

# CATALYST



Business Strategy | Marketing Communications

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## Brainstorming vs. Strategic Brainstorming

*By Tom Marx and Tom Herndon*

Everyone has a pretty good idea of what would be called garden-variety brainstorming. Folks get together and toss out ideas, make a long list, no 'wrong' answers, etc. The Marx Group has increased the value of this common practice by designing what we call 'strategic brainstorming.'

Some believe that these 'army meetings' can be a waste of time. Some believe that the content or process should be tightly controlled. Some don't really want other people to get in the way of their decision-making.

To ensure that your brainstorming session is successful you must manage it to remain an open format. In other words, the best of the classic brainstorming process: an open forum for sharing ideas, possibilities, and speculations; tossing out ideas, making a long list, no 'wrong' answers, and so on. However, to have the brainstorming be strategic, involve as many of the people who will influence the decision making process as possible. That way the entire team is collaboratively designing the same strategy.

Strategic brainstorming is based on collaboration – collaboration of all key players. Sales, Marketing and Product Managers – everyone takes part. When the whole team has buy-in on the strategy BEFORE it's implemented, there is an exponential increase in effectiveness. Across the board buy-in is fundamental to launching any new initiative. Think of the time and money saved when everyone is truly on the same page from the get-go.

We were surprised when one of our clients recently declined our request for a strategic brainstorming session. Their response was "these meetings don't create positive results and they take a lot of time. It's too hard to get everyone together. Isn't it YOUR job to figure this all out? You're the marketing and creative geniuses, not us."

We decided to put a stake in the ground and responded with, "While we appreciate the confidence you have in us, we are not willing to move forward on this campaign without a collaborative meeting with you, the sales manager and selected marketing and sales team members. We promise you that we will gain major insights, arrive at a more powerful result, and get everyone aligned on the strategy and tactics. We'll also help you handle the logistics, so key people's schedules can be honored."

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We won our case, and at the end of the session, our client acknowledged the value of having everyone speaking the same language. We left the meeting, returned to home base, did our own internal brainstorming – which confirmed the strategy – and finalized the tactical plan.

So what did we do in that brainstorming session that met, and exceeded, the client's expectations?

We raised the bar on the results that could be achieved for this new campaign. After drilling down to the core goals and objectives, we created two columns on the white board:

### **Must Have**

The left column was filled with 'must-have's' such as:

- Meet sales expectations
- Improve awareness of the product
- Faster close on sales
- Etc.

### **Over the Moon<sup>1</sup>**

The right column became a lightning rod for excitement and possibility:

- Increase annual sales by a factor of five
- Take over as #1 provider in this category
- Become the supplier of choice by the largest retail chains within 2 years
- And more...

This small shift in defining expectations led to a far more powerful sharing of ideas. In that same afternoon, we completed the strategic brainstorming session, wrote a briefing document, delivered the briefing document to the team, and got sign-off on the tactics. All this took less than a  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a day, and everyone was moving in the same direction.

(more in the next issue of Catalyst about how to create a powerful briefing document)

Here are some basic recommendations that can help move the needle from "waste of time" to "over the moon."

#### **A. Design a Repeatable Structure**

1. Choose a good facilitator/leader, create an agenda and assign a scribe
2. Start with strategy first and don't go to tactics until the strategy is nailed
3. Use the 2-column method: 'Must Have's' and 'Over-the-Moon' to generate ideas (remember, no wrong answers!)

#### **B. Watch the Time**

The leader's responsibility is to keep the meeting focused and on track, be sure all issues are covered, and that the meeting begins and ends on time.

#### **C. Get Alignment**

1. Have the scribe document the key points
2. Read each point aloud and ask for everyone's alignment
3. Don't move to the next item until all have aligned – no alignment means rethink the point

*DEFINITION OF TERMS: People do not have to agree with an item in order to align on the fact that the item could very well achieve the end results that everyone desires: success, more business, more profits, etc. One can declare their alignment and still disagree.*

#### **D. Circulate the Results**

1. Have the scribe regularly circulate a HOT LIST showing KEY THOUGHTS, ACTIONABLE ITEMS, DECISIONS MADE and NEXT STEPS.

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## **E. Manage the Promises**

All promises need to be tracked and managed. To ensure that next actions are clearly understood, someone needs to lead the charge.

## **F. Create 'Positive Anxiety'**

One of our associates, Chauncey Bell<sup>[2]</sup>, once said, "Without anxiety, there is no change happening." We believe that anxiety is good. We're not talking about gut-wrenching fear that immobilizes people. We're talking about being uncomfortable; not being sure of what is going on, but being in a mood of *wonder*. It's not that difficult to get to wonder. It takes a willingness to be uncomfortable -- a willingness to sometimes squeeze yourself and your colleagues through the eye of needle.

*Trust us, on the other side lies The Promised Land.*

These are the key points. We have created a more comprehensive 'how-to' document on the strategic brainstorming process. We're happy to send it to you. Simply email Tom Herndon at [therndon@themarxgrp.com](mailto:therndon@themarxgrp.com)

Next issue of Catalyst: The power derived from an effective briefing document

<sup>1</sup> "Over the Moon" is a concept that we attribute to the brilliant and insightful Marsha Shenk of The BestWork People, a consultant and coaching organization. Marsha can be reached at [www.bestwork.biz](http://www.bestwork.biz)

<sup>2</sup> Chauncey Bell is a brilliant business consultant and the Founder of The Design Community. Chauncey can be reached at [www.nineseeds.com](http://www.nineseeds.com)

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