How To Explode "Narrow Frame" Thinking To Unleash Great Ideas

By Chip Heath and Dan Heath

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Getting stuck in an either/or mindset leaves you with two ideas--when in reality there are a million in between. A case study in frozen bananas reveals the process.

Studies have found that people tend to make “whether or not” decisions, like “I’m deciding whether or not to quit my job,” or “I’m deciding whether or not to buy a new TV.” This is a trap--one that psychologists call “narrow framing.” People caught in a narrow frame tend to overlook the full range of options available to them. So the question is, how can you break out of a narrow frame and generate new options for yourself?

Two advertising-industry players, Dion Hughes and Mark Johnson, have pioneered a technique for doing just that. Their firm, Persuasion Arts & Sciences, acts as a relief pitcher for advertising agencies that have hit a creative roadblock. Hughes and Johnson often come in at the last minute to offer fresh ideas just before an important pitch.

Both men had worked previously in top-tier ad agencies. Johnson had been part of the team that developed the “ultimate driving machine” positioning for BMW, and Hughes had won awards for the “how to speak Australian” campaign for Fosters beer. (Sample billboard: A picture of a dagger is captioned, “Australian for dental floss.” Next to it, a bottle of Fosters is captioned “Australian for beer.”)

Hughes said, “We knew that creative people tend to be precious about their ideas and find the ones that they’re passionate about and then invest a lot of emotion into them. And they spend most of their time diving deep into one or two ideas and not a lot of time spreading their wings. So we thought, well, why don’t we do the opposite?” So, when Hughes and Johnson are called in by creative directors, they try to send them a dozen possible directions within a week.

To generate that volume of ideas--i.e., to break out of a narrow frame--they come back to the same set of questions, again and again. We’ll call it a “playlist” of ideas. For example, they might ask, What kind of iconography within the brand is useful and what could we build around it? For a UPS project it might be the shield logo, or the classic brown UPS driver uniform, or the familiar boxy shape of the delivery truck. Other questions in the playlist include:

•Is there a key color for the brand?

•What is the enemy of this product?

•What would the brand be like if it was the market share leader?

•What if it was an upstart?

•Can you personify the product?

In 2008, Persuasion Arts & Sciences was approached by a small mom-and-pop brand, Diana’s Bananas, which sold only one product: frozen chocolate-covered bananas. Diana’s had been founded by a Chicago woman who had subsequently passed away, leaving her husband with, as Hughes said, “a tiny little company and a tiny little factory with one shift of workers.”

Hughes and Johnson, moved by the story, agreed to do a small project for Diana’s. The owner had $80,000 to spend and they had to gently tell him that his budget wouldn’t support a major TV ad campaign. In brainstorming campaign ideas, the duo knew they needed to overcome two problems: First, few shoppers came to the grocery store with “frozen bananas” on their grocery lists, and worse, impulse buys were unlikely, since Diana’s lacked the budget to pay for good placement in the freezers. The packages tended to be stranded on one of the bottom shelves.

These problems got them thinking... These bananas are mostly for kids, and we could count on them to beg their parents to buy them, but the kids don’t know the product exists. So we’ve got to lead them to the right place. But how?

As they worked through the playlist, they paused on one question: What kind of iconography within the brand is useful and what could we build around it? One character on the packaging was a baby monkey in diapers. They started thinking about the monkey, and the bananas, and they thought, hmm, what if the monkey were eating bananas and leaving the peels behind, like a breadcrumb trail?

Excited by the idea, they designed a series of decals--bright yellow banana peels--that could be stuck to the floor of the grocery store, creating a trail that led right to the freezer where Diana’s was stocked. Kids immediately caught on to the game, following the trail like a treasure hunt.

After the trails had been installed in a chain of grocery stores, Hughes and Johnson called Diana's to see how the campaign was doing. The owner said, “We have had to put on a second and third shift to keep up with demand.”

There’s a brute-force aspect to the strategy used by Hughes and Johnson. They force themselves to consider prescribed questions, one at a time, to generate new options. A “canned” list of stimuli seems to spark fresh insights. What’s particularly surprising is that this brute-force approach can work in advertising, a domain that prizes creativity and novelty. If a playlist can work for advertisers, chances are it can work for you.

Could you create your own playlist to help your colleagues discover options? Think about some of the common types of decisions that have been made historically in your organization. For example, one unpleasant but common type of decision is how to make budget cuts. What if the wisest minds in your organization had come up with a list of ready-made questions and issues that could help direct the budget-cutter? For instance:

•Can you postpone expenses rather than cut them?

•Rather than cutting the same amount across the board, can you cut deeper in some areas to allow you to keep investing in the best opportunities?

•Have you exhausted every possible source of income that might relieve some of the pressure to cut?

Virtually every organization would benefit from decision aids like this. (What’s the downside?) A playlist is useful for situations where you need a stimulus, a way of breaking out of a narrow frame. By using playlists in your organization, you accomplish something precious: You ensure that the next person who makes a certain kind of decision will be smarter and better-equipped to handle it than the person who came before.

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