

### How to Use Ideation to Generate Great New Product Ideas

Developing new products is the surest way to control your future. And new products are exciting. The most exciting part of the development process is watching your new product take off in the market. The second most exciting is creating the idea.

Our client in this case manufactured ingredients for the food industry. Their margins had been shrinking as their products became commodities. The solution – create a new product. Their first step was to develop new product ideas through ideation.

The EVP enlisted the VP Marketing/Sales and the VP Production; each nominated 10 people to attend an ideation session. The EVP invited the 20, attendance required.

Leading off the session, the EVP reviewed their business, focusing on sales, profits and margins, reinforcing the need for a new product. He then opened up the meeting.

A sales person offered the first idea; a production engineer cut him off, explaining why they could not make it. Another production engineer then proposed an idea; a sales person patiently explained why the market would not consider it.

The lines were clearly drawn, two competing camps, each canceling the other. By lunch there were no ideas. It was obvious that the meeting was futile. The EVP huddled with the two VPs for lunch. They decided to cancel the meeting for the rest of the day and cool off. They'd resume early the next morning with the provision that no one was to critique the ideas offered by others. Isn't this the first rule of brainstorming?

The following morning the 23 began again, but cautiously. Within a half hour, the EVP felt his persistence had been rewarded as one idea flowed after the next. Allowing for breaks, the actual meeting lasted 8½ hours – 510 minutes; they generated 321 ideas, an idea every 95 seconds.

The EVP dutifully had the list typed and sent to each of the participants. It was then that he realized he had created a haystack and now had the task of finding, hopefully, the one or two great needles of a new product idea buried in it. That's when he called us.

This is the perfect example of an ideation session gone wrong: twenty people who would rather be somewhere else, agreeing to disagree, then putting their hearts into creating ideas with no sense of ownership. The result – a confetti of ideas, most of no lasting value and none having a champion. It took us a full week working with four of their senior staff to pare the list down to a small sample for concept evaluation. It worked out in the end – one successful new product and a great idea for a related service business, currently undergoing an in-depth business case analysis.

But this entire process would have been much faster, with little pain and more enthusiasm if they had followed a few simple rules for ideation sessions. Here's the program we follow:

Preparation:

1. Define the general business strategy for the new product – leverage existing market strength by developing a new product for our current market, or leverage technology strength by using current technology foundation to develop the new product.
2. Select a small group – 6 to 10 people – for the session. Mix sales, marketing, production and technology, but select them for their experience, broad knowledge and intimacy of either the market or the technology. They should all be respected and able to play well with others.

3. Invite them to participate: explain the purpose, the agenda, the expected results, the requirements. If they decline or are hesitant, select someone else. Each must feel committed from the beginning.
4. Ask one of the marketing/sales people to present a 30 minute market overview and one of the production/technology engineers to present a 30 minute technology overview.
5. Request each of the participants to come to the meeting with 2 to 3 "starter" ideas for new products.

The meeting:

1. Open by reviewing a detailed agenda (presentations/break/ideation/break/ideation/lunch/ideation/break/review and prioritize/conclude)
2. Present the market overview and the technology overview.
3. Present the rules for discussion:
  - a. You must like and be willing to support your idea.
  - b. You may not attack or disparage an idea during the ideation periods although you can question or ask for rationale.
  - c. One person talks at a time.
  - d. The review is not a "thumbs up/down" but a ranking of the likelihood of market acceptance and difficulty of production.
  - e. Proceed with ideation. Appreciate the limitations of the mind and concentration. The sessions should be relaxed, comfortable and allow each person to build upon the ideas of others. Consider different ideation activities to refresh thinking (For direction, review books by Michael Michalko, Robert Epstein, James Higgins and Roger von Oech).
4. Proceed with idea review and prioritization. Focus on prioritizing the ideas based on two criteria:
  - a. those most appealing to the market
  - b. those most suited to current technologyRun through the list, rating each idea using these two criteria on a 3 point scale, 3 being high, 2 medium and 1 as low. Eliminate those with lower total scores and reevaluate the top group until you are down to 10. Then let everyone go home.
5. Three days later send the participants: thanks for participation; do they have any additional new product ideas; do they have any additional thoughts on the rankings.
6. One week later: submit the final 10 ideas to the group. Ask for any final thoughts.

Ideation sessions like this can be fun, exciting. You should end up with 3 to 4 ideas that stand out from the rest. This is the beginning of your future.

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Insight Direction, Inc.

Jack Trytten  
200 East Delaware Place  
Suite 14C  
Chicago, IL 60611

Phone (312) 944-1754  
Fax (312) 944-0766  
Cell (312) 415-1755  
jack@insightdirection.com