

The Magic of Idea-Centric Creativity in New Product Development

By Jerry W. Thomas

Relevant new products are absolutely essential to corporate survival and success, but most large corporations are “barren wastelands” when it comes to creativity in new product development. Every corporate rule, regulation, and rigidity snuffs out creativity. Risk-avoidance reigns supreme in corporate culture. Senior decision-makers are isolated from the realities of their markets and from their customer’s lives, feelings, and motivations.



All the while, opportunities for new services and new products are everywhere. Every change in technology, fashions, social values, cultural trends, and competitive forces creates opportunities for new services and new products, but most corporations do not see, do not hear, and do not understand. The magic of idea-centric creativity offers a new way for corporations to re-invigorate their new product development programs.

More Than Creativity

Idea-centric creativity is only part of the magic. Relevant experience is vitally important. If the goal is to create a new soup, then we want to find soup users (including some heavy soup users) who possess idea-centric creativity. If the goal is to build a better tractor, then we would search for tractor buyers, tractor operators, and tractor mechanics who rate highly in idea-centric creativity. If the goal were to create a new airline service, we would identify highly-creative frequent flyers, and so on. Relevant experiences magnify the power of idea-centric creativity.

A Little History

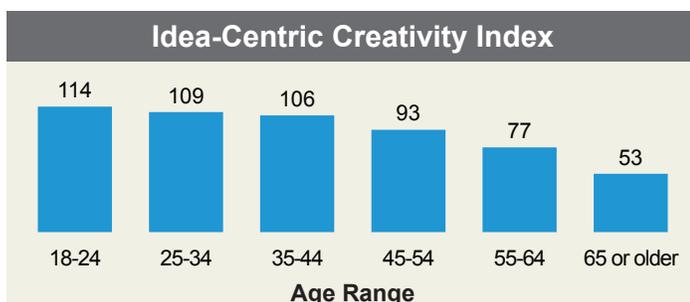
Foy Conway served for many years as president of Conway-Miliken, a research company in Chicago, and he was one of the founding fathers of new product ideation in the U.S. He coined the term “idea-centric creativity” to describe a special type of creativity that helps germinate viable new product ideas. “Idea-centric creativity” tends to be divergent in nature, commonly thought of as thinking “outside of the box.” Foy helped Decision Analyst develop valid and reliable psychological tests to measure idea-centric creativity in members of the human race. These tests have been translated into multiple languages, so that exceptionally creative individuals can be identified in major countries around the globe.

The Imaginators®

To build its idea-centric creativity community, Decision Analyst screened and tested over 250,000 adults (aged 18+) in the U.S., Canada, Europe, and Latin America to identify 2,000+ exceptionally creative individuals. These “idea-centric” creatives were then invited to join the Imaginators®, Decision Analyst’s new products ideation community. To the best of our knowledge, it is the largest and best online creative community in the world dedicated to the generation of new product ideas. As these creative savants work on new-products projects, they are evaluated and graded. Those that fail to generate sufficient numbers of high-quality new product ideas are retired or deactivated, so that the community becomes more creative and more productive over time.

Who are these exceptionally creative individuals? First, they live all over the U.S., Canada, Europe, and other countries. No country has a lock on creativity, or has any great creativity advantage. In the U.S. idea-centric creative individuals don’t cluster in California and New York, as the media might lead us to believe. They live everywhere.

Age is an important indicator of idea-centric creativity. Younger people tends to be more creative than older people, but surprisingly the fall-off in creativity as one ages tends to be minimal until the age of 54, after which creativity decay appears to accelerate, as shown below:



Even though idea-centric creativity declines with age, on average, many older individuals continue to be highly creative into their 70's and 80's.



Gender is a poor predictor of idea-centric creativity. Men and women appear to be roughly equal, although each sex does better in product categories where their interests and relevant experiences are concentrated. Women are much better in imagining new cosmetics and skin lotions, but men tend to be better at creating new golf clubs or new power tools.

Ethnic background is a poor predictor of exceptional creativity. Our historical data suggest that different ethnic groups tend to be roughly equal in creativity. There is some hint in our data (but not proof) that minority groups might have a slight advantage in idea-centric creativity.

Education tends to positively correlate with exceptional creativity, but the degree of correlation is not strong. That is, the college-educated tend to score higher than high school graduates, but the difference is not great. Many consumers with high school or less education tend to be very creative.

Other types of creativity (artistic, musical, literary, theatrical, etc.) are not very predictive of “idea-centric” creativity. No matter how we manipulated the regression techniques, these other types of creativity, alone or in combination, never showed up as significant variables in predicting idea-centric creativity.

You can't spot these new product geniuses on the street. They look like everyone else, dress like everyone else, and talk like everyone else. But, they are unique in one special way: ask them to come up with new product ideas, and they will come up with more than 10 times as many new product ideas as the average person, and their ideas will tend to be better.

Starting Points

How are these creative individuals used to generate new product ideas? First, creativity does not take place in a vacuum. New product creation demands starting points and focal points. Creativity must have rails to run on, a purpose, a destination. This is where industry knowledge and marketing research have key roles to play. Focus groups, depth interviews, and ethnographic techniques are especially valuable as precursors and catalysts to new product idea generation.

Client involvement and participation are critical to the success of a new products project, because corporate employees are the experts on the product category and their companies' goals, technical capabilities, risk tolerances, marketing strengths, and budget capacities. Clients' knowledge and understanding, and their feedback along the way, create the guidelines and context that help ensure the successful outcome of a new product ideation project.

Online or Offline

Once the research information and new product development goals are fully understood, these are translated into "starting points" for the creative process. At this point, a decision must be made. Will the ideation and brainstorming be online, offline, or a combination of the two? An online session might involve 20 to 50 creative individuals who interact with each other and the facilitator for a period of several days. The sheer number of participants and the extended period of time help ensure the creation of many, many new ideas.

In contrast, in-person sessions are conducted with fewer creative people, usually only 8 to 10. The in-person sessions are led by two ideation facilitators, who take the creative participants through a carefully scripted series of fast-moving, high-energy exercises focused on the project's goals. A typical session lasts from 9 a.m. in the morning until 4 p.m. in the afternoon. Client observation of these sessions is extremely important. During the lunch break, clients meet with the facilitators to discuss the morning's session, and then select themes and ideas to build upon in the afternoon session. These in-person sessions allow facilitators to explore ideas in great depth; group interaction is a stimulant to many new ideas; and the client's involvement and feedback help guide and augment the creative process. Whether online or offline, these ideation sessions produce hundreds of ideas and idea fragments; ideation sessions, however, do not create finished, test-ready new product concepts. The ideation outputs are rough and fragmentary.

The New Product Concepts

The real work now begins. The hundreds and hundreds of "raw" new product ideas must be sorted through, analyzed, expanded upon, melded with other ideas, and checked against the client's goals and constraints. The Innovation Team identifies the better ideas, notions, and themes, and evolves them into fully developed, integrated new product concepts, including artwork and copy. At this point, perhaps 15 to 25 new product concepts have emerged.

Next, it's time for the "first stage" concept review by the client. Based on client feedback, 10 to 15 of the best concepts are identified for final development. These concepts go through an online qualitative "communication check" to ensure that the concepts communicate as intended. Based on consumer feedback, the concepts are edited and the artwork is refined. Now, the final test-ready concepts are presented to the client for a last review.

At this point, the client has new product concepts that communicate as intended, and the next steps are

concept screening and concept testing. If the number of concepts is large, the screening step is always recommended to identify the strongest concepts. Then, the best new product concepts go through a final, monadic concept test to quantify the market potential represented by the new product idea (a volumetric forecast of year-one sales). Concepts with high potential then become the focus of Research and Development efforts to create physical products (or service bundles) that live up to the concepts' promises.

The engines that drive this whole process are idea-centric creativity combined with concept testing systems. Magic is a strong word, but "magic" communicates the power of idea-centric creativity and testing systems to help companies boost new product development efforts.

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Decision Analyst is a global marketing research and analytical consulting firm. The company specializes in advertising testing, strategy research, new products research, and advanced modeling for marketing-decision optimization.