutical companies did this well when they started to market directly to consumers who couldn’t buy their products without a doctor’s prescription but who could influence their physician and his/her choice of solutions.

To respond to changing times, we have to “see with new eyes” and force the brain out of its comfort zone.

But the brain hates change. If it is really going to “see, feel and think” in new ways, you need to get it to relax, open up to new ideas, and allow it to “play games.” Not simply playful or silly exercises, but serious play...games that have structure to them and help fool the brain. We call these “Innovation Games®,” designed by Luke Hohmann and modified by us with other games from the cognitive sciences that help you arrive at creativity and innovation.

Why “games?” The human brain is a pattern-making machine. It consistently uses patterns to shortcut, analyze and react to the stimuli of life. We are hard-wired to play games that use those patterns to redesign what we are seeing and feeling. Conversely, games involve a high level of emotion in a safe environment. Emotions help us to “ideate” and free us from our habits, and the randomness of games fools the brain and lets it see things in new ways.

Games help us imagine better solutions.

As the neurosciences have discovered, humans buy with emotions and justify those decisions with logic or reason. Games become a method for feeling in new ways and then organizing our thoughts to understand why. Best of all, games can be played with employees, partners, customers or prospective customers, even the general market.

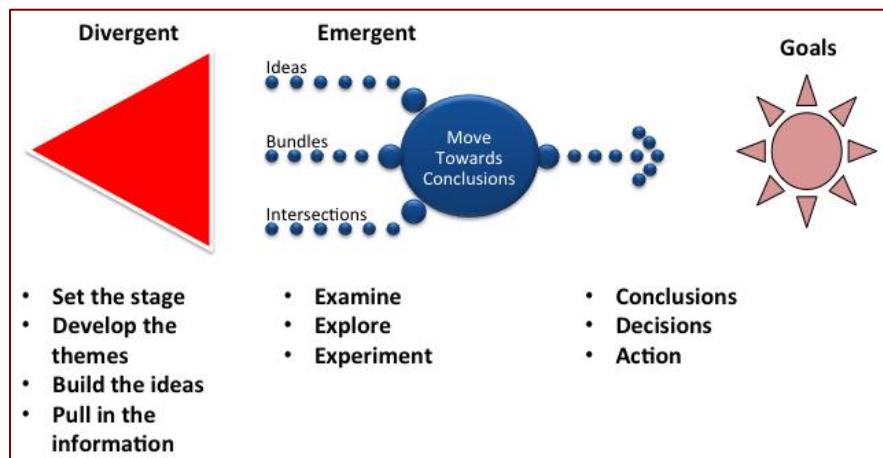
Especially now, organizations and corporate cultures need to create new ways to sustain a process of innovation to respond to rapid changes in business environments. Old management structures—hierarchies, processes and management structures—must sustain the business. But it is new innovative techniques within companies that are becoming essential to create new opportunities.

Let us take you through the process and see how you can get those creative juices flowing so you can design new ways to do your jobs to have better impact and effectiveness.

The Creative Process

To begin, there is a process that the brain has to go through for it to “see with new eyes.” It looks like this:

Divergence



This is the discovery phase. For the brain to see in new ways, it has to stop seeing in the old ways. Through visual exploring and deconstructing what exists today, we can begin to build

a bank of ideas that open our minds up to new ways to solve unmet needs, identify new problems, open new markets and discover new customers.

Divergence is equally valuable as a tool to solve tough internal business problems, process issues and management challenges. The traditional brainstorming sessions, surveys or focus groups just don't produce actionable results as quickly. Far too often, they generate ideas within the space that exists today rather than taking you past that into uncharted waters.

There are a number of games we use for the divergent phase of the creative process. Some of our favorites are "Prune the Product Tree" or "Hot Tub." But the one that we find most productive for clients just beginning the creative process is "Reverse Everything." Very simply, it is way to open up your mind to new ideas by reversing everything you do today, including that which you do very little or not at all.

The example we use is that of a restaurant. First, we listed all the assumptions about a hypothetical restaurant today. Then we said, "Pretend that tomorrow, we don't do any of that. What else could we do?" The ideas come quickly once you stop worrying about how to judge them. And they often come from outside your industry. Then as you link them together, the big ideas begin to emerge.

There is actually a restaurant in Chicago called "Next." You can find it at www.next.com. It has decided that the most valuable thing it has to sell is time. So it doesn't sell you food or liquor, it sells a performance that you buy online. The same performance takes place at different times and you pay a premium price for premium time—the same food and wine, just at a different time. Since you buy your time online and there are no refunds, people buy time and resell it, everywhere from Facebook to Craigslist. A typical evening at Next? \$450 or more.

So back to "Reverse Everything." To begin your creative process, first list all your assumptions about your business today. Then reverse each assumption. Ask yourself how to accomplish each element with new ideas. Because when you reverse your assumptions, you often find new ideas along with new viewpoints.

The key: it's not about changing your mind. It's about finding other possibilities that exist and making choices among more solutions, more variables. Remember, the more ideas you have, the more likely you will have good ones. Maybe even great ones. You just don't know which they are.

Now that you've started to build your idea-bank, you have to take those ideas somewhere. This becomes the bundling, intersections and early stages of prototyping where you

combine ideas into “maybes” and “what-if’s.” The best game for doing this, we have found, is “Build a Better Product Box.” Let’s take a look at Emergence and a sample game.

Emergence

This is where you want to “examine, explore and experiment.” A terrific game for bringing out great ideas and helping you combine and recombine them in new ways is called “Build a Better Product Box.”

You basically take a blank box, a bunch of magazines, scissors, markers and glue. Then you build a box as if it was a new product. On it, you paste images from the magazines and write what you would to make this new product come alive.



This game allows you to take all the ideas from your “Reverse Assumptions” and begin to organize them into a more concrete entity. The exciting part of “Build a Better Product Box” is how it engages all of the participants in building something new. When you “sell” your box back to the group, additional ideas emerge. Most importantly, key themes start to

gel. Team building is amazing. The experience is “Inspiring!”

Here is a picture of people reimagining a healthcare system. You can see the intensity of the group. These were all strangers who came together to better understand how they were dealing with healthcare reform.



And one more: here’s a picture of another client in the special events industry. They wanted to grow their business but the times were changing; they were expanding with new talent and needed to focus on their brand and their culture. Using games, some big ideas emerged from their creative process. Most of all, the process helped them build a team and capture the imagination of their talented staff.



What happens next as emerging ideas turn into converging ones?

Convergence

Convergence is all about turning these news ideas that are bundling together or intersecting in new ways into actionable prototypes. We encourage clients to actually build a sample of their new concepts and then get their customers or prospective customers to

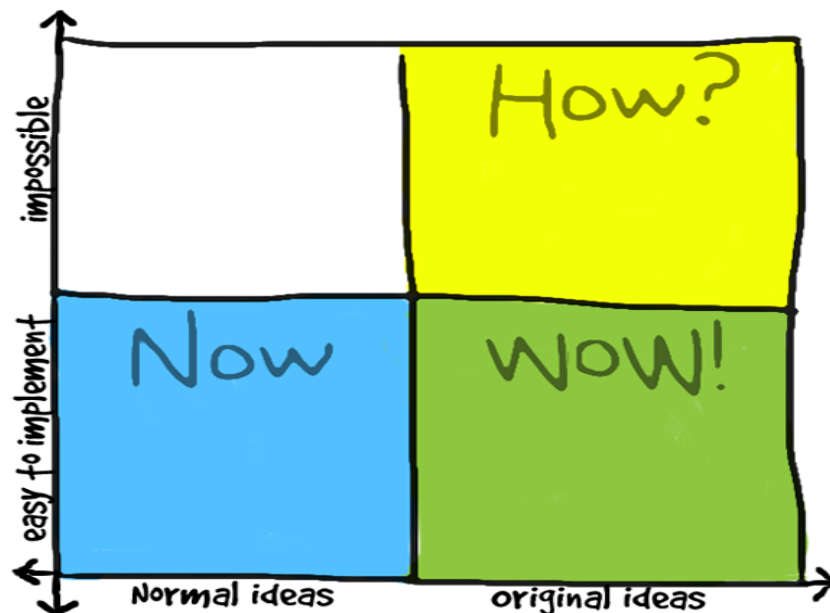
react to it, thereby including them in the creative process. This “audience” can help deconstruct the concept and see it from their perspective.

Some of the games that are excellent engagement tools are:

- “Buy a Feature”: Here we ask participants to take the features of a concept and put values on them. Then we give them play money, but not enough to buy all the elements of the new concept. They have to decide as a group what they will pool together their money to buy, which features matter the most to them as a team.
- “Prune the Product Tree”: We have the players take the elements of the concept and build a tree. What are the roots, the trunk, the branches, and the leaves? What is the fruit? When you watch how they build their tree, you begin to understand their perceptions of the benefits of the features.
- “Now/WOW/How”: This is a wonderfully simple game that helps people understand and prioritize. Played with employees, partners and customers, it forces them to deal with the paradox of choice—so many options they don’t know which to select.

When it comes to convergence, people often end up picking ideas that are most familiar to them. This is called the “Creative Paradox” or “Creadox.” There are a number of games that can help here, but the “Now/WOW/How” works particularly well.

The “Now/WOW/How” matrix is an idea selection tool that breaks the “Creadox” by forcing people to weigh each idea on two parameters: ability to implement (easy to impossible) and quality of the idea (normal versus original). Try it!



Why Do You Need Games?

As the basis of our business, we work with clients that are dealing with the rapid pace of change. They know that the old is not returning but they don't know how to adapt to changing times. In all too many ways, they feel like Columbus on a ship heading for a "Fuzzy Goal" ...not sure whether the course they have plotted is the right one or not.

In today's world, the risks are far greater than before and the wisdom they used to rely upon, those "best practices" that permeated an industry, have only led to commoditization. As Rita Gunter McGrath has written in her latest book, *The End of Competitive Advantage*, the old models for competing within a market space with a long period of market maturation is long gone. And as Blue Ocean® Strategists, we know that the companies who thrive in changing times are the ones that can "see, feel and think" in new ways, open up new market space and become value innovators, not duplicators.

It might sound strange but serious play to do serious work works. Seriously! Give the games a try and let us know how you are turning good ideas into great innovations.