

Brilliant ideas need work and effort

The German original of this interview was first published in *Planung & Analyse*, issue no. 1/2014.

At the beginning of an innovation or ideation process, there's a fuzzy front end, characterised by qualitative creative techniques. In their interview with *Planung & Analyse*, Heiner Junker and Laura Ostländer of Produkt + Markt explain the essence of successful creative ideas, and which rules need to be followed to generate specific ideas and to find inspiration.

Planung & Analyse: Mr Junker, you have been involved in innovation research for many years now. What is your favourite technique to find ideas?

Heiner Junker: The best method to find ideas is to be open and impartial towards new impressions and new information. An example: Some time ago, I attended a very interesting seminar on creative techniques in market research. A few of the things presented and discussed were new to me while the majority was familiar material that I knew from my own experience. Nevertheless, I was still deeply inspired by the course, and after just two hours of interactive coursework and talking to the coach and fellow participants, I was already able to jot down five new ideas for market research tools and workshop exercises. Even though those ideas weren't even presented in the seminar, they had deeply seeded themselves in my head for some reason. I could just write them down in great detail, almost automatically.

How can you become creative?

Laura Ostländer: Many people know this phenomenon: You ponder a problem for days, looking for a solution, but to no avail. Our head's creative centre – which doesn't even really exist – appears to be totally slow witted.

But then suddenly without warning, there comes our brilliant idea – at the gym, in a meeting, or in the shower. In our mind's eye, the idea seems to be virtually at our fingertips, and we can easily further specify it. A lot of times it is the small things, the experiences and perspectives of other people that allow us to leave our own way of thinking and behaviour behind, that make us question our allegedly perfect solutions.

Is it possible to deliberate reach and control this state?

Junker: The answer is easy, but also uncomfortable, unfortunately. Brilliant ideas need work and effort. The ideation process follows five stages: First, focus and definition of objectives; then preparation - gathering knowledge and information; thirdly, incubation as a sort of ripening process; then comes illumination, the moment when our fuzzy inkling turns into a brilliant idea; and finally, elaboration at stage five, where the idea is put to the test regarding its suitability and feasibility. This is also the moment for refinement and improvement.

That sounds feasible, so why is it so difficult in real life to successfully produce new ideas?

Junker: In most cases, it just isn't enough to have a good idea. That doesn't help the company. Because even if our brilliant idea appears to us like the perfect solution, it won't necessarily wow the decision makers of the company, let alone our customers. The majority of ideation projects run true to the motto "The more the merrier". This means that they produce as many ideas as possible in order to increase their chances of finding a great one. We call this "idea hurling", because this approach does not focus on feasibility, accuracy, or refinement, but rather on creating a wide spectrum of "inspiration points". Unfortunately there are many ideation projects that just fizzle out, because they never get beyond the "idea hurling" stage. This mainly happens because important rules of the idea development process are disobeyed, and the innovation process hasn't been planned out all the way through.

So the problem usually isn't that there aren't enough ideas, but that they aren't further elaborated?

Junker: Exactly. An idea development process is all about overstepping boundaries and breaking the rules. This sounds like fun and anarchy, but this only works if one plans the process systematically. This includes establishing certain boundaries and following the rules of ideation. This may initially seem contradictory to some of our customers: On the one hand, we talk about thinking outside the box and muse about fascinating ideas; but at the same time we get our "rule book" out, talk about the exact limitation of search fields as well as the decoration of the room, and consider the exact number of needed pin boards and flip charts.

From your experience, what are the rules that lead to successful ideas?

Ostländer: These rules have several dimensions. First of all it is important to establish boundaries. Unlike the ideas from approaches without rules, the developed solutions are usually much more refined, if one can focus on precisely described search fields while looking for ideas. Therefore it is important to define the search fields as precisely as possible, and to prioritise them as well. However, there still needs to be enough room to think outside the box.

A search field or field for innovation depicts the focus and scope where ideas are needed for innovation. Search fields should not limit the originality of the ideas, yet they should give a direction or provide a starting point. The search fields may be defined by certain parameters, i.e. target audience, touch points, positioning dimensions, benefit dimension, problem solving, process stages.

Junker: The preparation of the participants is also important to mention. It is crucial to give everyone enough time to delve into the subject. Therefore we give our ideators several days of time to take in the actual problem, and we also assign them specific tasks awhile prior to the workshop.

What does that look like, exactly?

Ostländer: In a project set to develop innovative and convincing service claims and service guarantees for a financial service provider, we asked the ideators to write down their nicest and their most terrible encounters with the bank, the insurance company, the electric company, the gym, etc.. Afterwards the participants were supposed to assume the role of the service provider and to come up with fascinating claims, that guaranteed exclusively positive encounters and believably ruled out the negative. The submitted solutions were already very good and witty. But that wasn't the point for us. For us it was more important that the participants could incubate the problem in their heads, resulting in many starting points for truly fascinating ideas.

In terms of facilitation, what issues need to be considered?

Junker: There are several points. It is important to find ambitious words for every problem. Therefore the objective shouldn't read: "How can we make the QM meetings more attractive for our employees?" Instead, a better option would be: "Which totally new idea can you bring to the table that turns our QM meetings into the ultimate highlight for every employee?" Exaggerations and hyperboles convince everyone involved that we are not looking for the obvious, just average solutions, but rather original, useful, and ultimate ideas. The wording style changes the mindset of all participants right from the start. They are not as easily satisfied with the quality of the ideas and ambitiously work towards their further development.

Ostländer: Additionally, it is important to rephrase questions and to change perspectives. Another example: A problem like “what’s $8/2$?” implies that there is exactly one solution. The answer would most likely be a spontaneous “4!”. In order to receive more than just one answer, one needs to change the perspective. Alternative questions all may lead to very diverse results, for example: “What is one half of 8?”, “Find all possibilities to illustrate eight divided by 2 or one half of eight!”, or “Which unusual and surprising ideas do you have for dividing your eights each into two parts?” Some of those answers might be “8 halves”, “16 quarters”, “half eight” or “19:30 h”. Visual people might even draw an eight cut in half.

Junker: Changes of perspective are necessary every time the flow of ideas stagnates. Skillfully changing the wording of the problem is hugely helpful at that. For all wordings it is important to focus on the search fields and to cover them generously.

So which creative techniques in particular are suitable for that?

Junker: When it comes to creative techniques, less is more, because the techniques are the jingles of creativity. They show shortcuts and new paths to diverse, useful, and original ideas. It is not necessary to use as many techniques as possible; it is more about using rather few techniques, yet to know those well. A poised and confident appearance of the facilitator is crucial as well.

It is not possible to make a general statement on the respective effectiveness of creative techniques. The choice of the appropriate technique depends for example on the respective stage of the creative process and is ultimately also a matter of the facilitator’s preferences.

Your own toolbox should at least include the following: i.e. brainstorming or brain writing to throw or hurl around ideas, bisociation to provoke new perspectives and original associations, i.e. 6 W+H-questions for specification and feasibility, and something like problem analyses or a priority matrix for the organisation and prioritisation of ideas. With a toolbox like that you are well-equipped for successful ideation.

Is ideation still market research?

Ostländer: Ideation processes focus less on the process but rather on results. That means the spotlight is on the new ideas and drafts and not so much the way they were developed.

Nevertheless, we always see that creative techniques are also very well suitable to obtain insights. In our workshops, the participants work intuitively, recombine elements, associate and construct ideas based on verbal or visual stimuli, and simultaneously provide us with insights into their hidden desires and motives. Behind every creative idea there are inspiring insights into the wants of the consumer. Therefore it is

necessary to strictly check even the least feasible and oddest ideas for possible inspiration.

Heiner Junker and Laura Ostländer, thank you very much for the interview!

The Authors



Heiner Junker has been Managing Partner at Produkt + Markt since 2005. In his work he focuses on Insights and Innovation Research.

hjunker@produktundmarkt.de



Laura Ostländer is a psychologist. She joined Produkt + Markt in February 2012 and works as a junior research consultant in the department of Customer and Service Research.

lostlaender@produktundmarkt.de