

Thought Starter

I'm staring at the menacing blank white page on screen; the cursor blinking silently at me, the deadline clock is ticking, my mind is racing with a hundred thoughts but I can't seem to catch one. Suddenly my personal budget that I've been putting off seems really easy to complete at this point...no, stay focused!

I'm not sure there's anything more daunting than blank page syndrome (okay, maybe coming face-to-face with a lion). Everyday copywriters and art directors face this challenge in creating great advertising - the challenge of getting started. So how do you get something on the page that starts your thinking and creating?

As Edward de Bono, the king of lateral thinking says "you cannot dig a hole in a different place by digging the same hole deeper". Trying harder in the same direction may not be as useful as changing direction.

When I was briefly a copywriter a few years back, there were some idea generation exercises that I used to get ink on paper, relax my brain and help get my hand writing. These exercises however are not just for creatives, but also media planners and client service people who are all in the game of problem solving.

The first method involves your dictionary; choose a random word and relate it to your brief/client. Say your client was Toss (the Salad and Soup People), pick any word from the dictionary, like "shoe", and your mind will immediately start trying to find a correlation between two separate concepts. This is called a deliberate disconnect. Example: sole = healthy, toe = big, high heel = corporate, smelly = fresh, Elizabeth Shu (from the movie Cocktail) = celebrity. Now turn any of those into a possible idea - Toss could do a Celebrity Salad Recipes column in the "Gossip/About Town/Spy" sections of the local newspaper.

Or try the Opposite method - what you wouldn't do, you do. Turn the problem you are trying to solve upside down. If your product and service wasn't there, what would happen? Imagine a newspaper with no ads in it except for one that stated the power of newspaper advertising.

The observation method is about wandering and wondering (preferably in new environments). Open yourself up to all that surrounds you and look for great insights. The recent NZ International Comedy Festival is a great example of this. Comedians are the masters of finding insights into everyday human behaviour and making them hilarious. We human beings are strange creatures who do funny things. Why not create a wallpaper swatch newspaper ad with a full broadsheet page and invite people to cover their homes with it.

Don't always try and do it on your own. Get a group of people together and brainstorm ideas. Quite often when working on a problem you get too close and caught up in it to stand back objectively. Someone removed gives a fresh perspective. This was the case for Volkswagen once, when a creative team had been working tirelessly on a brief to demonstrate how VW cars are reliable in the snow. It took someone walking past their office one day to ask "how does the snow ploughman get to his snow mobile?" Many a brilliant idea has come from the germ of a thought elsewhere.

Try speed; not drugs, but time. This is based on the chaos theory of everything done at the last minute...like this article. Most of the time we seem to perform better when under pressure. Rule your blank page up into 10 squares, set the clock and challenge yourself to 10 ideas in 10 minutes. Too often we are trying so hard to create something brilliant, that we can't even get started. Set yourself short goals to see how much you can achieve. Most of the time you'll catch a groove in those few minutes and be able to keep on going until you've cracked that great idea.

Finally, remember every great ad started from a blank page. Source annuals from the major award shows around the world for getting your head into the right space. Also, check out our inspiration section on our website www.nabs.co.nz, we've got examples of cool press ads from around the world to help stimulate your thinking. And when you use the above thought starters and idea generators to create your

fantastic newspaper ad, make sure you enter it into The Newspaper Ad of Year competition - you could just win \$10,000 for your efforts.

Now that my page is filled with words and I have generated a few ideas on future articles, doing my budget doesn't seem so appealing. I think I might observe something interesting about the world in today's newspaper.

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