

This article, written by Kip Gregory, appeared on YourBiz on June 1, 1998 issue. YourBiz was purchased by the Journal of Financial Planning. Offering ideas to help you brainstorm more effectively, this article maps out a step-by-step process to successfully generate and organize new ideas using both traditional and innovative methods.

Brainstorming: What's the Big Idea?

Do you talk with others to explore ways to improve your practice? **Routinely** ask your clients for suggestions? What are the business results you'd like to change? Brainstorming is a great place to begin thinking about how to enhance your business.

How to Do It

Brainstorming is fast, easy and can be done alone (with the help of software), but is preferably done in a group. You need a question, a clean sheet of paper and an open mind. Come up with your own question or consider one of these:

- How do we market ourselves to clients once they've **become** clients?
- What can we do to make a meaningful difference to our clients?
- What changes could we make in our business to improve our results?
- What do we do manually that might be computerized?

Try Mindmapping

If you don't know where to begin, try mindmapping to get the process started. Mindmapping is a great way to capture and organize thoughts related to a main idea. Briefly, here's the process.

Start with a blank page. Draw a box in the middle. In it write the question you're answering. Without stopping to judge your ideas, start writing down everything you can think of that relates to your question. As you write, draw lines from each idea to the thoughts it generates. Don't worry if some are silly; one of the basic rules of brainstorming is "all ideas count."

After you've exhausted your thoughts, categorize them by drawing symbols around ideas with common themes. So, everything that relates to client retention is circled, you draw triangles around all of your administrative processes, etc. Once that's done, you can prioritize your ideas either individually or by category or both.

Working with a group, it's easier to brainstorm using Post It notepads and blank sheets of chart board paper. Write each idea on a separate Post It, then put them on the chart board paper for group review. As a group, look for related items and group them accordingly, moving them around as necessary.

Why It Works

Whether working alone or with others, thoughts will invariably occur to you using this process that you never would have considered otherwise. Why? Because you've let your mind wander. You're doing what psychologists call "stream of consciousness" thinking.

By generating a large volume of ideas, you increase the chances you will identify one of the critical few ways to make a meaningful difference in your business in what creativity experts refer to as a moment of "aha!" insight. Use the results of your brainstorming to create a blueprint of what you want your business to look like.

Creative Power Boosters

There are a number of good books and software programs available to help you improve your brainstorming and creative thinking ability. Software packages that can give you terrific help include IdeaFisher (www.ideafisher.com) and Inspiration (www.inspiration.com).

For a detailed description of the mindmapping concept, read "Mindmapping -- Your Personal Guide To Exploring Creativity And Problem Solving" by Joyce Wycoff (© 1991, Berkeley Books). Other books on creativity and creative thinking include "A Whack on the Side of the Head" (© 1990, Warner Books) and "A Kick in the Seat of the Pants" (© 1986, HarperPerennial), both by Roger von Oech, and "Lateral Thinking" (© 1970, HarperPerennial) by Edward de Bono.

In another article, we'll talk about effective ways to implement ideas surfaced during the brainstorming or creative thinking process.

If you'd like more information about brainstorming or would like to share your experiences with it, please contact Kip Gregory at kip@gregory-group.com. Kip is Principal of The Gregory Group, a Washington, DC consulting firm that provides marketing and technology coaching to financial professionals.

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