

What's the Big Idea?

In a tight market where suppliers are dying to produce the next hit, they're asking themselves that very question as they look for inspiration, epiphanies and aha moments.

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Unlike most executives, Mark Faust loves a good recession. Not the kind that nudges small-business owners to scramble a little faster. No, Faust, principal at Echelon Management, a business consultancy based in Cincinnati, loves a roiling, disheartening, terrifying recession. "I love the recession because it rivets businesses' attention," he says. In doing so, it forces small-business owners "back to the priority of innovation."

Faust may be a little unusual in his enthusiasm for an economic lag and the ingenuity it can foster, but he has a point. If nothing else, the recession taught the industry that suppliers can't coast through hard times on existing product lines. It's often through a tighter, more competitive market and innovation (i.e. new products and services) that suppliers find a market advantage.

The tough part for suppliers, however, may not be finding the time to generate new ideas, but finding ways to create an inspired work environment so that every staff member can play an active role in pushing corporate innovation forward. Read on to find out how.

Make the Case for Creativity

Sure, brainstorming sessions are ideal, but many suppliers are too busy to schedule a weekly, monthly or even quarterly brainstorming session. Instead they're looking for ways to infuse creative thinking into their everyday work processes. "I think that to successfully build an innovative culture you need to start at the top," says Faust.

That may be, but saying and doing are two different things.

"Just saying you 'ought' to be creative as a company doesn't really inspire change," says Josh Linkner, CEO and managing partner of Detroit Venture Partners LLC, a venture capital firm based in Detroit. "Business leaders need to make a case, starting with 'why?'"

Perhaps ramping up creativity is necessary because of a more competitive marketplace; maybe the economic hardships of the past few years are demanding that your company become more innovative. Regardless, "the first step is to get buy-in from everybody," Linkner says, "which is easier said than done."

How executives communicate the importance of creativity and innovation throughout an organization will vary from com-



BRAINSTORMING FOR BIG IDEAS

pany to company, but there are recommended practices that typically foster a more creative environment in which employees feel safe to voice their ideas. For example, “rather than punishing mistakes, some companies celebrate them” as opportunities to learn, says Linkner. Businesses should communicate that every staff member, no matter their role (think accountants, machine workers and others) can – and should – be held accountable for new ideas, Linkner says.

Prep the Participants

Sometimes an environment infused with a creative mindset isn't enough. That's when brainstorming sessions can play a key role. Don't expect a staff charged with brainstorming, however, to enter a session cold and come away with brilliant ideas. Yes, that may happen, says Stephen Michael Brown, senior vice president of MSLAtlanta, a public relations firm, but he recommends taking proactive steps ahead of time. A one-page brief detailing talking points, specific topics executives will cover in the meeting and other topics should be handed out at least a day in advance, Brown says.

Once brainstorming participants are actually in the room, have them warm up with a few exercises, Linkner says. He often has clients manipulate Play Doh for 20 minutes or take random pictures from the Internet and ad lib a story about what's going on in the picture. Doing so, he says, not only jumpstarts creative thinking, but also lightens the mood and releases tension so that when members start brainstorming actual product ideas they're more open-minded to what other employees are saying. Like any sporting event, athletes “wouldn't show up to a game five minutes before,” Linkner says. “You get there early, stretch and warm up.” The same thing holds true for “exercising” in a brainstorming session.

Inspiration, experts insist, comes from free-association thinking and an absence of boundaries. Managers automatically create that dynamic when they take the desired project off the table and ask brainstorming participants to create ideas for an entirely different subject. Similar to warming up before a brainstorming session with mind exercises, having staff come up with ideas outside the company's needs will often jumpstart creativity by taking the pressure off the project at hand.

Keep it Narrow, Keep it Brief

“Questions are much more important than answers,” says Todd Ordal, president of Applied Strategy, a business consultancy in

Boulder, Colorado. It seems like an odd statement for someone who advises companies on how to brainstorm successfully, but too often companies assemble workers and lob overwhelmingly large questions at them, he says. “It's like locking a bunch of execs in a room with no process and saying, ‘figure out our strategy.’”

Putting 10 people in a room and saying, “come up with a new product,” is a move that will most likely fail, Ordal adds. Instead, suppliers would be better off, for example, looking at specific industries for which a product could be created, historically which products have been the most popular in a particular industry, and what three changes they could make to one specific product to improve it based on customer comments or complaints.

Split the Group

Invariably, a brainstorming group will have a quiet member too shy to speak up. That's unfortunate if they can have groundbreaking ideas. Often, “the loudest voice wins” during idea generation, Ordal says, but that may not always be the person with the best idea. Besides forbidding criticism, which might encourage silent participants to speak up, it's smart to break a brainstorming group into smaller groups, Ordal says. Overall, brainstorming sessions

work better when they contain no more than a couple of dozen people, but breaking down the whole group into teams of three or four can create intimacy among participants and a less threatening discussion group.

Free Your Mind

Want to come up with new ideas? Experts recommend taking your thinking outside of the box – way outside the box. “Take three organizations unlike your own or your client's and brainstorm from those perspectives,” says Brown. Doing so boosts creativity by eliminating the stress of coming up with an idea that will propel your company to the head of the pack.

Similarly, brainstorming the worst ideas for new products can eliminate inhibitions among team members and create an atmosphere so loose that more creative ideas flow more freely. Finding the best idea for a new product is rarely done in one step.

It's important to realize, Linkner says, that the best ideas are often cobbled together by people in brainstorming groups tossing out a germ of an idea and then building upon it with other comments throughout the room. The idea that creativity is a collective process is crucial to brainstorming success, Linkner adds.

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Quantity Not Quality

Take two different groups within the same company: same number of people, same management level, same directives to brainstorm ideas. One group will invariably come up with better ideas, increase productivity and boost profits, Faust says. Why? One group will generate more ideas. Quantity, more than quality, is key when it comes to idea generation, he says. That's because in a group setting, the more ideas members toss out the more it will spark additional ideas and input from other members. New products or services are rarely the result of one person's ideas, experts say. Rather they're the product of an idea from one person, added to by another, enhanced by a third and so on, with the original idea slowly developing into a marketable product with a specific function and features that outpace competitive products. The whole point of brainstorming is collaboration, of course, so the more ideas and comments a brainstorming group talks about the better, Faust says.

One way to increase the number of ideas, says Linkner, is to play "hot potato" by passing a Nerf football or other object

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from participant to participant. While one member writes, others shout out ideas and then quickly throw the ball to someone else. "More ideas create better ideas," he says.

Query Clients

"I don't know Steve Jobs, but nobody asked for an iPhone. It came out of him seeing something in the environment that he thought he could monetize," says

Ordal, adding that some of the best product ideas come from internal inspiration rather than customer requests.

Still, it doesn't hurt to query clients about product features they love and hate. Regular quarterly queries or even an occasional question when on a sales call should be documented and stored in a company database to boost brainstorming throughout the year, experts say.

Suppliers who don't use brainstorming or other tactics on a regular basis are risking losing ground in the marketplace, says Faust. "They've got to innovate or will die." 

Betsy Cummings is senior writer for Supplier Global Resource.

Taking Protective Measures

Now that you've come up with an amazing product you'll want to protect it. But deciding the best way to do that can be tricky. We talked to a few experts who provided the following tips on when, why and how to patent or trademark a product.

1. Figure out your path. Think your thermos can be patented simply because the handle is different than your competitor's? You might have to reconsider. Patents (which are applied for before a product hits the market) must be "unique, novel and non-obvious," says Jessica R. Friedman, a trademark, publishing and copyright attorney in New York. By that she means a product must be new to the market, offer a practical use and not be something that just anybody could put together.

Trademarks on the other hand, which can be applied for at any time, Friedman says, protect a product's or a company's name (think Coca-Cola).

Whether to apply for a patent or trademark depends on what a supplier is trying to protect.

2. The clock's ticking. Patents, which can take up to two years to apply for and acquire, last for 20 years, while trademarks last forever. That said, patents can be expanded, so to speak, by adding improvement patents over time, says Alec Schibanoff, vice president of marketing for General Patent Corporation, a patent enforcement firm based in Suffern, New York.

3. Don't go it alone. Many small-business owners assume they can file for a patent on their own. In fact, the United States Patent and Trademark Office states on its website that individuals can complete the necessary paperwork themselves. But attempting that on your own (in addition to the daily demands of running a company) can be difficult. There's a great deal of nuance and art to determining which

products and names will be given patents and trademarks, says Maurice Ross, a partner at Barton Barton & Plotkin LLP, an intellectual property law firm in New York.

4. Invest upfront. "Most people are under the illusion that you can spend \$500 to \$2,500 and get a patent that works," Ross says. The reality, he says, is that the cost of obtaining a patent may be more in the neighborhood of \$50,000 or more. But fighting a patent infringement lawsuit can set a company back on average \$4 million, Ross says. Most companies don't want to put in the initial investment to protect themselves, Ross says. But the alternative is much worse, and often inevitable, he insists. "The reality in the year 2011 is that you must, no matter what the business is, lay a proper legal foundation" for developing products, Ross says. "If you don't you might as well be throwing your money out the window."