

best practices: It's Time to Get Creative

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It's Time to Get Creative

December 18, 2007

By **Teri Evans**

WHEN MORNINGS BREAK in New Orleans, a fleet of polished black trucks with tinted windows and shiny chrome wheels roar down city streets. Inside are workers in crisp black uniforms, ready to spill into the French Quarter and start their shift.

It's a day in the life of garbage men. Not just any garbage men. These sharply dressed employees work for Sidney Torres, an entrepreneur who took an unusually stylish approach when he launched SDT Waste & Debris Services in 2005.

Others in the trash business might stick to gritty. But Torres went glam, not only dressing up his trucks and sweepers but also producing glitzy television commercials that include the jazzy, celebratory culture of the Big Easy. "Whether you're the garbage man or a rock star, it's about standing out from the rest," says Torres, who credits the fashionable touch with driving revenues at SDT to an estimated \$25 million this year.

A creative strategy can often give entrepreneurs an edge over the competition. Whether it's thinking in opposites, like Torres did, or challenging assumptions, an innovative approach can land deals and hook customers.

"Creativity doesn't cost anything, but it can reap huge rewards," says Joel Saltzman, a San Diego consultant and author of "Shake That Brain!," a book about creative business practices.

In an age of cost-cutting and streamlining, experts say creative thinking re-energizes business owners who may have unwittingly buried their inspiration under tightening budgets.

"The reason we are entrepreneurs is we challenge the way things have been done," says Charles "Chic" Thompson, a Keswick, Va., motivational speaker and author of "What a Great Idea!," a guide to thinking creatively. "But after several years in business you can forget what it's like to be an entrepreneur."

Not Mary Cantando, a Raleigh, N.C., consultant to women business owners. More than five years after launching her consulting firm, she still remembers to "get outside of my head" to come up with creative ideas.

One morning several years ago, Cantando was struggling with a business problem just as her yellow lab, Sonar, nudged her for attention. During their leisurely walk, Cantando found herself talking out loud, asking Sonar for his opinion and then imagining what the canine's rather simplified perspective might be. As a result, she discovered new possibilities and ultimately solved the problem. Conversations with Sonar are now a daily morning ritual. For more perplexing issues, she transports herself into the mindset of a trusted friend, who she views as a sage.

"Instead of a knee-jerk reaction, I stop and think, 'What would Sheila do in this situation?' It's as if she were my mentor, but with no requirement on her part," says Cantando, who is also the author of the business guide, "The Woman's Advantage."

Creativity experts say entrepreneurs can discover their competitive advantage also by questioning assumptions. Saltzman suggests creating a list of everything you know to be true about your business — the more obvious the better — then go back and challenge each one.

Another powerful strategy, Saltzman says, is to examine your negatives and see if you can turn them into positives. It worked for Cantando. Whenever she makes a negative announcement in a meeting, she always follows up with three positive results.

For instance, "if you lose your biggest account, you may say, 'Well, they were slow paying anyway, the guy was tough to deal with, and it frees up time to assign people to a different client or search for a new client,'" Cantando says. That's a challenge for many entrepreneurs, because "we often think that our way is the best or only way," she says.

Although small-business owners are indeed experts in their field, that may actually hinder creative solutions since they know too much, according to Thompson. He encourages entrepreneurs to search outside the confines of their industry for new approaches in business.

"Find atypical analogies that redefine what's possible for your industry, not someone that does the exact same thing you do," Thompson says. "You can ask how would Apple or Starbucks solve your challenge?"

Dan Calista of Vynamic Solutions followed Thompson's advice and found his "atypical analogy" in a business that's truly unlike his boutique management-consulting firm. Now, the Philadelphia entrepreneur heads to Cereality, a unique cafe where pajama-clad employees serve up cereals and toppings, to get his inspiration.

"When individuals join our team, I take them to Cereality as part of their orientation to discuss what a customer experience is all about," says Calista.

What does a cereal cafe have in common with a serious management-consulting firm?

"Cereality took a product that's been around for a long time and created a fun Saturday morning experience around it," Calista says. "We've also taken a service that's been around for a long time and emphasized the customer experience in how we work."

It appears to be working. In August, prior to incorporating Thompson's strategies, Vynamic projected a 21% increase in 2007 revenues. The company has since revised its projection and now expects revenues to rise 36% this year. Calista attributes the additional growth in large part to the company's new emphasis on creative thinking.

Are you a creative entrepreneur?

Consider these questions and judge for yourself. If you answer yes to any of them, read on for expert strategies to create new ideas or solutions.

1. Do you dismiss ideas for being "out of scope"?

If yes, then... be curious first, critical second. Allow people at least one minute to explore their idea. "The easiest thing to say is 'No, that wouldn't work,' and that quashes the creative process," says Saltzman, author of "Shake That Brain!" Instead, say "Yes, and," then build on their idea.

2. Do you only consider what you should do, yet still draw a blank?

If yes, then... create a list of "nevers." What would you never do? What would someone new to your industry do? "Then consider what's right about the 'nevers' and see if that sparks an idea," says Thompson, author of "What a Great Idea!"

3. Do you follow rigid guidelines for what's right and wrong?

If yes, then... throw out the grammar-school rules. The teacher (or boss) isn't always right and there's often more than one right answer. "The goal is to always look for second, third and fourth right answers," Thompson says.

4. Do you find yourself or others saying, "That's not the way we do things"?

If yes, then... make a list of what people say that stifles ideas — and post them in a highly visible place in your company. "You can be as outrageous as to fine people 50 cents or \$5 every time they say a killer phrase," Thompson says.

5. Do you talk about creativity, but never take time to explore it?

If yes, then... commit to change — and mean it. "People say, 'My door is always open,' but then it isn't," Saltzman says. "Adopt a sense of fun. It doesn't have to be 24/7, but when people are having fun they're more likely to generate new ideas."

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