



## Innovation: Using 'Focused Ideation' for Creative Problem Solving

### Creativity in Business Problem Solving

Creativity is an important cultural component for any organization looking to grow and expand. In truly innovative companies, creativity occurs naturally, every day, and is not concentrated within a particular function (e.g., Marketing or R&D) or relegated to certain times of the year (e.g., year-end planning, company offsites, etc.)

Still, there are times when a specific creative session is called for to address certain business issues, including corporate visioning, brand positioning, new product development, or communication planning. During these times, a "focused ideation" can be useful to generate a broad array of benefit-based solutions for addressing distinct business challenges.

### 'Focused Ideation' Defined

A 'focused ideation' can be defined as *a group of people gathering to form ideas around a specified problem.*

Unlike traditional brainstorming sessions, which tend to emphasize creative "output," focused ideation places greater emphasis on the session "inputs" to ensure that the sessions are *focused* on solving specific business issues. After all, "a problem well-defined is a problem half-solved."

### Conducting the Focused Ideation Session

The ideation session typically consists of three parts:

- **Part 1: State the Problem.** This involves putting the problem in succinct terms and providing the background (e.g., customer research, trends, hypotheses, etc.) to provide additional context. This information is usually presented during the initial 60 minutes of the session, to make sure all session attendees are "on the same page," regarding the problem to be solved.
- **Part 2: Set the Problem Aside and Generate Seemingly Irrelevant Material.** Here, the session leader uses a variety of creative exercises designed to *indirectly* solve the problem. Importantly, these exercises should be carefully designed to facilitate idea generation, and on the surface, are not related to the problem just defined. Setting the problem aside (at least temporarily) will help result in "breakthrough" ideas vs. "incremental" ideas that typically emerge when trying to link ideas too closely to the problem definition. Part 2 typically involves two to three hours of creative exercises.

- **Part 3: Relate the Ideas Back to the Problem and Solve It.** The final part involves obtaining closure among session attendees, by involving them in consolidating ideas to address the defined problem. This can involve a prioritization process (e.g., using color-coded dots for voting), or using worksheets that the attendees fill out to summarize their preferred "winning propositions." Since this is the most important part of the session (i.e., determining the potential "answers"), at least one hour should be allocated to it.

Upon completing the session, additional concept development is typically performed by the facilitators to further synthesize and build out the ideas into testable propositions for customer research.

### Who Are the Ideal Session Attendees?

Session output will be maximized based on both the quality of the inputs and the quality of the session attendees (more so than the number of attendees). The following criteria should be considered in determining who should attend:

1. **Expansive thinkers.** Open-minded, creative individuals are key to generating out-of-the-box thinking. Don't invite people who have difficulty developing and expressing ideas, or are apt to say, "We've already tried that before." There will be plenty of time to screen out bad ideas later.
2. **Knowledgeable thinkers.** People with an in-depth understanding of the business or product of focus are good to include; often cross-functional representation infuses the session with varying points-of-view. This is particularly important if the problem being solved would benefit from insight into specific technical aspects (e.g., product characteristics, complex customer requirements, environmental factors, etc.).
3. **People who are comfortable in creative work sessions.** The best sessions will involve an element of brevity, humor and some "play time." Even though the department head may be integral to solving the problem, if he or she is not going to be comfortable in a somewhat loosely-structured creative session, don't send an invitation. Rather, include them in the process when reviewing session output, to obtain input and facilitate buy-in.

For more information on Using 'Focused Ideation' for Creative Problem Solving, please contact [Tim Koelzer](#) at EquiBrand