



INVENTING **BIG IDEAS**



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INTRODUCTION

This book outlines a new thinking model for inventing big ideas on-demand. It is intended as a practical guide for small and mid-size companies who want to use big ideas to build their businesses.

Research has consistently shown that 80% of companies know that big ideas are critical to success, yet only 4% think they know how to do it ([Big Ideas](#), Jonne Ceserani). Big companies have all kinds of resources (staff, money, R & D labs, etc.) to continually provide fresh ideas for implementation. At smaller firms, the responsibility falls directly on the shoulders of the CEO and the senior management team who have fewer resources at their command.

Thinking of big ideas is the highest value activity you can engage in to keep your company alive. Managers of small and mid-size firms need to do this at least once a year or their companies will fall behind and eventually fail.

Because of today's intense competition, big ideas are no longer optional. They are a critical business need. No longer is it acceptable to just adapt to change. Today it is imperative to create change because the bar to success keeps getting higher.

Until now, generating a big idea was seen as random. There never seemed to be a way to plan for it because when a big idea did pop up, it seemed

so accidental. Not anymore. The understanding of ideation thinking has advanced significantly over the last several years — and today, big ideas can be generated on-demand.

This book spells out a new 10-step thinking model by which big ideas can be generated and implemented. It's not easy. You have to think. A lot. It is very much as Thomas Edison described in 1929 — 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.

The model recommended in this book is a unique team approach that involves a professional ideator working in collaboration with your best people to invent and develop a big idea in less than 90 days.

HOW TO GET NEW IDEAS

There are many ways to get new ideas.

Some companies have suggestion boxes or a formal system of employee feedback. Others hire training consultants to transform their companies into perpetual creative machines. Some hire big-name business gurus to give them ideas. Many invest heavily in market research with the hope of tapping into a trend that can translate into a big idea.

The stark reality is, however, that most mid-size firms do none of the above due to lack of time, money or an understanding of how to get started.

What's a manager to do?

Well, there is an easy, affordable solution.

First, you need to be committed to the notion of change and its value. If you're not, wait until you are.

Second, you need to understand some of the principles and techniques of the ideation process. The first principle, as spelled out in James Young's book, [A Technique for Producing Ideas](#), is that a new idea is simply a new combination of old elements. The second principle is, the better you understand how things relate, the better you will be at putting new combinations together.

Third, it helps to use a thinking model based on the latest ideation science.

The model we have developed and have used successfully (see illustration "10-Step Ideation Thinking Model", p. 13) covers four stages involving ten steps:

Stages of the Ideation Process	
(see p.13 for reference)	
Stage I	Preparation (steps 1, 2)
Stage II	Idea Generation (steps 3 - 7)
Stage III	Evaluation (step 8)
Stage IV	Selling and Implementation (steps 9, 10)

ELEMENTS OF THE IDEATION

THINKING MODEL

Step 1: Problem/Opportunity Brief

Einstein once commented that understanding a problem is as important as the solution.

This also holds true when trying to invent a big idea. You can't develop a relevant idea unless you clearly understand the context of the problems, opportunities, or scenarios a company or organization faces. The ideation process needs to have a clear focus to succeed.

To get the project started, you need to interview the key company employees to find out what problems or opportunities exist. The interviewing team should involve at least two of the people who will be participating in the ideation session.

The right questions need to be asked. There are no dumb questions. Jonas Salk thought the answer to any problem pre-exists — you just need to ask the right question to reveal the answer.

Use the Problem/Opportunity Worksheet (p.14) as a guide to some of the questions that need to be answered.

Once you have gathered and summarized the background notes, designate a person as pub-

lisher who will write an ideation brief and circulate it amongst the people who will be attending the ideation session. Ask for comments and suggestions and then the publisher will incorporate any changes and issue a final brief.

The brief should be like an Executive Summary — no more than 2 - 3 pages long. If it is felt that more information is needed, put it in a fact-pack and distribute it along with the summary ideation brief.



“When you ask a dumb question, you get a smart answer.”
— Aristotle

Step 2: Preparation for Ideation

Session

Preparing for an ideation session is a little like preparing for an exam. This step should not be taken casually. This step is one of the ways that an ideation session is different from a brainstorming session — you can't just show up. You need to get a running start.

The first step is to study (not just read) the ideation brief. If you have any strategic questions about the brief, contact the publisher who issued the brief and get the answers. You can't ask too

many questions.

It is important to have a clear understanding of the problems and opportunities facing your company. It is recommended that you read the brief 2 - 3 times (at different times) to sharpen your focus and perspective on the thinking and creative task at hand.

The next step involves investigation and research. The Session Preparation Worksheet (p.15) walks you through this step.

Check out all the appropriate Web sites — particularly the competition. Talk to experts in the industry. Read up on the subject to increase your general knowledge and understanding of emerging trends. Google the subject and read as much as you can. Review all the appropriate blogs to ensure that the traditional online media hasn't missed a sleeper-trend.

At this point you should feel comfortable that you have a good understanding of what type of ideas might or might not be relevant to the task at hand. If the task involves a product make sure you observe customer usage.

Three days before the session you should start ideating on your own. To warm up your brain, try some mental “stretching.” In fact, some scientists at the University of Washington suggest listening to light classical music — Mozart's “Sonata for Two Pianos in D Major” in particular — as a way to warmup.

Carry a small notebook to capture all your ideas.

Then let the ideas gestate — develop in your subconscious. Upgrade these ideas as you go along in your notebook.

For a good warm-up try to generate 15 ideas during the 72 hours prior to the session. Stretching your mind like this is similar to stretching before you exercise or take a long run.

If you follow all the suggestions in this phase you will be more than ready for the fun part — the ideation session.

Step 3: Ideation Session — 100 Ideas

The purpose of the ideation session is to generate 100+ good ideas that are relevant to the ideation brief. The session should run 60 - 90 minutes depending on the productivity of the group. If the group is on a roll, let it run.

Sessions often start off slow and build up steam as more and more ideas start popping up.

A typical group will consist of 8 - 10 people. It should include a professional ideator and appropriate management personnel. The room should be well lit (sunshine is the best) and comfortable for the group. People don't ideate well in a cramped, dingy space.

The room should have a whiteboard (or flipchart) and lots of wall space for Post-it notes. In addition to the ideators, the group should include one or two support personnel: one to place/organize the notes on the walls or write on the whiteboard, and one (with a laptop) to record the ideas in full sentences so as not to lose the essence of the thoughts.

Ideation Session Tips:

- The group should be facilitated, not managed.
- At this stage in the process all ideas are good ideas. Show respect for everyone's ideas. Think "yes" (it's possible) to every idea. Avoid using negative words or body language during the ideation session.
- Don't interrupt fellow ideators. If you think of a great idea put it on your Ideation Session Worksheet (p.16) and wait your turn.
- At mid-point in the session the facilitator should check with the group to see if a 5 - 10 minute break is in order.
- Towards the end of the session, change mental gears and review the ideas generated. See how you can plus-up some of the ideas. Big ideas almost never come out complete the first time. Many times they include a combination of smaller ideas.
- If you are not on track to reach 100+ ideas in one 90-minute session, adjourn and schedule another session to complete the task.

To the extent possible, the ideas should be grouped by functional area or similar solutions. Grouping is important because patterns may emerge that will lead to other ideas. Ideas are often springboards to other ideas. And if everyone came prepared (with ideas) you should be able to easily capture 100 ideas in 90 minutes.

Step 4: Organization and Incubation

After the ideation session, all the ideas should be organized by functional area and typed into an Ideation Workbook (p.17) by the designated publisher. For example, all the marketing ideas should be grouped on the marketing page, and all the new service ideas put on the new services page, etc.

The first draft of the Ideation Workbook (version 1.0) should be sent to all who participated in the ideation session for review and incubation.

During the first review period, individual ideators should make corrections and amplify ideas. According to Joey Reiman — if there is no shape to an idea, there is no substance. New ideas should also be listed if they pop-up.

Ideators then take a break from the process and let the ideas incubate in their subconscious. This is where a lot of the action takes place unbeknownst to us. Everyone has experienced the power of the subconscious. If you ever wondered why you seem to have a lot of ideas when you are sleeping or in the morning when you are shaving

or taking a shower, it's your subconscious at work. It seems like magic but it's actually the power of incubation — one of the most powerful, yet least understood, components of the ideation thinking model.

When and where does the power of the incubation cycle express itself? Here is a partial list:

- showering or shaving
- commuting to work
- during a boring meeting
- while reading
- while exercising
- in church
- in the middle of the night

The trick to harnessing the power of incubation is to capture, as soon as possible, these new ideas, fragments or insights, in your ideation session workbook.

The next step at this stage is to review once again the entire contents of your copy of the Ideation Workbook and amend it as your thinking and incubation evolves.

Then submit your updated workbook back to the publisher who is responsible for publishing the master workbook in preparation for the ideation upgrade session. The publisher will then take the new notes from the 8 - 10 ideators and send

version 2.0 of the workbook back to all the ideators for their review at least one week before the start of Step 5: Idea Upgrade Session.



“Empires of the future will be the empires of the mind.”

— Sir Winston Churchill

Step 5: Idea Upgrade Session

After version 2.0 of the Ideation Workbook has been published and reviewed, it’s time for all the ideators to meet again for another 60 - 90 minute session to focus on upgrading all the ideas. Big ideas don’t always pop-up in finished form, so it’s important to think hard (collectively) about how each of the ideas can be improved, completed, or combined with another idea.

This might seem like overkill, but experience has proven that some of the seemingly worst ideas can sparkle when painted with a different brush. This phase requires heavy doses of concentration, creativity and determination. We’ve provided an Upgrade Session Worksheet (p.18) to help keep your thoughts organized.

Some of the upgrades will come easily — others will seem impossible. But remember the motto of a good ideator is “no idea is impossible.” However, from a practical matter, move on with the easy ones first and come back to the harder ones

later — after your mind has warmed up. You will be surprised when you address these ideas for a second time how much easier it can get.

After every idea has been upgraded or combined, you should end up with 65 - 75 good ideas on your master list. At this point the publisher of the Ideation Workbook should summarize the results of the upgrade session and send a draft of version 3.0 to every ideator for any revisions or edits in preparation for Step 6: Prioritization.

Idea Upgrade Tips:

- Make sure the ideas as stated in the workbook are correctly written. Sometimes you will need to edit an idea description before you can upgrade it.
- If you get stuck, consider changing your thinking mode. The idea is not stuck — you are. For example, you might want to change your thought process from rational to absurd, or safe to speculative. There are many different thinking strategies. But decide it as a group so you can harness the power of the group.
- Look for ways to combine weak ideas to create strong ones. Then upgrade those ideas. Then try to upgrade those ideas once again.
- As you are going through the upgrade session, take the time to revise the idea descriptions if needed, so as not to lose the essence of the idea. Great writing can add power to an idea — it might even trigger additional upgrades.

Step 6: Good Ideas (Prioritization)

The prioritization step has two phases, both very left-brain oriented — but still, use your right brain and trust your intuition. During the first phase, the ideators study version 3.0 of the Ideation Workbook and individually rank every idea from 1 to 10, 10 being the best.

Two days later, review it one more time and amend it if necessary and return it to the publisher who will compile version 4.0 — based on the individual judgments of all the ideators.

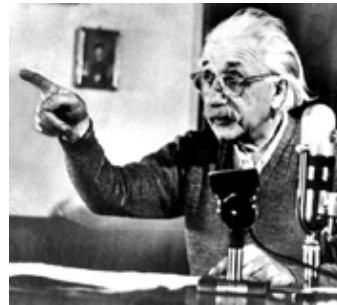
The new workbook (4.0) will then have two ranking systems, again based on the 1 to 10 scale. The first cut will be by functional area. For example, the top “new products” ideas will be ranked as a group.

The second cut — a total listing of all the ideas — is based on their numerical averages. For example, any idea that has been ranked “10” by all the ideators will top the list.

The second phase of the prioritization step involves the group getting together to collectively review the new master list (version 4.0) for the purpose of making any changes to the ideas that rank in the top 15. Focusing on a smaller list will allow for any new upgrades or further clarifications on the top ideas. These can be consolidated on the Top 15 Idea List Worksheet (p.19) provided.

On this list (the top 15) there should be at least 3-4 big ideas.

After the prioritization session, the publisher issues a revised workbook (version 5.0) to all the ideators in preparation for Step 7: Big Ideas.



“Imagination is more important than knowledge.”
— Albert Einstein

Step 7: BIG IDEAS

The purpose of this step is to select the best three ideas.

You started with 0, went to 100, narrowed it down to 75, then down to 15. Now the task is to narrow down to the top three.

The first task is to individually review version 5.0 of the Ideation Workbook to see how you feel about the rank order of the 15 best ideas as determined in Step 6.

If you had to bet the ranch, which two or three would you pick? Use your own judgment. They don’t have to be the top three on the list — they just have to be on the list.

Using the Step 7 Concept Worksheet (p.20), describe your favorite ideas both visually and in words. Make the ideas come to life. Give them a personality if it helps complete the picture. Remember the word “idea” comes from the Greek verb idein or “to see.” A big idea is seeing something a different way. Do this for your top 2 - 3 ideas and forward your concept worksheets to the publisher. If there are 8 ideators in the group then there should be 20 - 24 concept sheets. By this time, three ideas with great potential should surface. Eureka!

The publisher will pick the three with the most submitted concept worksheets and will forward workbook version 6.0 to each of the ideators for preparation of the group meeting to vet the top three big ideas.

At the meeting, the three ideas should be carefully studied.

The different visual expressions and copy for each big idea should be reviewed. The discussion at this meeting should be robust about why the idea is good or not so good. When something not so good comes up — solve the problem or adapt the idea to eliminate the problem.

After about 20 minutes focused on each idea the discussion should shift to ranking the three ideas in order of potential.

The last phase in this step is to appoint one of the ideators as champion for each of the three ideas.

With the help of the publisher, each champion is responsible for doing a final visual concept and copy for that idea. The purpose of this task is to come up with the best image/copy to show why the idea is truly a big idea. The publisher will take the final three revised concepts and issue Ideation Workbook version 7.0 in preparation for Step 8: Evaluation.

Step 8: Analysis, Research, Evaluation

You now have three big ideas. It should be very clear what the ideas are and what they can do. The ideas at this stage are still somewhat intangible. You now need to do some analysis, research and evaluation. It's time to do a reality check. Using the Step 8 Evaluation Worksheet (p.21), start answering (to the extent that you can) questions about the risks, the costs, and the payback.

If it were your money, what additional questions would you ask? Is there any user testing that you need to do? The questions in the Step 8 Worksheet are only a beginning, a guide. With a big idea, this step should be fun. However, this step should be conducted in a very thorough manner. Sloppy work could alter the ranking of one of the top three ideas or worse — cost the company millions because the pre-implementation analysis was shoddy.

You will have spent a fair amount of time getting to this point, and once you start to see the potential impact of the idea, it should be very gratifying.

The team involved in this evaluation should be made up of:

- the appointed idea champion
- a sales or marketing representative
- a researcher able to get any market or customer analysis that may be needed
- a financial whiz (number cruncher)
- an industry expert, if needed
- the publisher who will be responsible for assembling all the information needed for the evaluation.

Once the three evaluations are completed, the publisher will send a draft of version 8.0 to all the ideators for review and comments and ask if the rankings still hold or if they need adjustment.

With this feedback the publisher will issue the final version 8.0 of the Ideation Workbook in preparation for Step 9: Package and Sell the Idea.

Step 9: Package and Sell the Idea

Even though you may have generated 3 big ideas, never try to sell more than one idea at any one time. You will water down your chances of getting the necessary approvals and buy-ins for success. You don't throw the other ideas out — you just do one at a time.

Your job at this stage is to do what you have to in order to move the idea into the implementation phase. Often it is much easier to generate a big idea than it is to sell it. If you can't sell it, all the hard work up until this point is wasted. Use Selling the Idea Worksheet (p.22) as a guide.

Selling Tips:

- If you can sell the CEO first, the process will be easier.
- The idea needs to be expressed in clear, simple language. Don't let flabby words cloud the brilliance of a big idea.
- You need to put the idea in context of a problem solved, money saved or opportunity gained, etc.
- If an idea can't be fully understood in words alone, use graphics, a prototype, whatever, to complete the picture of the big idea.
- Be prepared for questions, rejections, resistance, disinterest. No matter how big the idea, you'll surely get some of each.
- Show respect to people who first negatively react to the idea. Learn from rejection. Retool your sales approach to adequately address concerns.

The first thing to recognize is that the people you will be selling to aren't as passionate as you are about the idea because they haven't lived through the first eight steps.

Selling a big idea requires a special team and a thoughtful plan of attack. Assemble a sales team (4 - 5 people) that includes at least two from the ideation session; someone with rank (to run interference); and someone from sales or marketing who understands how to sell and market anything.

The people you select should be individuals who have time, talent and intellect, and who won't wilt under pressure as the idea is sold. Sometimes people don't buy the first time. Even if you think the impact of the big idea is obvious, people receive this type of information in different ways. Some are quick and get it right away while others need to think it through on their own.

Step 10: Big Idea Implementation

An idea not implemented adds zero to your balance sheet.

Because this final step involves a lot of hard work (perspiration), it's helpful to remember why you started on this journey. You want your company to be a winner — not a loser! Use the Implementation Plan Worksheet (p.23) as a guide.

There are several keys to successful implementation:

- Persistence
- Approval and support from the top
- Enough money to do the job right

- Buy-in from the employees
- A disciplined implementation team headed by a tough, talented manager — generally this is not the ideator who came up with the idea
- Well-defined milestones
- A reasonable implementation timetable
- An incentive for the implementation team to complete the project on-budget and on-time

After the first big idea is well underway, the other two big ideas that made it through the ideation process should be dusted off, sold through the organization and implemented when the timing is right. But remember the old axiom, "Do a few things well rather than a lot of things poorly." Make sure you don't stretch your resources to the breaking point.

You should also, while the big ideas are being implemented, go back and review workbook version 5.0 that listed the top 15 ideas. If there were three big ones, then you have a dozen good ideas to look at again and implement. Maybe they aren't big — but even small and medium ideas, when implemented, can add real value to your organization. Some of the most successful companies today thrive because they implement a steady stream of small ideas.

This concludes an overview of the 10-Step Ideation Thinking Model. The detailed explanations of the individual steps should be considered only as a guide. Every company and every ideation

team is unique. Invent what works best for you.



“Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is probably why so few engage in it.”
— Henry Ford



IDEATION MODEL WORKSHEETS

The 10-Step Ideation Thinking Model diagram and worksheets on the following pages are provided for your convenience. You might want to invent your own to better serve your needs.

Step 1: [Problem/Opportunity Worksheet](#)

Step 2: [Session Preparation Worksheet](#)

Step 3: [Ideation Session Worksheet](#)

Step 4: [Ideation Workbook](#)

Step 5: [Upgrade Session Worksheet](#)

Step 6: [Top Fifteen Idea List](#)

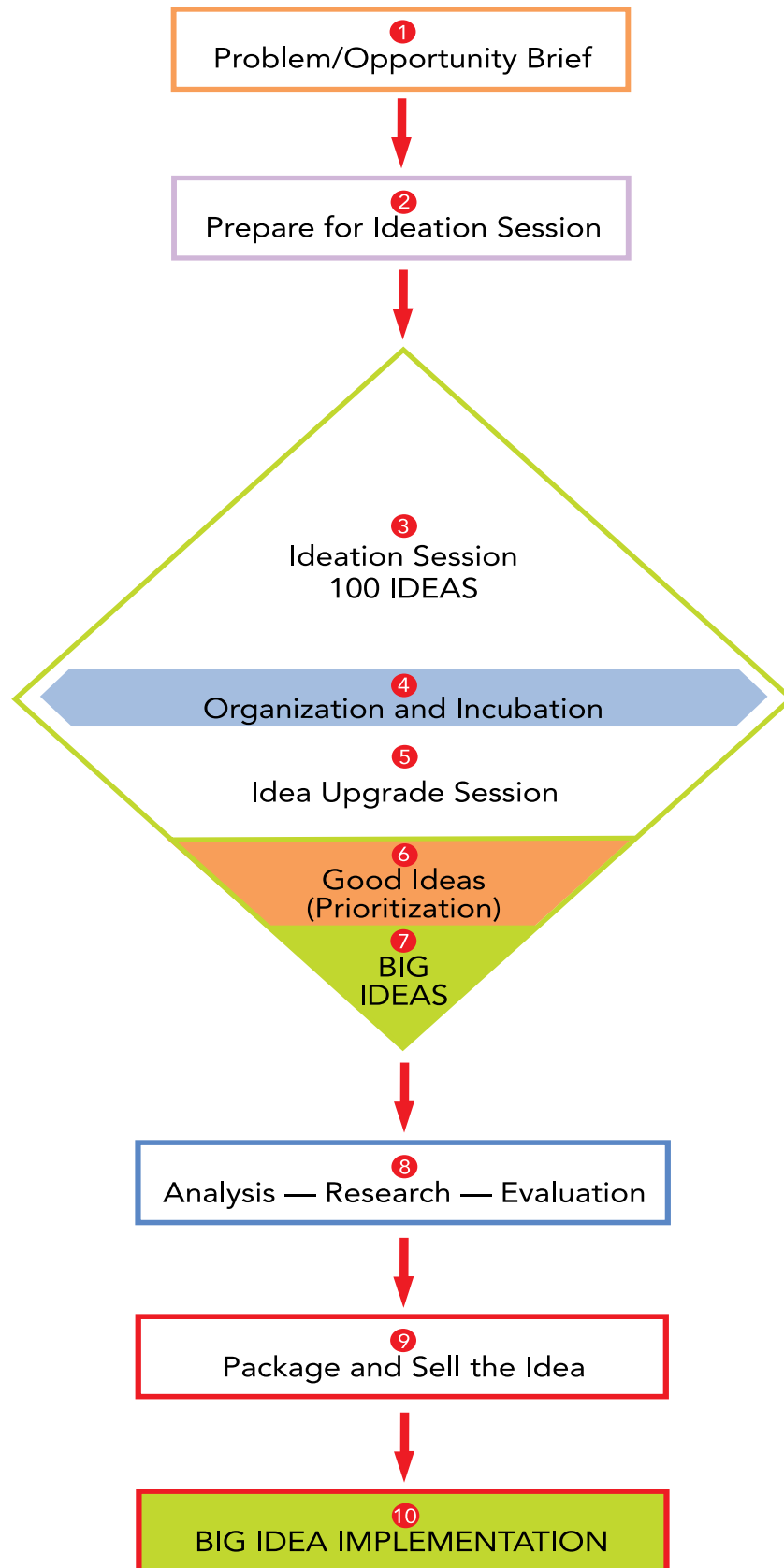
Step 7: [Concept Worksheet](#)

Step 8: [Evaluation Worksheet](#)

Step 9: [Selling the Idea Worksheet](#)

Step 10: [Implementation Plan](#)

10-STEP IDEATION THINKING MODEL



BIG IDEA — PROBLEM/OPPORTUNITY WORKSHEET

1. Type of company	
2. What are 3 of your biggest problems?	
3. What are 3 of your biggest potential opportunities?	
4. What competitive situation bothers you most?	
5. What ideas have you considered and not implemented? Why not?	
6. Does your company have an active ideation program?	
7. When is the last time you implemented a big idea?	
8. What category threats do you need to deal with?	
9. What limitations exist to implementing a big idea?	
10. Is your organization open to change?	
11. How do you feel about the future?	

BIG IDEA — SESSION PREPARATION WORKSHEET

1. Category Description: (size, growth rate, etc.)	
2. What research on the company or category is available?	
3. What other published resources are available?	
4. What are the most promising current emerging trends?	
5. Are there any current trends that are creating needs that are not being met?	
6. What does your company's brand stand for?	
7. What can be learned from the top competitors' Web sites?	
8. What are the top competitors' points of differentiation?	
9. Is there any customer feedback that might lead to a big idea?	
10. Do you need to observe customer usage?	
11. Who are the experts in the field?	
12. Does the company have any current ideas not yet implemented?	
13. Other:	

STEP 4: BIG IDEA — IDEATION WORKBOOK

The various versions of the Ideation Workbook are the control mechanisms to ensure that everyone is working off the same page.



BIG IDEA Ideation Workbook	
BRANDING	
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	

BIG IDEA Ideation Workbook	
SALES	
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	

BIG IDEA Ideation Workbook	
CUSTOMER RELATIONS	
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	

BIG IDEA Ideation Workbook	
NEW PRODUCT/SERVICE	
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	

STEP 6:

BIG IDEA — TOP FIFTEEN IDEA LIST

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.
11.
12.
13.
14.
15.

Step 8:

BIG IDEA — Evaluation Worksheet

1. BIG IDEA	
2. What problem does it solve or what advantage does it create?	
3. Is it consistent with the brand?	
4. Is there any risk in implementing this idea?	
5. Is the competition doing this?	
6. Estimated Implementation Cost	
7. Estimated 3 yr. Monetary Payback	
8. Does this idea need to be researched or market tested before a full-scale roll-out?	
9. Does this idea infringe on anyone's patent?	
10. Measure of Success	

BIG IDEA — SELLING THE IDEA WORKSHEET

1. Who needs to approve the big idea?	
2. Who needs to be communicated with in advance of approval?	
3. Will the idea be presented as a fait à complit or will you invite feedback?	
4. Does the idea need some level of research to support the selling process?	
5. Is the idea quickly understood when presented in text or does it need an illustration or prototype?	
6. How will the idea be protected or defended during the selling process?	
7. What are the key selling strategies?	
8. How will rejections be handled?	
9. Who will be involved in the selling process?	
10. Who needs to be communicated with after approval?	
11. What is the selling process timetable?	
12. How will you know when the sales process is completed?	

STEP 10: BIG IDEA — IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

1. BIG IDEA	
2. Has approval been given for implementation?	
3. What is the implementation budget?	
4. Who is on the team responsible for implementation?	
5. What are the key implementation challenges?	
6. How will these challenges be overcome?	
7. Will this idea be pilot-tested or rolled out nationally?	
8. Has the idea been legally protected? Patented?	
9. Implementation Timetable	
10. Does the idea need a business plan?	
11. How will the success of the idea be measured?	

Case Studies

The case studies detailed on the following pages are just a small sample of the dozens of big ideas our professional ideators have been associated with over the years.

The purpose of including these case studies is to illustrate several points:

- Big ideas are very relative to the companies involved. You may read one of the case studies and think, that's not very sexy — it seems pretty simple, straightforward. And you may be right — but to the company involved it was a big idea and made big impact.
- All types of companies — not just Fortune 500 — can implement big ideas.
- Big ideas can be invented on-demand.
- Big ideas can provide a sustainable competitive advantage.
- Big ideas make money.
- The cost of a big idea is easily paid back over a short period of time.



Thomas Edison holds the American record for the number of patents: 1,093.

He produced one minor invention every ten days and a major invention every six months.

COMMUNITY BANK

Problem

A local community bank needed a way to differentiate itself from all the other banks so it could attract the deposits needed to grow.

Big Idea

Establish a special account called the City First Fund that ensured all new deposits would be loaned back to the community.

Measure of Success

This approach was unique to the market and it generated \$10,000,000 in new deposits in the first six months.

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Problem

The Chamber sponsored the local annual holiday parade and had reached a plateau on how big it could get, thereby affecting how much money it could raise for charity.

Big Idea

To expand the scope of the parade it was decided to reposition it as “America’s Children’s Holiday Parade.” This new approach would allow the Chamber to invite bands, floats, participants, etc., from all over the United States, which opened up a lot more opportunities for regional and national sponsorships and media coverage.

Measure of Success

It is expected that the repositioning of the parade and the money it raises will increase ten-fold over 3 years.

NEW MAGAZINE

Problem

An under-funded start-up wanted to publish a music magazine distributed in a major metropolitan area. Research showed the necessity of spending a couple million dollars to convince enough people to buy the magazine for \$2 per issue. Publishing companies don't traditionally make money from their paid distribution. It is used as a way to qualify the reader. If they paid for the publication, the theory goes, the reader is interested in the subject.

Big Idea

Start a new method of distribution; one that makes the magazine available for free at point of purchase. The reader was qualified because they were already shopping in a music or record store.

Measure of Success

The magazine became the fastest growing magazine in the nation during its first year. Advertising revenue grew every issue for a few years.

BUSINESS JET AIRPORT OPERATOR

Problem

A fixed-base operator at one Bay Area airport wanted to increase the number of out-of-town jets that landed there. This particular company had an added advantage of having the largest maintenance group in the area. It needed to find a way to differentiate itself from the other two airports. It was also determined that one of the most important things jet owners wanted was assurance that they could get the service they needed without affecting their schedule.

Big Idea

To establish a meaningful point of differentiation, it was recommended that this firm's "maintenance" advantage be branded. A unique name (JetCare) and logo were developed and a promise to get jets back in the air on time. To back up their promise they offered to lend one of their own jets if the service took longer than expected.

Measure of Success

Out-of-town pilots now favor this airport because they offer a key guarantee that neither of the other two airports could.

TRADE SCHOOL

Problem

A 15-campus chain of schools in Los Angeles specializing in training young adults for medical support positions wanted to find a way to increase enrollment. There were a number of similar schools in their area and they all appeared the same when you looked at their advertising, course booklets and Web sites. There was a range of prospective students who were interested in these types of professions, but a high percentage were single mothers who found it difficult to attend school on a regular basis because of a lack of affordable daycare.

Big Idea

To differentiate their product offering, it was recommended that the school offer onsite daycare. None of its direct competitors were offering this service. It was also recommended that the school outsource this service to a company like KinderCare to avoid any incremental costs.

Measure of Success

When implemented, it would generate \$1,000,000 a year in extra profit if an additional 100 students signed up.

RECYCLED COPY PAPER MANUFACTURER

Problem

A regional paper company introduced a line of recycled copy paper in the West and priced it 12% higher than standard copy paper. The price premium was assumed because the paper took more steps to produce and recycled paper from other producers was always priced at a premium. Market research in the environmentally-friendly region also indicated that people were willing to pay more because using recycled paper was the right thing to do.

The company's recycled paper was high quality and contained 35% post-consumer waste — which was more than triple the 10% level required for the recycled designation.

The paper did well in the first seven years, capturing a 10% share of the marketplace, but sales started to stall and the company wondered how it could jumpstart growth. The company did not have sufficient funds to increase the current level of advertising and promotion. The annual market research also indicated people were still willing to pay more for the product.

Big Idea

The big idea to get sales growing again was to challenge two traditional assumptions.

First, was the market research really telling the full story? Maybe people were just telling them what they thought they wanted to hear — that an overwhelming majority were willing to pay more for recycled paper.

Second, did recycled paper really have to be priced at a premium? With new technology, did it really have to cost more to produce?

After careful reflection and analysis, it was decided to improve production techniques and no longer charge a price premium.

Measure of Success

With the price premium eliminated, the recycled paper was able to compete on a level playing field with all types of copy paper. Sales started to grow again and several million dollars in extra sales were realized.

PUBLISHING COMPANY

Problem

A small publishing company wanted to establish a leadership position in its market region. Because every media outlet, from broadcast to newspaper, views the others as competitors, it was acknowledged that they never gave each other positive coverage, so there was little possibility of increased profile through public relations.

Big Idea

Produce a popular-vote awards show that could be branded directly back to the publishing company. Include a newspaper, radio and TV station as media partners. Because it was based on

popular vote with the proceeds going to charity, the rest of the media reported on the event.

Measure of Success

The magazine became the fastest growing magazine in the nation during its first year. Advertising revenue grew every issue for a few years.

HAWAIIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Problem

For decades, the economy of the “Big Island” of Hawaii’s east coast was based on growing sugar cane. The climate, volcanic soil and water from mountain run-off and rain were ideal for the tropical crop. However, lower cost cane from tropical third-world countries was undercutting the price of the Big Island’s cane, and unemployment rates were projected to reach 25% or more as cane production there was discontinued. The East Hawaii Economic Development Commission was charged with finding ways to restore the economic health of the area.

Big Idea

To re-purpose the Island’s natural resources into higher-value applications.

First, the huge volumes of mountain run-off were filtered by the volcanic soil resulting in water with exceptional purity. Recommendations were made to bottle the water and create a distinctive brand, such as Hawaiian Springs Mountain Water. Doing so would allow water from East Hawaii to have an identity that distinguished it from any other brand in the U.S. marketplace.

Second, the tropical climate and volcanic soil that had supported the growth of sugar cane was equally desirable for other higher-value tropical plants. Among newly planted species were breadfruit, cherimoya, jackfruit, rambutan and star fruit. Some of the fruit is shipped fresh. The fruit is also processed into jams, juices, chutneys and other exotic fruit products allowing for a larger volume of fruit to be marketed. To support that, an FDA-approved, multi-user processing facility was built and a new East Hawaii product appellation was created.

Measure of Success

Much of the 68,000 acres that had been in sugar cane are now planted in other higher-value crops. The value of crops grown in the area has reached \$300 million annually. While employment was in precipitous decline as sugar cane ceased to be a viable crop, there is now a solid base of more than 2,500 jobs.



Q. and A.

This Q. and A. section is included to give some additional perspective on the ideation process.



Q1. Aren't ideas just accidental?

A: A lot of people think so. But today, ideation thinking models have proven that a thoughtful disciplined approach can generate 100 ideas in 1 - 2 hours. Out of that group 3 - 4 might be big ideas; our experience shows a ratio of 25 to 1.

Q2. What is a big idea?

A: As a practical guide, a big idea should let you grow 25-50% faster than the industry without spending more on marketing. A big idea might scare you at first, but the bolder the better. A big idea can also be described as one that provides for a long-term sustainable competitive advantage. Steve Jobs thinks a big idea is one that dents the universe. But he's in a league of his own.

Q3. How do you know when you have a big idea?

A: According to professionals in the field, when someone thinks they have a big idea, they are usually right. However, it needs others to validate it.

Q4. How much is a big idea worth?

A: Everyone agrees that ideas create money, but the value of a big idea is relative. A big idea for a \$10 million company probably wouldn't have the same leverage at GE, IBM, or HP. For a mid-size company you should look for a return of 5 to 50 times your ideation investment. A quick rule of thumb for a mid-size company might be to generate an extra \$1,000,000 over a 3-year period of time. However, keep in mind that if a big idea doesn't get implemented it's worth nothing.

Q5. Can I create a big idea myself?

A: Sometimes you can. There are several good books on the subject – and if you are predominantly a right-brain person you might be able to do it. It may take a while but keep trying. But experience indicates that because big ideas don't always pop up in their final form, collaboration is helpful to guarantee success.

Q6. Why should I pay an outside consultant to do this?

A: The main reasons to hire an ideation thinking firm are:

- Your odds of success are much greater.
- You get big ideas faster – because of a disciplined thinking process.
- You get more relevant ideas (both big and small) because professional ideators are more experienced with creative thinking and collectively bring a fresh and different perspective to the process.

Q7. Don't just the big companies need ideas?

A: No. Every company needs big ideas to survive and grow. All big companies started small. Big ideas were the way they grew — and continued to grow. Research indicates that companies with fresh ideas are on average 25% - 50% more successful than companies that don't have new ideas. (Big Ideas, Jonne Ceserani)

Q8. How long does it take to generate a big idea?

A: Normally the thinking part takes 6 - 10 weeks — not including implementation. It's a 10-step model that yields the best results when the process is not rushed.

Q9. What are the core objectives of big ideas?

A: Tangible — Big ideas help you grow, beat competition, and help you make more money. They generally fall into three categories: efficiency, effectiveness, and innovation.

Intangible — It's good for employee morale and it inspires them to do better. Big ideas also improve the perception of your brand. And, if you are a public company, analysts are always looking for what's new in the pipeline.

Q10. Why do some people have lots of ideas and others don't?

A: Some people are more prone to creating ideas. They are heavily right-brain and have ideas on a wide range of subjects. Some people are natural athletes, natural musicians – and some people are just natural ideators. People who are big producers are generally passionate about thinking. They never lose sight of their imagination; “no” is not in their vocabulary; and they truly enjoy thinking about ideas.

Q11. How important are small to medium ideas?

A: As part of the ideation process, a lot of good (small to medium) ideas surface that should be evaluated and implemented as appropriate. Many companies (e.g. Toyota) thrive on a continuous stream of small ideas. A small idea might be worth \$10,000 a year. A big idea might be worth \$500,000- \$1,000,000 per year. Under this scenario a big idea is 50-100 times more important than a small idea. Big ideas propel a company forward. But don't ignore small ideas. As they accumulate, they leverage your ideation investment.

Small ideas are also important because often it's the combination of small ideas (or parts thereof) that result in a big idea. Small ideas can also be viewed as food for thought that spark a big idea.

Q12. How much does a big idea consulting project cost?

A: It varies by the scope of the work, but a small or medium-size firm should budget \$25,000 to \$75,000 for the project. Some consultants charge between \$500,000 - \$1,000,000 per idea. The days of "a penny for your thoughts," unfortunately, are over.

Q13. Why is there a wide variance in costs for developing a big idea?

A: The main reasons are: (1) whether or not proprietary research is required at the beginning or end of the project; (2) whether or not outside technical experts are required for preparing for the ideation session; and (3) whether or not the project scope includes helping package and sell the idea throughout the organization.

Q14. What's the difference between brainstorming and ideation?

A: They are similar in part of the process but ideation involves intense preparation, generation and development of the ideas while brainstorming focuses more on generation — mass production. The main difference is the amount of critical thinking involved.

Q15. What's the key to getting a big idea?

A: As Linus Pauling said, "The best way to get a great idea is to have a lot of ideas." Our experience indicates a ratio of 25 to 1 is a good rule of thumb. In other words, we recommend generating 100 ideas to get 4 big ideas. And the best way to get lots of ideas is to follow an ideation thinking model.

Q16. What are some of the criteria for narrowing down the ideas to the best ones?

A: Professional ideators recommend viewing ideas through several screens:

- relevance
- uniqueness
- legality
- ease of implementation
- right timing
- impact
- payoff

Q17. What's the difference between generating an idea and developing one?

A: Generating ideas involves making a master list for consideration. At this stage, judgment is withheld. After this phase, development starts. It generally is necessary to focus on each emerging idea to upgrade it into a feasible solution. The first stage is very right brain. The second stage is both right and left brain.

Q18. What is the difference between right brain and left brain thinking?

A: The main difference is that the two brain hemispheres do not process information the same way. The left brain uses convergent thinking to come up with a single solution. The right brain utilizes divergent thinking and comes up with multiple solutions.

Q19. Can you describe these different ways of thinking?

A: Thinking Approaches:

Left Brain	Right Brain
Convergent	Divergent
Analytical	Visionary
Linear	Spatial
Rational	Free Association
Vertical	Lateral
Deductive	Inductive
Black/White	Gray
Words	Images
Numbers	Patterns
Boundaries	No Boundaries
Aware of Limitations	Disregards Limitations

Q20. Is it okay to borrow ideas from others?

A: Yes, unless there is a patent involved. Some of the best ideas for your organization might be ones your competition borrowed from others. However, if you get in the habit of borrowing, you are selling yourself short. The greatest gift you can give yourself is thinking for yourself.

Q21. What is the difference between an idea and an innovation?

A: Generally the difference is when a new product requires a new technological or mechanical solution. For example, a big idea is not having to look at commercials while watching television. The innovation is TiVo.

Q22. Is the ideation thinking model presented in this book better than the others?

It's hard to say better — this one is different and we know it works. The three points of difference include:

A: First, there are very few real ideation thinking models out there that are available to small and mid-size companies. Second, we believe the combination of a team of outside professional ideators working closely in concert with your ideation team provides the right mix of brainpower and industry expertise to generate and develop big ideas. Third, the discipline of the 10-step model gets the most out of the raw material (ideas, fragments, etc.) generated during the ideation session.



Using a Professional Ideation Team

Unless you have a team of creative thinkers in-house, you might want to consider adding some outside professional ideators to your team — who would interact with your senior management throughout the project.

Professional ideators are:

- people who believe anything can be made better
- people who love to create 24/7
- passionate about ideas
- very right-brain oriented
- knowledgeable about a wide range of subjects
- proven innovators
- interdisciplinary in perspective
- experienced
- deep thinkers

When you are trying to invent big ideas, there are several thinking strategies that ideators use to make the ideation session more productive:

- Speculation
- Visualization
- Combinations
- Trans-disciplinary
- Trans-boundary
- Metaphorical
- Idea Mapping
- Absurdity
- Scenarios/Story-telling

Some ideators will also utilize outside experts in the preparation stage, as needed.

Reference Section

A deep debt of gratitude is owed to those who wrote the books listed below. It's not a complete list on the subject but, if read collectively, you will get a good understanding about how to think so you can invent a big idea.



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About the Author

Dave Dunn is the managing principal of Branding Communications and BrandEquity Consulting, located in the San Francisco Bay Area. He has spent more than 30 years as a branding professional working for start-ups, Fortune 500 firms and non-profit organizations.



He is recognized as an expert brand strategist and has gained hands-on experience with more than two dozen brands of some of the nation's largest firms. His experience includes new product introductions, brand building and brand restaging for:

- HP
- General Foods
- Warner Lambert
- Seagram's
- AT&T
- Cheeseborough-Ponds
- Heublein
- Georgia-Pacific
- Kentucky Fried Chicken
- Foster Farms
- Tenet Healthcare
- Oakland Airport

In 2002, Dave was honored as the "Entrepreneur of the Year" by the Oakland Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce. Dave is a graduate of Stanford University and has an MBA from the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce. He is active in the community and was chairman of the Oakland Convention & Visitors Bureau from 2005 - 2007.

Dave, a sought-after speaker, has authored numerous newspaper and magazine articles, a series of white papers, and written six e-books on branding:

- Branding: The 6 Easy Steps
- Inventing Big Ideas
- Brand Architecture: Your Blueprint for Success
- Web Site Audit Handbook
- The Social Media Planning Guide
- A Primer on Content Marketing

Contact

We would welcome any comments or suggestions you might have regarding this ideation book. Thank you in advance for your feedback.



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