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Why Brainstorming is Bollocks /
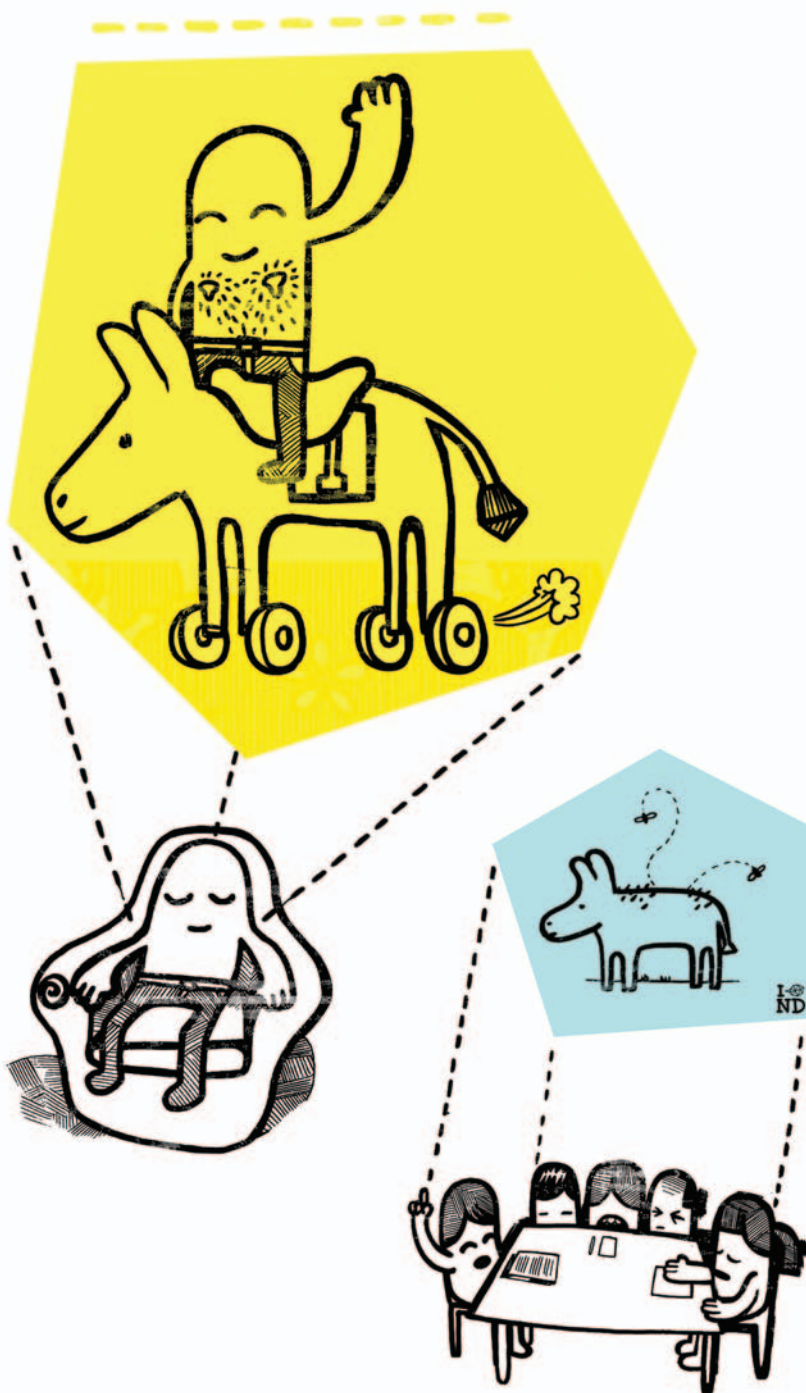
Why Brainstorming is Bollocks / Advertising is a numbers-driven game. But where creative is concerned, the difference between the few and the many can be vast / By Dr Amantha Imber /

How many times do you hear someone utter the phrase 'Let's have a brainstorm' in an average month at work? If you work in a department where creative problem-solving is critical (which is arguably any department, especially in agency land), then you probably hear this phrase quite frequently.

Brainstorming is a technique that was invented back in the 1930s by an advertising executive, Alex Osborn. And despite the tool being very old and dusty, many organisations still believe it is God's gift to idea generation.

George Davison and his colleagues at Sandia National Laboratories beg to differ. They had a hunch that brainstorming was bollocks, so they set out to explore the difference in idea output of groups generating ideas, versus people doing it alone.

They divided their human guinea pigs into two groups. Group one had to come up with ideas within a team of people. Group two had to generate ideas on their lonesome. Everyone was given a tricky problem that could be solved only through some creative thinking.

Following idea generation time, all ideas were rated on originality, feasibility and effectiveness by a group of independent assessors (a bit like having three creative directors assessing a bunch of ideas, but presumably with fewer arguments). Davison found that those working solo actually performed much better than the groups across all three dimensions.

Scott Berken, author of *The Myths of Innovation*, is equally scathing, asking: 'Could you imagine Mozart, da Vinci, or Marie Curie sitting next to each other,

taking notes, at an all day company-wide event? It's hard to see any of these commonplace situations working out well for the prospect of innovation.'

Brian Mullen, a researcher at Syracuse University, New York, and his colleagues found strikingly similar results to Davison. Specifically, he found that people working alone tended to produce considerably more ideas than brainstorming groups. He also found that the larger the brainstorming group, the less productive it was. Interestingly, in agency brainstorms, more people are generally seen as a good thing, rather than a counter-productive thing. Could be time to rethink that assumption...

The 'rules' of brainstorming

There are actually several big and hairy problems with brainstorming. One of the first comes back to the 'rules of brainstorming': no idea is a bad idea, don't say 'no' say 'maybe', and so on. Chances are you have heard these rules ad nauseam if you've attended a few brainstorms in your time. And while these are great rules in theory, in practice they are pretty useless.

One reason for this is non-verbal body language that we all naturally give off, whether we like it or not. While people may say 'maybe' with their words, their crossed arms and furrowed brows are screaming 'no' loud and clear. This kind of behaviour is enough to put off even the most confident idea generator (well, except for those really cocky folk who are sometimes oblivious to these sorts of cues). Likewise, it is enough to scare any introverted people into a hole and never want to come out.

Yet another problem with brainstorming is that a lot of us don't generate our best ideas most effectively in a group. I know that many of mine come when I am having a shower or when I am bleary eyed at 3am in the morning.

Slackers

And as if these problems weren't enough, how about Groupthink? This is the term used to describe the way in which group members start to think and behave in similar ways. This is a surefire way to get a really narrow range of ideas and solutions – which kind of defeats the purpose of a brainstorm.

And of course, when you're working with a group towards a particular goal, there is almost always one person who tends to coast along and not contribute as much as the others. Yes, we've all given greasy looks to this person who sits lazily on the outskirts twiddling their thumbs. On the other hand, when you are working on your own to generate ideas, it can be a tad transparent if you slack off.

A final reason for brainstorms being quite unproductive, in case the above hasn't got you over the line, is that in the average brainstorm, group members can be really bad listeners. This results in many thoughts and ideas going unnoticed and as a result, dying before they ever get the chance to live.

However, do not fear, as there are a number of strategies that you can use to overcome the huge shortcomings of brainstorming to generate ideas.

Fly solo

Firstly, whenever you have a problem to solve that requires some creative spark, such as when a killer brief hits your desk, resist the impulse to have a chat about it with the person next to you. Instead, spend a bit of time thinking about it on your own. Once you have come up with good - and not so good - ideas, it is then time to drag in your co-workers to help build on your existing ideas and grow them into bigger and better ideas.

For workshops and meetings where you need to get creative juices flowing, such as a big group gang bang discussion about a hugely important brief or client problem, you should allow people some time at the beginning to generate ideas individually. Once you've given people a chance to work solo, invite everyone to share their ideas and then use the group environment to build on the suggested ideas and improve them.

Alternatively, in preparation for such meetings and workshops, you can send an e-mail round that reveals the problem or brief to the team a few days before the meeting. This will allow time for people to work on their own to generate ideas. It also means that you won't be starting the meeting or workshop from a blank slate. Instead, there will be a large number of ideas that can be built upon during the allocated time.

Shifting

If you insist on keeping idea generation confined to a meeting or workshop, you should have a shot at using a technique called Shifting. Shifting combines the best of individual and group idea generation. The technique begins with people generating individually. This is done for about five minutes. After that time, individuals join forces with a group for five minutes, and use this time to listen to and build on the ideas that have been generated by all individuals. Following this five minutes, the group goes back to working individually for five minutes, and afterwards repeats the idea building process.

Over at Harvard University, some psychologists compared the results of this technique with those from a group of people brainstorming together for 20 minutes, with no individual work. They found that the group that employed the Shifting technique generated significantly more ideas that were noticeably broader. So if your agencies decide to use this technique, you can expect a whole lot more ideas, and more diverse ones at that.

May brainstorming rest in peace, and may Shifting and solo idea generation take over your organisation to drive bigger, better and bolder ideas.

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