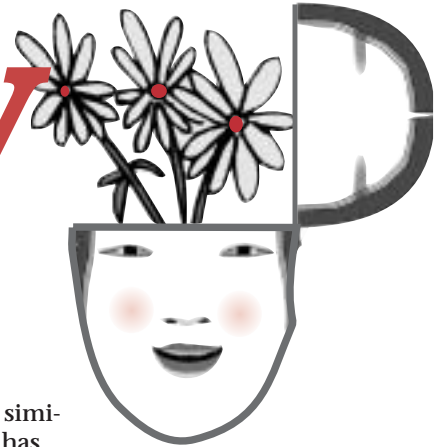


Stay



by Michael Collie

Problem: You need a compelling book title and cover design. And you need it tomorrow. The concepts so far are labored, dull and uninspiring. You have that empty-headed, where-do-I-start feeling.

The brain is not naturally a great creative tool. We subconsciously classify new information according to past experience. This enables us to rapidly process huge amounts of information. We can find our shoes and put them on without having to “think” about it. However, it also limits us.

To think outside well worn thought-paths, we need to trick ourselves into ignoring the rules which govern our thinking. We must leave familiar ways behind. Our brain tells us ‘how it is’ and ‘how it always has been’ not ‘how it could be’. So, can we think ‘fresh’? What can you do when the creative well runs dry?

Say it again

Describe the problem in different words. In how many different ways can you express the core issue or dilemma? Write them down. You now have new points of departure and new ways of looking at the problem. Pursue each in turn.

Smell it again

Discover non-verbal ways of expressing the task. Describe the problem without words. No talking. Draw it. Act it out. Mold it in clay. Leave your comfortable, analytical territory behind and play. Immerse yourself in the task. Ask your children to help you.

Turn it upside-down

We had been toying with concepts for a new logo for years. One day a colleague standing beside my desk rotated my latest crop of sketches 90 degrees so she could see them. At last, I saw it! There it was: our new logo. Sometimes we simply need to see something from a different angle.

Swap brains

See the issue from someone else’s point of view. Look at the problem through the eyes of an alien. How would a child describe the task? How would a potential reader describe the book?

Change planets

Who else has faced a similar challenge? Who else has solved a similar problem? What can we learn from them? How can we apply their experience to our challenge? The inventors of the roll-on deodorant looked at the ballpoint pen and applied the same principle to deodorant. They visited another planet where a liquid had to be spread thinly across a surface.

First ask: “What are we trying to do?” Isolate and summarize the task in the simplest way possible. Then, investigate where else this issue has been encountered—in other industries, in childhood, in medicine, in nature.

Velcro™ was invented in 1941 by George de Mestral while hunting in the Jura Mountains, France. He inspected the burrs caught in his woollen clothing and noticed the hundreds of little hooks engaging loops in the fabric.

Work backwards

Close your eyes. Imagine a reader enthusiastically recommending the published book to a friend. Imagine this reader being greatly blessed by reading the book. Imagine the book has become your best-selling title. Imagine the positive reviews. Imagine the satisfaction of the author lifting the finished product from a retail display.

Imagine seeing the book for the first time; hot off the press. Now, quickly, before the image fades... What does it look like? What is the dominant color? What is the most obvious emotion delivered by the cover? Is there a powerful image? Or a forceful title?

Break the rules

Assemble all the accepted wisdom and assumptions about the issue at hand. Play around with each rule. Try exaggerating, opposing, reducing and reversing as many of the existing assumptions as you can.

The potato “chip” (or, “crisp”) was invented in 1853 by George Crum, a New York chef. Angered by complaints about his thick, under-cooked fried pota-

Fresh

toes, he sliced his potatoes as thin as he could and deliberately over-fried them. The guests were delighted and asked for more!

Make random connections

Select an object or idea that has nothing to do with your creative challenge—then force a connection. The less association the item has with the task, the better. The random nature of the stimulus creates surprise and freshness. It forces us to think in new ways.

The secret is to suspend judgement so that ridiculous ideas can be explored and nurtured. This can be difficult to do. It requires practice. As Albert Einstein said, “If, at first, an idea is not absurd, then there is no hope for it.”

Use rubbish

I constantly scandalize my friends and colleagues by picking up scraps of torn magazines or mutilated packaging in the street. However, back in the office this debris is displayed or filed as a stimulating reference. A pleasing combination of colors, an item removed from its context, an unintended clash of images—they are a kaleidoscope of inspiration.

Sell your book

Sell it as if your life depended on it! Imagine that your only source of income for the foreseeable future will be generated by selling the book door-to-door to complete strangers. You have a few seconds to win each potential customer. A door opens. What urgent words will you use? What need will this book meet?

Work harder

It is easy to underestimate the energy and effort required to create a successful book cover. Once a book has been printed and is selling well, it is easy to forget the research, consultation and creative energy that contributed to its success.

Are you sufficiently committed and persistent to go beyond the first acceptable solution? Too often, it is easy to settle for the first acceptable solution to a problem. Make sure that you have at least three solutions before you choose one. Push for more. A superb idea

has to be superbly executed. How much farther can you go?

Stop work

‘Sleep on it,’ my father used to say when I was perplexed by a difficult problem. He was often right.

Reduce the options

Try limiting your resources. For example, limit yourself to a single neutral typeface, like Arial. Work in black and white. Now, concentrate on the idea.

Turn off the computer

A computer is not always the best tool for pushing and nurturing concepts. With a pencil and paper you can generate a rapid succession of ideas. Sketch fast and loose. Watch the idea evolve.

Change your routine

Most of us do the same things every day. We take the same route to work, read the same newspaper, listen to the same radio station, spend time with people just like us. Day by day, our groove becomes deeper and more comfortable—yet we still expect to be able to come up with something new. Something different. Something that we have never thought of before.

The quality and uniqueness of our ideas depends on the quality and uniqueness of our stimuli; what we observe and experience. Staying fresh means exposing ourselves to new thinking and perspectives that will provoke new connections and ideas.

Organize new experiences for yourself and your team. Cultivate curiosity about the world and plan it into your everyday life. How? Spend time with people with different backgrounds and occupations. Take a walk in a park or plaza at lunchtime. Occasionally take an alternative form of transport to work. Deliberately seek magazines and newspapers that you wouldn't normally read. Live fresh, think fresh. Be open to being surprised. ♦

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