

Creativity in PR





How to use Creativity in PR and what other professions could learn from the public relations industry

As a PR practitioner, a major part of my job and that of those I employ is to develop creative ideas into workable, multichannel communication strategies.

Even in PR, creativity is such an under-valued attribute and can easily be damaged or inhibited if not well managed.

Creativity has to be nurtured and while I do believe that creativity is in some way 'caught not taught,' there are ways to learn how to improve creativity and there are techniques that can be adopted to enhance the creative process.

Before we get into the nitty gritty, let's start at the beginning.

The definition of creativity in PR

The definition of creativity is the use of imagination or original ideas to create something; inventiveness.

Often in PR we are looking for both creative ideas to inform media relations, social media and content but also a broad creative theme that helps us build a wider strategy. A creative theme in PR is:

An overarching “big concept” that captures attention and communicates a message in an original way. It is a unifying **theme** that can be used across all propositions, campaign platforms, marketing disciplines and a wide variety of audiences.

Why is creativity useful in PR

Creativity is a problem-solving tool to help PR professionals achieve their communication objectives. Often what our clients try to set out to achieve is very similar. “Sell more widgets” or “drive more footfall.” These message needs to be communicated in original and new ways that are linked to the values and purpose of these organisations and its target audience.

The challenge is how to do this creatively and strategically. Most people who work in the creative industries have all heard the clichés that there is “no such thing as a new idea” and “talent borrows, and genius steals.” While there is some truth in these generalisations, I’d like to take this moment to debunk both of these points of view.

Creativity is infinite.

Creativity in PR allows brands and businesses to engage with their audience in new ways never thought possible.



In particular creativity is useful in PR because:

1

Creativity wins pitches

2

Creativity gives us the ability to out-manoeuvre competitors, who often have bigger budgets

3

Creativity is the hook that can tie the tactical back to something more meaningful and strategic

4

Original discourse will earn more attention – i.e. media coverage, social shares, discussion in day-to-day life

5

Creativity which is well targeted touches audiences emotionally

6

Emotional connection will influence and impact audiences in ways which we hadn't thought of before

7

In the age of AI, automation and algorithms, creativity is the fundamental human trait that keeps us connected to each other. Be it in art or our work, without creativity we contribute little of true value.

How to be more creative

The definition of creativity is the use of imagination or original ideas to create something; inventiveness.

While some are naturally more creative than others, there are ways to learn to be more creative and there are tactics that you can use to help you come up with more creative ideas.

Later on, I will outline some tools and techniques for creative thinking that will help you be more creative.

We'll cover robust and time served processes, including mind mapping, thinking hats, checklisting, fishbone diagrams and the Five Whys.

There are also problem-solving tools that help us prepare for brainstorming and interrogate briefs, allowing our ideas to be more focused and to help deliver a better outcome.

These techniques are really the big concepts that will help you - but there are also some little pointers that can be useful:



Find the right amount of risk to take for you and your business. Brands often don't like to take risks, but some are willing to take bigger risks, especially the challenger brands.

Risk and creativity are the subject of much conversation within the PR industry. Some side with Oscar Wilde in that "an idea that is not dangerous is unworthy of being called an idea at all" while others are more risk averse.

Clearly the level of risk taking depends on the brief and the client.

Planning and advertising planning techniques are an important part of effective brainstorming. We touch on a few planning techniques later on but in reality this is a big subject worthy of a separate discussion.

Take a creative course – there are millions available, especially those run by the CIPR and PRCA, but for those not within the PR industry there are also plenty of creativity courses out there that are not industry specific.

There are training courses covering all the techniques that I detail later on.



‘Manage’ those who kill creativity – this point is covered in the brainstorming section later on, but I think this rule also needs to be applied to your life. Create rules to stop these people from draining the momentum of creativity. Creativity is a delicate process and some people can, through no conscious fault of their own, limit creative energy.

Make sure that everyone is aware that no idea is dismissed (and stick to this), and that those who may (sub-consciously or otherwise) hinder creativity are balanced with those who add to creative energy.

The creative process needs to be curated, allowing naturally creative people to generate ideas without being inhibited by criticism or judgement.

Be aware that sometimes creative people can be touchy when faced with criticism by people who just ‘don’t get’ their ideas, so control the narrative and save the assessment of which ideas will actually work in reality for later on.

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Think like a child - This might sound ridiculous but being playful and pursuing fun or even ridiculous thought processes can stimulate ideas in others. What is more, when one member of a group is freeing themselves of adult and societal constructs, it permits others in a group to throw away the shackles of adulthood too and contribute in ways they thought impossible.

Don't worry if you often procrastinate, I find that some people just work in different ways, as long as you are productive in the long run then you'll be fine.

Work with other people – other people help us build empathy for different audiences and identify new thought patterns, which heighten our creative thinking processes. Seek out creative minds and allow them to nourish your creative energy. It is not a coincidence that we like to hang around with like-minded people.

Creative people tend to gravitate towards other creative people. Artists and musicians especially will collaborate more readily because they tend to understand the process, and while artistic differences can occur, being around other creative people will make things happen.



Avoid the grind and allow your mind to wander – much has been said about the concept of “the grind” in entrepreneurship and business. The grind is seen as a badge of honour, where working every hour under the sun is lauded and downtime is a sin.

In my experience I find that the grind can wear you down and cause burnout. I also know that creativity often happens within the first hour of the day and the shorter the working day, the more productive I am.

Allow yourself (a small amount of) free time in the working day to “play”, relax or procrastinate.

This can stimulate creativity and is what a previous boss of mine called ‘isolation of inhibition theory’, where we isolate ourselves and go and procrastinate in some way to allow our thoughts to form in the back of our minds and create an ‘Eureka’ moment.

Write your notes down, no matter how silly or poorly thought through the ideas. Often a poorly thought through idea can enrich or even lead to another stronger and more robust creative theme.

Paperback note pads are great for scribbling on, even if we now spend most our time hammering away at the keyboard of a laptop.

Allow yourself time to consume art and media, from the highbrow right down the frothy and trivial. Art can help us see the world in a different way.

Some might think art can be pretentious, but it allows us to see the world through the eyes of others – which is key for brainstorming ideas to suit different audiences.

Art is everywhere: galleries, libraries, music shops, fashion, gig, food, product design to name a few.



Creative thinking tools

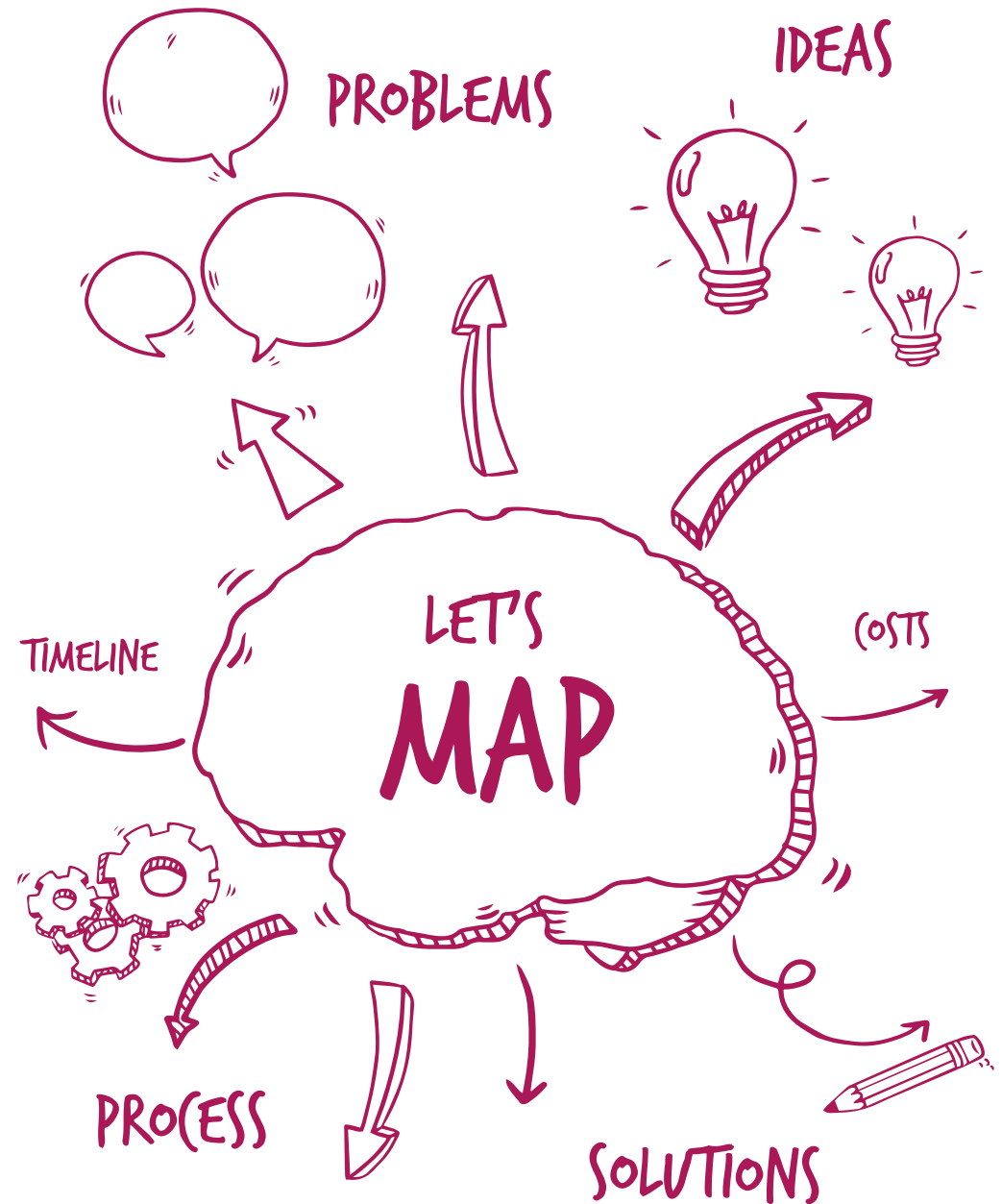
Creative thinking tools are techniques that help us through the creative process. They can make brainstorming fun and more effective. There are lots of techniques and I recommend identifying one or more to use, before jumping straight into a brainstorm.

Mind Mapping

Let's begin with a timeless classic. A mind map helps you record a brainstorm without worrying about structure. A mind map is a drawing representing ideas, words, concepts, or items linked to and arranged around a central concept or subject using a non-linear graphical layout

It's a visual technique that my good friend Paolo Feroletto opened my mind to with the work he conducts via [Fero Studio](#). He is often hired to chair and host mind mapping sessions and draws out the findings.

Too often ideas are not recorded properly and laying them out visually allows us to revisit them in relation to other contributions and collate and evaluate them.



The Checklist

Much has been written about the checklist. It was first proposed by Alex F Osborn in 1957. He said that it was easier to tone down an existing idea with a new one. Here it is in full. It's a great way to really hone ideas from a brainstorm. Simply follow the checklist to refine your ideas.

Other uses?

Can it be used in other ways?



Adapt?

What else is like this? What other idea does this suggest? Does past offer parallel?
What could I copy? Whom could I emulate?



Modify?

New twist? Change meaning, colour, motion, odour, taste, form, shape? Other changes?



Magnify?

What to add? More time? Greater frequency? Stronger? Higher? Larger? Longer? Thicker?
Heavier? Extra value? Duplicate? Multiply? Exaggerate?



Minify?

What to subtract? Smaller? Condensed? Miniature? Lower? Shorter? Narrower? Lighter?
Omit? Streamline? Split up? Understate? Less frequent?



Substitute?

Who else instead? What else instead? Other material? Other process? Other power? Other
place? Other approach? Other tone of voice? Other time?



Rearrange?

Other pattern? Other layout? Other sequence? Transpose cause and effect? Change place?
Change schedule? Earlier? Later?



Reverse?

Transpose positive and negative? How about opposites? Turn it backward, upside down,
inside out? Reverse roles? Change shoes? Turn tables? Turn other cheek?



Combine?

How about a blend, an assortment, an ensemble? Combine units?



SCAMPER Technique

An alternative to Osborn's checklist is the SCAMPER technique by created by Bob Eberle and written about by Michael Michalko in his book, Thinkertoys. This uses:

S₁

Substitute - components, materials, people

C₁

Combine - mix, combine with other assemblies or services, integrate

A₁

Adapt - alter, change function, use part of another element

M₃

Modify - increase or reduce in scale, change shape, modify attributes (e.g. colour)

P₃

Put to another use

E₁

Eliminate - remove elements, simplify, reduce to core functionality

R₁

Reverse - turn inside out or upside down

The Six Thinking Hats

The Six Thinking Hats is a brainstorming classic written by a forward thinking chap called Dr. Edward De Bono.

De Bono discovered that argument can easily become biased or confrontational.

This means egos takeover, where the objective is simply to win the argument, not to reach the most elegant outcome.

The thinking hats technique is designed to make us think differently and with greater empathy.

It allows us to see ideas from a different perspective.

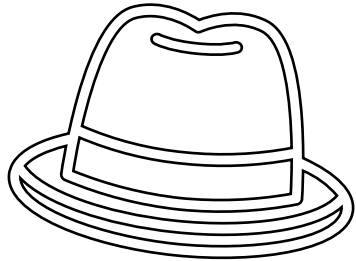
A word of warning. While this technique is designed to build empathy and avoid arguments, it is derided by some and you might face some resistance from participants.

As a technique it does work but it takes skill to manage. The process of thinking like this is very time-consuming and some team-members will prefer to work alone.



How does it work?

Each thinking hat is a different way of thinking, giving you permission to look at ideas in a singular way.



White Hat:

the white hat is data and insight driven. What does the data tell us about this idea and our approach to it?



Red Hat:

this is the intuitive hat. What is your gut instinct telling you?



Black Hat:

the black hat is controversial in brainstorming as this gives you permission to look at why the idea might not work



Yellow Hat:

the yellow hat is positivity and allows you to press on regardless of negativity



Green Hat:

the green hat represents creativity and idea generation



Blue Hat:

the blue hat is the chair the person who controls the meeting.

Lateral Thinking

Lateral thinking is a technique by Edward De Bono again. Not satisfied with his “hats of many colours” theory, he also hypothesised about lateral thinking.

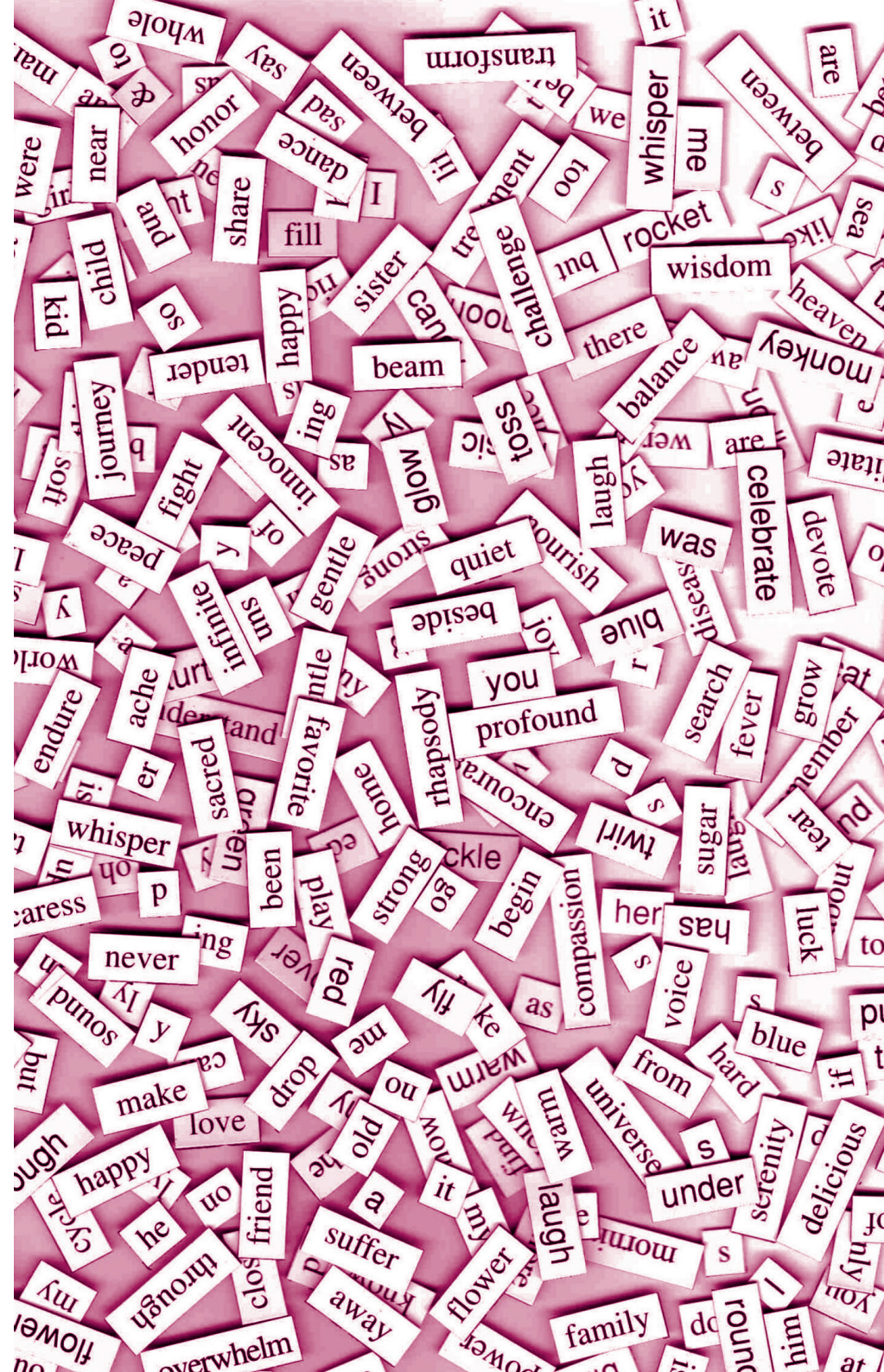
His approach to lateral thinking involves a tactic to stimulate ‘blue sky’ thinking.

It is designed to break traditional thought processes, interrupt norms and linear patterns that mean we often arrive at the same answer time and time again.

Dr De Bono surmised that lateral thinking should follow these principles:

- be provocative, non-sequential, and non-logical.
- seek additional options, exploring unlikely thought patterns, and we don’t always need the right answer
- avoid patterns, structures and behaviours. Be deliberately arbitrary and unstructured
- be aware that the results of lateral thinking are unpredictable and will vary in quality and likelihood of success





For example, I am about to brainstorm ideas for a new cactus brand that I am launching. I've picked the word "**devil**". The devil makes me think of:



Immediately a few ideas now jump out at me. Why not launch a new range of cactus plants called Pitchfork?

Cactus are spikey and pretty evil as far as plants go so immediately, I now have a new narrative.

Pitchfork Cactus, for those looking for a touch of evil in their plant repertoire! Stereotypes would suggest it sounds like a brand that might engage with men.

From a graphic design point of view there are lots of avenues a logo could go down.

I know it is quite a frivolous example, but this technique immediately helped me come up with a new idea.

This technique could be a good ice breaker with newly-forming teams.

Picture Association

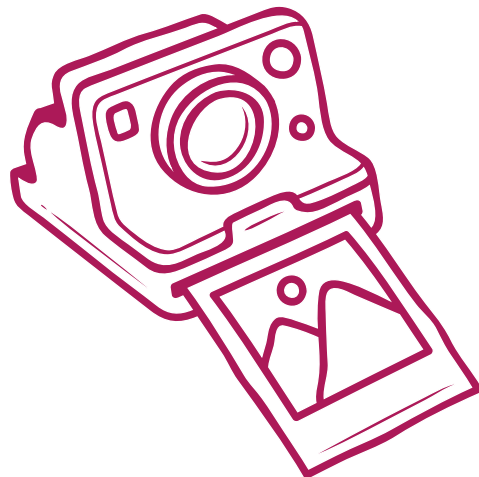
We are now getting more abstract.

The picture association method of brainstorming is more relevant for designers rather than PR professionals looking for editorial or brand storytelling, but it is quite interesting and can be useful.

Pictures help creatives come up with new forms and shapes that help stimulate idea generation and early drawings and sketches.

This website really does a good job of explaining the process.

Warning! This approach is quite out there but as a former designer, I think this approach is a great way to get the creative juices flowing.

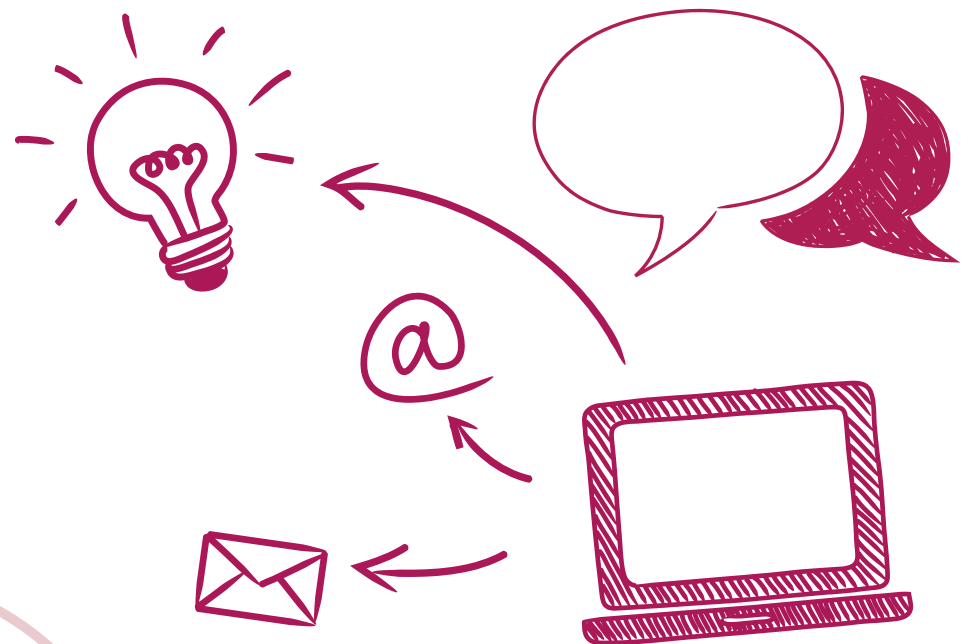


Problem-solving tools

Brainstorming is a problem solving tool but for me it is something that we do further along in the process of answering a brief.

Before we come up with ideas we need to build a platform of informed insight which then becomes fertile ground for our ideas to grow in.

Many of these techniques help us analyse the brief, push back on the client for more information or inform our strategy. There are many more problem-solving tools, but these are the most popular ones to get you started.



The 5 Whys

The 5 Whys was created by a Japanese industrialist who preferred rolling up his sleeves and hitting the factory floor, instead of sitting in boardrooms discussing why a certain problem occurred.

He liked to trouble shoot by getting 'hands on' and asking simple questions. In particular he'd ask "why?" five times.

Asking the five whys helps us to test out ideas and that might have been dismissed and refine them to perfection.

The process starts by assembling a team to tackle the problem, then spending some time on defining the problem.

Someone in the team needs to be the facilitator to keep the team on track. In defining the problem do remember that the key to problem solving and indeed brainstorming is a good brief.

We have written in detail about the value of a good PR brief and have a free to download template [here](#).

We then move into the core of this technique asking the first "why?". For example:

- Why can't the client sell more cans of a new fizzy drink?
- No brand awareness
- Few retail listings
- Larger competitors outspending the brand
- Journalists don't trust the brand
- No influencers sharing their experiences of the product

After this stage it is important to assign responsibilities to solve each problem and communicate these with everyone involved. Each of problems require a solution - via your brainstorm.

The parents among us might recognise this technique as quite childlike but actually it is an acute way to get to the heart of a problem. Do remember that this technique is not about blaming people – we are looking for solutions!

Be warned, it is a simple theory that is hard to perfect. I personally like this technique and if it is good enough for Toyota then it is good enough for me.

Fishbone Diagram

A Fishbone Diagram is also known as a Cause and Effect Diagram and is a very thorough and useful tool during the planning stages of a brainstorm.

A good brainstorm starts with a brief so before jumping straight into the ideas, we like to spend time interrogating the brief and understanding the problem.

We often ask the client more questions and look for insights either independently or via the client or other third parties.

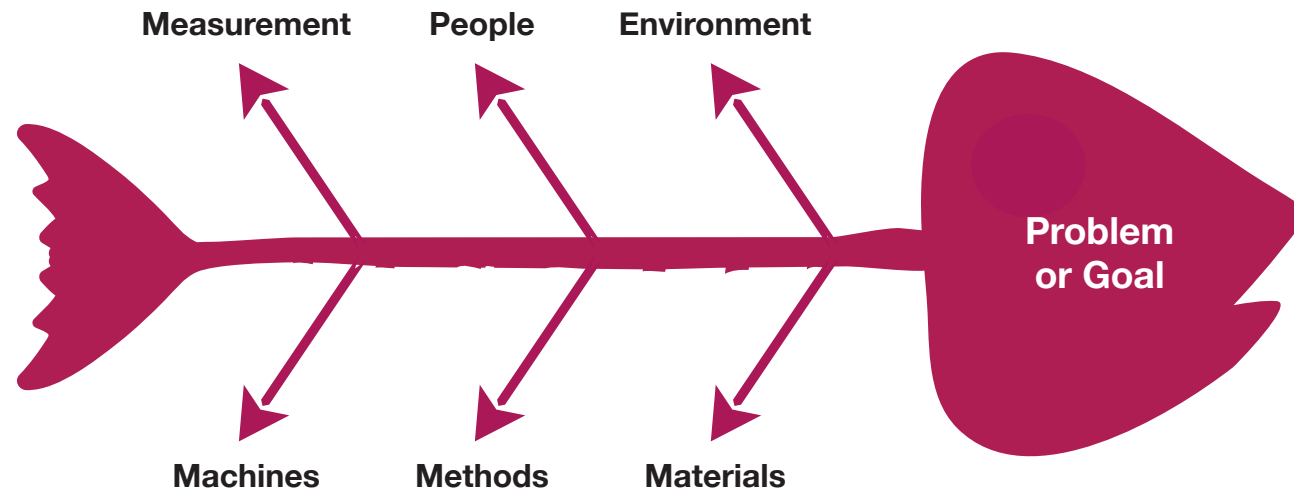
Insights can then help us brainstorm in a more strategic way. Time is spent listing out key categories of sub-problems or causes and then more time is spent identifying the actual causes of the problems.

There are a number of tools that can then be used to discover proposed solutions (one of which is brainstorming).

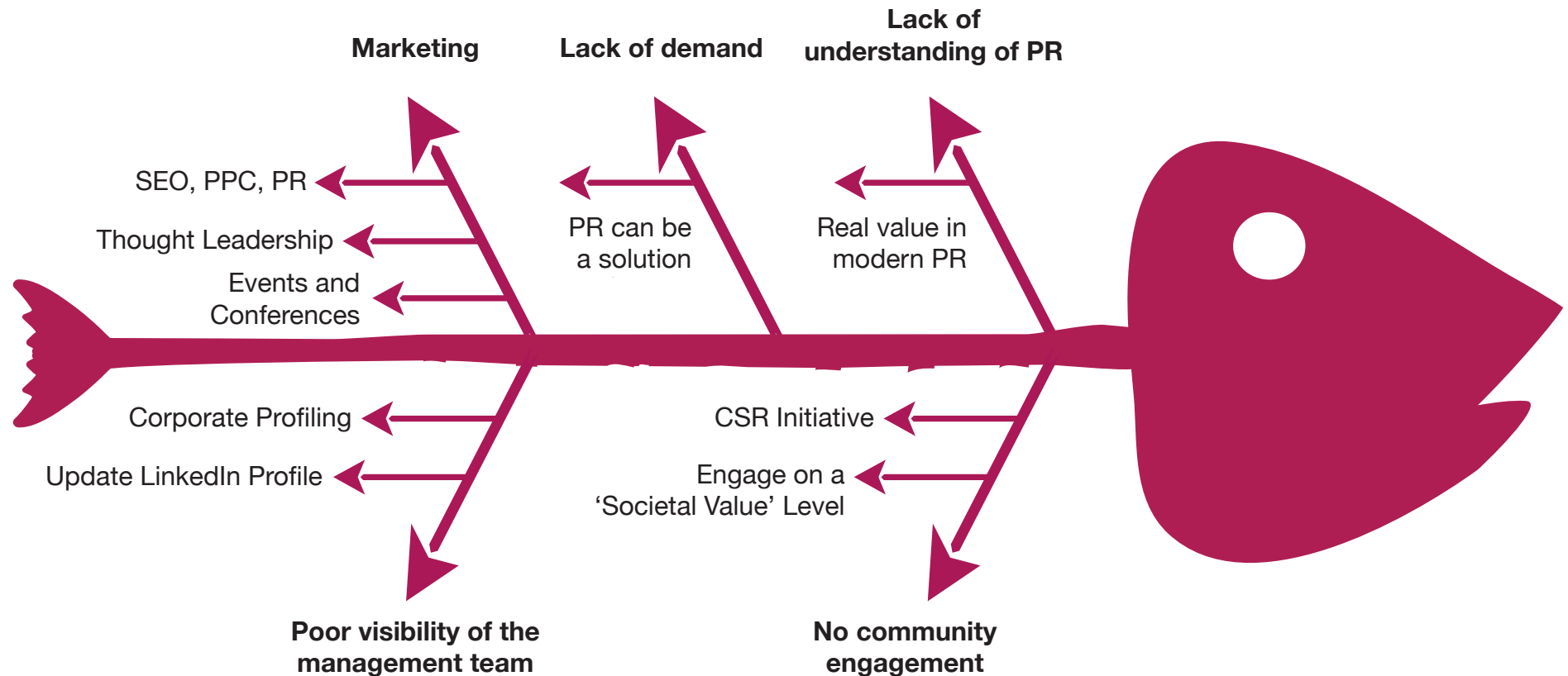
This is a visual tool and works very well if drawn on a white board, note pad or represented digitally.

For example, a fictional managing director in a marketing firm in Hull has a problem. She needs to generate more leads for hr PR agency.

The sub problems for this are represented visually as the bones from the spine of the fish.



For example:



Following the fishbone diagram method, she would then spend more time, looking at the problem in more detail, writing down more 'bones', e.g.

Marketing – SEO, PPC, PR, thought leadership, events and conferences

Lack of demand – brands unaware that PR can be a solution for their problem

Lack of understanding of PR – brands not really knowing the true meaning of modern PR

Poor visibility of the management team – the team need to undertake more corporate profiling work and be more visible on LinkedIn

No community engagement – we need a better CSR initiative to engage with more audience on a “societal value” level

Pareto analysis

Pareto's law was devised by Vilfredo Pareto, who was Italian and a busy man it seems as he was an engineer, sociologist, economist, political scientist, and philosopher. He theorised that 80% of our results come from the first 20% of effort.

This makes complete sense. Anyone who has started a project knows that the hardest part is finishing it - so we should focus on the ideas that will deliver the greatest outcomes and which are the most worthwhile starting.

In brainstorming this analysis helps us to decide which of the ideas in our brainstorm are the most likely to succeed.

For example, if we have ten ideas that are solutions to problems, we need to prioritise those solutions that will give us the biggest return.

We can then spend more time refining and developing those ideas.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is the most common problem solving technique used in business. It is commonly used but often misunderstood. Brainstorms are often great and but can also sometimes be ineffective.

I will be covering off everything that you need to know about brainstorming – the good, the bad and the ugly – to limit the number which end up being ineffective.

There are many ways to run a brainstorm and the biggest mistake people make is just jumping straight in. While just brainstorming with no preparation can deliver results, we can get so much more out of this process if we prepare.



Rules for brainstorming:

- Spend time analysing and discussing the brief. Make sure you are fully prepared ahead of the brainstorm
- Refine the brief, spend time using the problem solving techniques, such as those identified earlier (Fishbone Diagrams, The 5 Whys) beforehand
- Focus on segments of the brief, brainstorm the audience, their needs, the location, the stakeholders and what matters to and interests them
- Record these processes and thinking. It will make great content for your strategy
- Don't be judgemental. No one knows where a good idea is going to come from
- Encourage the most out-there thinking and thinkers. A wild idea will take you to new places in your thinking
- There is no such thing as a bad idea
- Refine and improve the ideas of others
- Focus is key. It is easy to get excited and procrastinate or go off topic (but don't be judgemental or critical)

- Try and chair the brainstorm so there is one idea proposed at a time
- Try to be visual. Draw, sketch and take notes
- Try and get down as many ideas as possible. Quantity and momentum are important

Spending time on the brief, insights and planning is an important part of a brainstorm. If you feel that certain insights are missing, feel free to postpone the brainstorm and go and find out the information that you need.

Many of us have chaired brainstorming before and sometimes you get ideas that are just poor, or you know won't work. This is where the skill of the chairperson comes to the fore.

The idea mustn't be rubbished but the brainstorm must be carefully and sensitively steered in the right direction. Use coaching techniques – ask questions rather than simply say that the idea won't work.

For example:

Don't say: "your idea won't work because I have done this before and it failed"

Do say: "do you think we can shape that idea given that consumers might not behave in this way?"

Physical environment

Choosing a location for a brainstorm is important and while the right one can be inspirational, the wrong one can really backfire.

A brainstorm can simply be run as a huddle around a desk in an office. However, brainstorms can also expensive processes which drain man hours, so taking time out to run the brainstorm off-site can help remove distractions, inspire attendees and save money in the long run.

It also gives the brainstorm the gravitas and importance that it deserves, meaning that attendees will take it more seriously and be more motivated to come up with ideas.

I strongly advise holding brainstorms away from people's desks to avoid other distractions and interruptions – e.g. phone calls, emails and other colleagues.

People

Choosing the right people to attend a brainstorm is important. You need the best people there who will contribute the most.

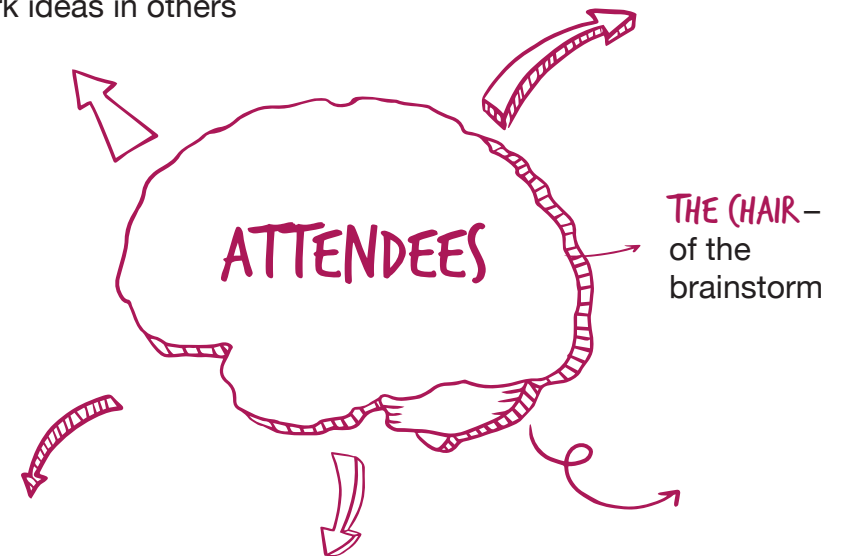
Here are some suggestions of the types of people who should attend:

(CREATIVE, IDEAS PEOPLE –
the type of people who are full of ideas and will spark ideas in others

PEOPLE FROM THE TARGET AUDIENCE –
people who know about or can empathise with this group in terms of how they might think or behave

**KNOWLEDGEABLE PEOPLE
OR SPECIALISTS IN THE FIELD –**
people who have very specific skills or knowledge in the area you are brainstorming about

(CHALLENGERS –
people who will challenge the people from the target audience group or the specialists to think outside of the box



In my opinion there are some people who you should not invite. These are mainly people who inhibit others' capacity for ideas.

I personally think it is a very bad idea to have clients in a brainstorm. But the worst are those who are overly dominant, critical or negative.

How to facilitate a brainstorm

Facilitating a brainstorm is not easy. If you have followed earlier advice then you have already chosen the location and decided who to invite (and who not to invite), but there is plenty more to consider, especially in terms of how the brainstorm is led.

Here are some quick tips:

- 1 Set a time for the brainstorm. Make sure it has an end. An hour is more than enough.
- 2 The room set up is important. A circle is always the best lay out while theatre style seating is the worst.
- 3 Share the rules up front. Make sure everyone is clear.
- 4 Create an agenda – make sure the brief is discussed and any analysis time is allowed for outside of the brainstorm.
- 5 Set up a warm up activity if necessary to get the creative juices flowing and overcome any inhibitions.
- 6 Go around the room in order – this allows everyone to contribute, especially introverts who might find the process difficult.
- 7 Bring some sweets, cakes or beverages to keep energy levels up.
- 8 Allow a free time for discussion – this can be an important way to build energy and cross pollinate ideas.
- 9 The ideas are all recorded – someone needs to be uber-scribe.
- 10 Make sure there is a follow up meeting to go through the ideas with the three R's (reflect, refine and reshape) in mind.

Other miscellaneous brainstorming tips

The biggest tip is to just get started and don't take it too seriously, but don't underestimate how much investing in the process can improve results.

Ask the right questions, keep them open not closed to stimulate discussion.

Be open and aware of the room and the people in it. It is your job to keep everyone engaged.

Try to become as well informed in the subject you are brainstorming as quickly as possible, beforehand.

Have fun. Don't take it too seriously...