

Brainstorming that works

Brainstorming is a perennially useful idea generation tool, but experience has taught us that the approach works best with three additions.

by Matt Peterson, Erik Rutten and Jim Williams

October 2015

Wherever you look for inspiration¹, ideas for new product and services ultimately come from just one place: the human imagination. For decades companies have used brainstorming sessions as a way to help teams collaboratively generate and explore new ideas. It's an approach that has its drawbacks, however. The free and unstructured nature of a brainstorm means it can be all too easy to spend time exploring blind alleys or tackling less important problems.

In our experience facilitating hundreds of brainstorming sessions in all types of companies, we have found that a little extra work upfront can transform the effectiveness of the approach. In particular, brainstorms that work really well tend to share three essential characteristics: direction, facts and variety.

Direction comes from properly establishing the frame of the brainstorming. This means providing sufficient constraints to focus the efforts of participants while still leaving enough space to allow truly innovative ideas to emerge. The greater the potential of the space explored by the brainstorming session, the greater the chance of valuable outcomes, so successful companies choose their hunting grounds with great care. A good approach is to begin with a short list of possible areas against which innovation resources might be invested. When one packaged food company ran a series of ideation workshops to identify new product opportunities, for example, participants were directed specifically to think about "fast and healthy" snacks, based on several weeks of opportunity identification and market sizing.

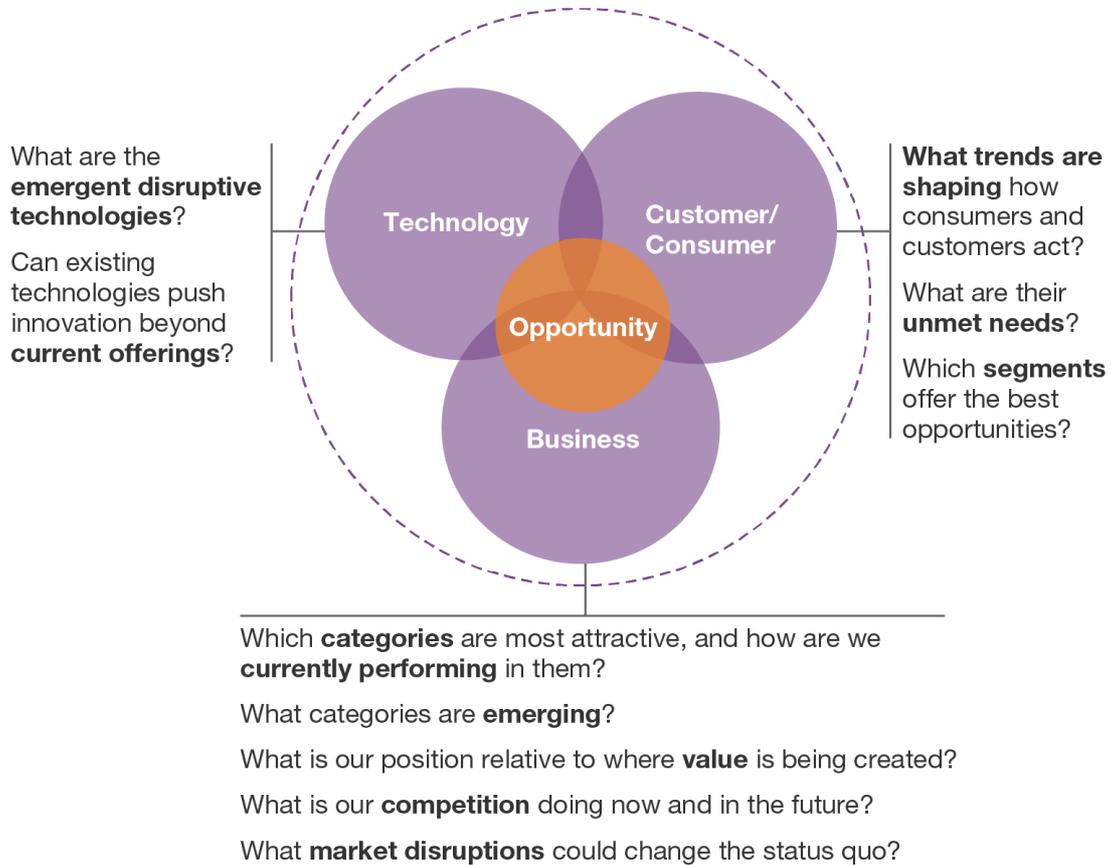
Facts provide a catalyst for innovative ideas in a brainstorm. They also increase the value of the ideas generated by reducing the chance that participants will spend a long time exploring ideas built on erroneous assumptions. Once again, the best companies use detailed pre-work prior to the brainstorming session to gather, organize, and present useful information to participants. Some companies find it useful to gather and classify this supporting data using three lenses: customer, technology, and business. The exhibit shows some key questions they seek to answer during their preparatory work.

In our experience, it is important to bring facts from all three lenses to support the brainstorm, as some of the most interesting ideas arise at where they cross. Proteus digital health, for example, built its business on the intersection of a consumer problem (patients failing to take their medication on time) and a technological shift (the widespread availability of smartphones with wireless networking capabilities).

¹ See "Six ways to improve your product pipeline," Operations Extranet, September 2015 (https://operations-extranet.mckinsey.com/content/function/Product+Development/view/20150929_six_ways_to_improve_your_product_pipeline)

Exhibit

Most successful innovations are found at the intersection of these three lenses. The greatest technology without a business case or a consumer need will likely go nowhere.



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It developed a patch that could be attached to the skin and which would read data from a tiny digestible microchip embedded inside prescription pills. By communicating with the patient’s smartphone, the patch could remind them to take their medication, confirm they had done so, and record other medical data for later analysis.

Variety comes from bringing different groups together. The power of brainstorming is greatly enhanced by the junction of different perspectives. That doesn’t happen by accident. The best companies include representatives from across the organization, and from suppliers too, in their brainstorming sessions. Product conventions² are a powerful way to conduct this kind of structured brainstorming activity at scale. In these events, companies bring together product development teams, manufacturing specialists, suppliers and other

² See “Product conventions ‘plus’,” Operations Extranet, March 2012 (https://operations-extranet.mckinsey.com/content/function/Product+Development/view/20120322_product_conventions_plus), and “Product conventions,” Operations Extranet, July 2008 (https://operations-extranet.mckinsey.com/content/function/Product+Development/view/20080702_product_conventions)

stakeholders for an intensive two- or three-day session to explore opportunities to improve existing offerings, or introduce new ones.

When one company in the renewable energy sector brought representatives of different functions together with suppliers for such a product convention, it not only found a host of ways to simplify the assembly and installation of its products, it also identified a new opportunity to move from being a supplier of components, to offering complete systems for consumers■

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