

Three Steps to Getting Better Ideas

By Brian Jud

Did you ever try to solve a jig-saw puzzle? It's simple, right? The picture on the cover of the box shows you how the completed puzzle should look, so all you must do is organize and connect all the pieces. Now think of your publishing journey as the puzzle. You have your vision of the end result, but you have to create the pieces to complete it.

One way to come up with the "pieces" is through brainstorming, a group discussion in search of an answer to a specific question or problem. The facilitator begins a brainstorming session by gathering people, posing the question to be addressed and explaining the rules (quantity vs. quality of ideas initially, defer judgement, freewheeling, and hitchhiking). At the end of the idea-generating phase, teammates eliminate those suggestions that are currently untenable, and choose the best ones to put into action.

But what if the brainstorming meeting focused on the wrong question? The result would be a number of ideas – many of them excellent – that may not solve the real problem.

The solution is to conduct two critical (and often overlooked) steps prior to brainstorming. The first is to frame the real issue, and the second is to allow downtime for ideas percolate to the surface. Only then will step three – finding the right solution -- be most effective.

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Step One: Framing the problem to be solved.

What did Renaissance kings do to break out of the groupthink environment their "yes-men" advisors created? They asked a "fool." It was the fool's job to reframe any proposal under discussion to make it appear in a fresh light and reverse the common perception of a situation. Example: "If a man is sitting backwards on a horse, why do we assume that it's the man who is backwards and not the horse?" Result: he dislodged people's assumptions and allowed them to see things from a different perspective.

"So what?" you say. What does this have to do with solving a book-marketing problem? Here is an example. Let's say your book is about the history of ice cream, and you are trying to get an ice-cream-store manager to host your book signing. The manager wants to sell more ice cream, so you could persuade that person with this idea: Instead of promoting your event with, "buy an ice cream cone and get a discount on my book," turn it around. "Buy my book and get a free ice cream cone." People like to get things for free, so the store manager could sell more ice cream (which you pay for out of your earnings).

This brainstorming process is successful only if it leads to the solution of the proper question. Therefore, Step One is not the pursuit of answers, it is a quest for questions – a search for the definition of the real problem. For example, what if sales of Title A are trending down? A group might form to find ways to reverse that slide. The leader may prompt the session by asking, "How can we increase sales of Title A?" The participants will contribute ideas in rapid succession: "Conduct an email blast. Have the author perform on more TV and radio shows. Post more on Facebook. Get more reviews. Do additional book signings." And the comments continue coming until the well of ideas is exhausted.

But what if these are answers to the wrong question? Might a different range of more impactful answers be generated if other questions were asked first? Here are several provocative questions that could lead to a more strategic discussion, and stimulate a much different list of responses: “Why are sales of Title A down? Is it properly priced? Who are the target readers? Is that the correct definition? Is current promotion directed to the proper audience? With the right appeal? Where do they shop? Do they prefer ebooks instead of the current printed book? Who else could use the information in the book? Could it be sold as a premium to buyers in corporations, associations, schools or the military? Could it be sold through non-bookstore retailers (gift shops, airport stores, supermarkets, discount stores)? Is the content of Title A seasonal? Should Title A be retired to backlist status? Should we focus on increasing revenue or profits of Title A instead of unit sales?

This approach to a forced-innovation session can re-direct the ensuing rush of ideas in a more strategic direction. Limit the input for Step One by allowing people to contribute only questions. This singular focus suspends the automatic desire to provide an answer, and ultimately helps expand the problem space for deeper exploration.

Step Two: Incubation.

The ancient Greek scholar Archimedes was charged with proving that a crown presented to the king was not solid gold, as the goldsmith claimed. The solution eluded him until he stepped into the bathtub, and his body weight caused some water to spill over the sides. At that moment he had his method for proving the crown was fake, by measuring its volume based on its buoyancy.

This story demonstrates that deliberate contemplation can form borders and constraints that block potential ideas from surfacing (officially called “cognitive inhibition”). Self-limiting beliefs (“Books can only be sold through physical bookstores and Amazon.com.”) or biases (“I could never call a prospective corporate buyer.”) create the “box” that forms a barrier to creativity. On the other hand, hunches, instincts, feelings and/or premonitions occur when least expected, and can lead to unintended solutions. Being relaxed, sometimes distracted, helps innovation. The harder you force yourself to have an idea, the harder it is to get one.

Put your brain in neutral (or park) instead of accelerating through the thought process. Take some time away from the dilemma to allow your submerged ideas to percolate through, around, over or under the barriers. You may get your best ideas while driving, meditating, running, swimming or showering. If so, take a drive, meditate, go for a run or swim, or take more showers to release additional ideas. It’s important to keep that in mind (so to speak).

Step Three: Manipulation.

Do you remember the old hand water pumps? Try as you might, no water will flow until the pump is primed. Steps One and Two serve that purpose. Now, as people congregate to brainstorm, they are primed with information to start and increase the flow of ideas. The session is more likely to be strategic and on target to solve the correct problem. You can now spend time manipulating the contributions people make, and the resulting actions are more likely to solve the real, underlying issues. As Louis Pasteur famously said, “Chance favors the prepared mind.”

Look back at all the questions posed throughout this article. Did they get you more involved, make you think and keep you reading? This three-step technique is more likely than traditional one-step

brainstorming to generate specific, targeted ideas. But getting the right pieces for your book-marketing puzzle is not the end result. In fact, it only the beginning of the next phase. Now you must put them together.

Brian Jud is the Executive Director of the Association of Publishers for Special Sales (APSS – www.bookapss.org), and the administrator of Book Selling University (www.booksellinguniversity.com) Contact Brian at brianjud@bookmarketing.com or www.premiumbookcompany.com